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Encountering the Presence of God through Images:
Practicing Visio Divina as Prayer

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Abstract

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Humans experience and learn about God through various means, for humans have different types of learning approaches, for example, visual learner, auditory learner, and kinesthetic learner. However, people in local churches typically engage in learning about God through texts, thus underutilizing images although often images are powerful tools, especially for those who are visual learners.

I believe that the church needs to keep alive a variety of spiritual disciplines to help believers seek God and share their faith in the faith community, particularly now, in the twenty-first century, when people are constantly exposed to images and can easily access them.

This final project introduces Visio Divina as a way of seeking God's presence and sharing the experience of God through images in the local church to enhance and deepen spiritual life and enrich theological conversation in which various perspectives of God are embraced and celebrated.

Encountering the Presence of God through Images:
Practicing Visio Divina as Prayer

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I. Introduction

The ancient monastic practice, *Visio Divina*, can enrich and enhance modern Christians' prayer life and evoke theological conversations beyond current contemplative practices centered on readings. Think about it: When and how have you experienced the transformation and renewal of your heart and mind? How have you encountered the presence of God in which you feel God's love and peace? When, if at all, have you had deep and intimate conversations with God in your prayer life? Have you heard and seen God through the eyes and ears of your heart? As the disciples of Jesus Christ, on our faith journey, we Christians seek God through prayers and other spiritual disciplines to know God's will by which we may be transformed to be more like Jesus Christ. What have you found to be the best, most effective spiritual discipline or practice through which to renew your mind and heart, to discern what God's will is, which is "good and acceptable, and perfect"¹?

Among the many types of prayers and spiritual disciplines are silent prayer, fasting prayer, praying while coloring, the Jesus prayer/breath prayer, centering prayer, speaking in tongues, soaking prayer, *Lectio Divina*, *Visio Divina*, *Audio Divina*, "Tongsung Kido (Praying aloud),"² and so on. As a Korean American woman clergy person, who served a Korean immigrant church—a Reformed Church in America in Queens, New York—as an associate pastor for about ten years, often my predominant prayer practice personally and communally was *Tongsung Kido*. During my ten-year service as lead pastor of United Methodist churches in the

¹ Romans 12:4, NRSV.

² The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 445. "In Korean congregations, among others, *Tongsung Kido* is popular and an important part of prayer life. Usually, the congregation is given a specific time period, with a common theme of petition or supplication. Then all pray aloud at the same time. The voices of other will not bother them when they concentrate on their own earnest prayers, longing for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit."

suburbs of New York and Connecticut, I became more familiar with silent and written prayers rather than verbalized extemporaneous prayers. Each church has its own, unique tradition of prayer and preference for spiritual disciplines.

Yet in both contexts, I have observed a common problem: the lack of visual stimulation in an assortment of spiritual disciplines, Christian education, and worship. For example, many spiritual forms of prayer are rarely introduced nor used at certain churches, no matter their size, location, or congregational demographics. The church has ignored the fact that each individual is created with multi-sensory for learning, communicating, and worshipping. Marjorie J. Thompson says, “Spiritual disciplines must be freely chosen.”³ Yet the majority of churches in the States, regardless of size, location, race, ethnicity, social-economic status, have not provided a variety of spiritual disciplines from which congregants can freely choose, but limited them by offering few options. Congregants should be given many choices to enable the liberty of spiritual discipline as they strive for finding their ways to God, and the clergy has responsibilities and privileges to meet the congregants’ spiritual needs and the means for spiritual growth. One way to meet those needs is through *Visio Divina*. It is an inclusive discipline of contemplative prayer in which all people can participate through visual stimulation, the interaction of their minds, hearts, emotions, imaginations, wills, and desires.

In both Korean and White-American church contexts, many church members know the power of prayer, have a sincere desire to pray to experience God and to be closer to God, but struggle with and do not know how to pray. Many church members have told me over the years that after praying for a few minutes, they do not know what to say, so their time with God in

³ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xi.

prayer is very brief. That has been the pattern of their praying life. How can I help them to spend more intimate time with God and encounter God through prayer? Tongsung Kido does not fit all Korean Christians. Likewise, written forms of prayer do not fit all White-American Christians. Nor is the gift of speaking in tongues given to all Christians. There is no single spiritual practice that is a good match for all people.

Though all are created in the image of God, each human is uniquely created by God with different gifts, personalities, and learning styles through which we know God, experience God, express our love to God, people, and reflect God in our lives. 1 Corinthians reminds us, “Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful”⁴ Through our different gifts, we glorify God and bless other humans. Likewise, we experience various aspects or attributes of God and the world through our various senses.

It is through a sensory perception that we draw knowledge of the seen and the unseen world, including *Deus Revelatus* (God that is Seen) and *Deus Absconditus* (God that is Hidden)...our senses enable us to experience all that is within the world of *Deus Revelatus* in a way that would not be possible in their absence. They also play a role in our experience with the world of *Deus Absconditus*, the unseen world. These sensory receptive fields do their work, day in and day out. They are the concierges of our world experiences. This means that whether we are paying attention or not, the sensory receptive fields for sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are all at work. They receive information constantly and prompt our response.⁵

We, humans, receive information and knowledge, and we respond through our human senses. Some are visual learners who learn best through seeing pictures and graphs, some are auditory learners who are more attuned to the sense of hearing. Some are kinesthetic learners

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:6, The Message.

⁵ Mel Ahlborn and Ken Arnold, eds., *Visio Divina: A Reader in Faith and Visual Arts* (Leeds, MA: Leader Resources, 2009), 24–25.

who learn best by engaging in an activity. “Educator Bernice McCarthy identifies four primary learning styles: Imaginative, Analytic, Common Sense, and Dynamic. None of these four styles will fit a student perfectly...we are all mixes of the four styles, but most of us will have one that feels like our best fit.”⁶ Yet rarely do Christian education, spiritual disciplines, and worship at church engage all our senses fully. Given the variety of human senses, gifts, and learning styles, the church would do well to offer and teach a variety of spiritual disciplines that stimulate all our senses. That would foster congregants’ spiritual growth, strength, and maturity.

This project re-introduces the ancient monastic prayer of *Visio Divina*, a meditative and contemplative form of prayer that incorporates images for the believer’s visual stimulation and imagination. Three sessions of *Vision Divina* give opportunities for church members to engage with the Word of God and images to hear God and see God through the eyes and ears of their hearts. Such an approach may be an especially good fit for those who are visual and “imaginative learners,”⁷ for those who do not know how to pray, and for those who have difficulties expressing themselves verbally. Though in origin *Visio Divina* is an ancient monastic prayer form, it can also effectively enrich modern Christians’ prayer life and connect them to God. Through *Visio Divina*, reading the Word of God can involve gazing at images, contemplating in silence, and sharing their own perspectives beyond current contemplative practices centered on readings in the twenty-first century.

II. What is *Visio Divina*?

A. Origin and its Components

⁶ Marlene D. Lefever, *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1995), 19–20.

⁷ Lefever, *Learning Styles*, 108. “Imaginative learners respond most positively to content presented through methods involving observation and reflection, group interaction, artistic interpretation, roleplay, creative listening, group singing, storytelling, drama, and arts and crafts projects.”

Visio Divina originated from the ancient monastic prayer practice called Lectio Divina, which means sacred reading. Benedict of Nursia developed Lectio Divina in the fourth century as a practice of individual meditation on the Word of God. Benedict wanted his monks to cultivate the life of prayer through constant repetition of and delving deeper into the Word of God, which are distinctive marks of monastic Lectio Divina.⁸ While Lectio Divina focuses on the reading of the Word of God through the four movements “Lectio (literal/historical sense of Scripture), Meditatio (Christological/allegorical sense of Scripture), Oratio (behavioral/ moral sense of Scripture), and Contemplatio (mystical/analogical sense of Scripture),”⁹ Visio Divina has an exclusive and unique movement of contemplating an image. “Visio Divina is a Latin phrase that can be translated as ‘Holy Seeing’ or Divine Looking’ ... In Lectio Divina, a person reads a passage of Scripture as an act of contemplation; in Visio Divina, a person looks at an image as an act of contemplation, seeking an experience of the Word.”¹⁰ Visio Divina is also an ancient monastic contemplative prayer practice using an image in conjunction with scripture to “hear” and “see” the presence of God through the eyes and ears of the heart.

Visio Divina has five movements: First, listening to the Word of God (Lectio); second, Meditation on the Word of God (Meditatio); third, seeing the Word of God by pondering an illumination or image (Visio); fourth, contemplation with the Word of God (Contemplation);,

⁸ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 5, quoted in Mark Alan McCormick, “Incorporating Visio Divina into Preaching Preparation” (D.Min. Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2011), 8, accessed January 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹ Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 56–57, quoted in Mark Alan McCormick, “Incorporating Visio Divina into Preaching Preparation” (D.Min. Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2011), 11, accessed January 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰ Ahlborn and Arnold, *Visio Divina*, 28.

and fifth and finally, responding to the call to become Christ-like (*Conversatio*).¹¹ The movements are not rigid, so some scholars and practitioners suggest six movements; similarly, the movement can be arranged in different ways. Both *Lectio Divina* and *Visio Divina* are contemplative prayer practices in which God's power and presence are experienced like Paul's prayer for the Ephesians:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, . . . and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.¹²

To contemplate means to rest and to be quiet in the Lord and to embrace God's love as who we are—created beings made in the image of God for communion with God.

St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."¹³ Contemplation is to rest and to be quiet in the Lord and embrace God's love as who we are, created beings in the image of God for the communion with God. We recognize that we are called to become Christ-like in this world, reflecting God's love and light.

All we need to do is look: open ourselves to the light and desire that it shines in us . . . With a child's eyes, that is, with the clear gaze that opens on reality after a dream, delights in it, it is amazing, and sees its perennial newness. In silence: the atmosphere in which the most important communication and the deepest insight occur.¹⁴

¹¹ Victor J. Klimoski, editor, *Illuminating the Ministry: A Journal Exploring the Call to Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 6–8, quoted in Mark Alan McCormick, "Incorporating *Visio Divina* into Preaching Preparation" (D.Min. Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2011), 26, accessed January 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹² Ephesians 1:17–19, NRSV.

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, book I, ch.1, quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York/Mahwah, NJ Paulist Press, 2000), 219.

¹⁴ Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An introduction to *Lectio Divina** (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 116, quoted in Mark Alan McCormick, "Incorporating *Visio Divina* into Preaching Preparation" (D.Min. Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2011), 13, accessed January 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Contemplation is an invitation of God in which all people are invited into the presence of God where we humans can fully rest and be renewed, and restored to the fullness of God's image.

“In the Bible, the Greek word *eikon*¹⁵ is usually translated as “image.” (Gen. 1:26), and Paul tells us that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). In this sense, “you and I are icons, even though sin distorts the image of God in us. Jesus, however, restores this divine image in humanity.”¹⁶ Restoration occurs as we contemplate in the presence of God; as we rest in God's arms, where the true transformation of our hearts and lives happens. “While the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.”¹⁷ Visio Divina is a way to attain God's rest and to see God's image through contemplating the Word of God and images that draw one to God so that we humans can reflect God's image in the world.

What does it mean to be created in and to reflect God's image? What does it mean to be made in God's likeness? Recall Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and overall the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”¹⁸ The Bible scholar, Nahum M. Sarna, explains that “the continuation of verse 26 establishes an evident connection between resemblance to God and sovereignty over the earth's resources, though it is not made clear whether a man has power over nature as a result of his being like God or whether that power constitutes the very essence of the

¹⁵ In the Septuagint (LXX), the word “image” in Genesis 1:26 is *eikon*.

¹⁶ Binz, *Transformed by God's Word*, 11.

¹⁷ Hebrews 4:1, NRSV.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:26, NRSV.

similarity.”¹⁹ While Nahum is not sure about human’s power over God’s creatures in God’s resemblance, Gordon Wenham explains human’s capacity to function as God does. He asserts:

Man is made in God's image. The nature of this image is elusive, but the function of the image is clear: it enables mankind to rule over the earth and the other creatures. In ancient oriental myth, kings were made in the gods' image, but Genesis democratizes the idea; every human being is a king and responsible for managing the world on God's behalf.²⁰

Humans and God are not identical, but similar, for humans can have some of God’s natures through the power of the Holy Spirit as gifts known as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. For example, like God, humans are created to be relational beings, relating to God and to one another, just as God is relational among the three persons of the Trinity. Humans have been given the power to rule over nature, which is from being in relation to God. Humans can also reflect who God is by managing, ruling, and creating the world through God-given power such as God’s love, justice, peace, mercy, compassion, beauty, and so on. Humans can relate to God and reflect God through our creativities like visual images that capture more of the fullness of God in creation. All creatures and our creativities in heaven and earth reflect God’s beautiful image, as the psalmist reminds us:

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world.²¹

Through creation, God teaches, instructs, and guides humans. With that in mind, I turn to examine how *Visio Divina* is employed implicitly or explicitly in our lives in light of scripture,

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Genesis* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 12.

²⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Story As Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004), accessed on March 4th, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=743257>.

²¹ Psalm 19:1–4, NLT.

tradition, reason, and experience as a method of theological reflection, which is called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.²²

Scripture

Visio Divina is contemplative prayer practice based on the significant belief that God still speaks to humans today as God did yesterday, through dreams, visions. And another important thing in practicing Visio Divina is to have an expectation of what might happen, what God might reveal. Stephen J. Binz, the author of *Transformed by God's Word*, says, “This expectation leads us to read the Bible with empty hands, placing the control in God’s hands rather than in our own. Reading with expectation means truly listening, knowing that God’s agenda may be different from ours.”²³ The prophet Habakkuk saw a dying world in which evil triumphed, seeking God’s answer with expectation. Habakkuk 2: 1–2, “I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.”²⁴ Habakkuk’s attitude of expectation with patient waiting and watching for God’s response is required in Visio Divina as we encounter images.

God “spoke” to many prophets through visions. A particularly striking visual example of this is God promising to bless Abram with offspring, offspring as many as the stars. The visual clue helps Abram to understand God’s plan and promise, a plan so extraordinary and unexpected given that Abram and his wife Sarai were many decades beyond child-bearing age, it was hard to fathom. Genesis 15:5–6 tells the story: that God “brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward

²² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 47. “Their preaching and teaching were grounded in Scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason.”

²³ Binz, *Transformed by God's Word*, 7.

²⁴ Habakkuk 2: 1–2, NRSV.

heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”²⁵

God uses the visual imagery of stars in the sky to help Abram to understand God’s plan.

In Job chapters 38 to 41, when Job questioned and doubted God’s justice in his painful plight, God interrogated Job about God’s creation from its foundation to all sorts of lives of animals—the wild donkey, wild ox, ostrich, and horse. God asked Job to look at God’s creatures beyond his question and doubt. “Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you; it eats grass like an ox.”²⁶ After Job saw all that God showed to him, Job said, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”²⁷ Job encountered God and understood God through seeing God’s creation. To allay his disciples’ anxieties about provisions for their lives, Jesus likewise drew attention to God’s creatures, in this instance the birds of the air and the lilies of the field:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.²⁸

What Jesus asked his disciples to do was simply to look and consider. What God asked Abram and Job to do was likewise to look at God’s creation, the image of God, to know who God is and what God does. The word *look*, in Matthew 6:26 is ἐμβλέπω *emblépo*, *em-blep’-o* in

²⁵ Genesis 15:5–6, NRSV.

²⁶ Job 40:15, NRSV.

²⁷ Job 42:5–6, NRSV.

²⁸ Matthew 6:25–29, NRSV.

Greek, which means to look on, to observe fixedly, or to discern clearly, and hence to behold, gaze up, look upon, and see. The word *considers* in Matthew 6:28 is καταμανθάνω katamanthánō, kat-am-an-than'-o in Greek, which means to think through thoroughly and to note carefully, hence to consider, to consider well. The word *look* in Job 40:15 is הִנֵּהּ hinnêh, hin-nay' in Hebrew, which means behold, look, see. The word, look, in Genesis 15:5 is נָבַט nâbat, naw-bat' in Hebrew, meaning to scan, i.e., look intently at; to regard with pleasure, favor or care, and hence to (cause to) behold, consider, look (down), regard, have respect, see.²⁹ Visio Divina requires a Christian to do the same as God asked Abram and Job, and as Jesus asked his disciples to do.

In short, Visio Divina is a biblical form of prayer, a humble attitude of expectation, and a method of opening our spiritual eyes to the truth. It is employed in the scripture by which God and Jesus taught God's people, through which they understood God's will and truth beyond their understanding and imagination to grasp.

Tradition

As early Christians wrote about the good news of Jesus Christ, they also expressed the good news in images on wood and plaster. Most early Christians' art was ruined over the course of many years for a variety of reasons, one of which was the persecution of the Church. Yet much as manuscripts were preserved thanks to the work of many copyists, so too "inconographers preserved sacred images through the centuries by their faithful reproduction of the original forms and symbols of the icons."³⁰ The act of gazing contemplatively on icons, called Visio Divina in the West, became increasingly common in Eastern Christianity. That

²⁹ Blue Letter Bible, accessed Jan. 12, 2022, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h2009/niv/wlc/0-1/>

³⁰ Binz, *Transformed by God's Word*, 9.

practice was particularly preserved and refined in the monasteries of the Eastern Orthodox church, while the Western churches gravitated increasingly to *Lectio Divina*.³¹ The purpose of icons was to communicate the word of God, interestingly described as being “written” rather than painted.³² The word of God is thus seen as well as heard or read. The ninth-century Saint Theodore the Studite is among the many who explain this process:

Imprint Christ onto your heart, where he already dwells. Whether you read about him in the gospels or behold him in an icon, may he inspire your thoughts as you come to know him twofold through the twofold experience of your senses. Thus, you will see through your eyes what you have learned through the words you have heard. He who in this way hears and sees will fill his entire being with the praise of God. (*Epistolarum Liber, II.36*)³³

Visio Divina is thus an act of sincere, humble, and longing gestures of seeing and hearing God who can fill our hearts with joy, contentment, and satisfaction. Much like the reminder to pray with confidence— “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened”³⁴—so too *Visio Divina*, the contemplative gazing on icons, is a form of prayer that opens up the door to the kingdom of God, practiced in Eastern Christianity through the liturgy of the church and also through personal prayer in the home.³⁵ Eastern Christian individuals still pray with an icon whether at home or in the church, considering it to be a window into the presence of God.

Russian icon painter and art historian Leonid Ouspensky knows this intimately from his own practice. He writes about icons as follows:

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.* 10.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Matthew 7:7–8, NRSV.

³⁵ Binz, *Transformed by God’s Word*, 20.

the visible image is equivalent to the verbal image. Just as the word of Scripture is an image, so is the painted image a word...in other words, the icon contains and proclaims the same truth as the Gospel. Like the Gospel and the Cross, it is one of the aspects of divine revelation and of our communion with God, a form in which the union of divine and human activity, synergy, is accomplished....In the eyes of the Church, therefore, the icon is not art illustrating Holy Scripture; it is a language that corresponds to it and is equivalent to it, corresponding not to the letter of Scripture or to the book itself as an object, but to the evangelical kerygma, that is, to the content of the Scripture itself, to its meaning, as is also true for liturgical texts. This is why the icon plays the same role as Scripture does in the Church; it has the same liturgical, dogmatic, and educational meaning.³⁶

Much as Ouspensky says of icons, so too *Visio Divina* creates spiritual space in which images and the word of God, as two means of proclaiming truth, equally serve and lead people to experience God's presence, although in Protestant Christian tradition images are largely viewed as only a means of illustrating the written word of God. Yet I suggest that images in themselves are unique and powerful to convey spiritual messages. For this reason, it is entirely likely that a combination of image and the Word of God will be more effective and powerful than only one of those.

Reason

Lectio Divina and *Visio Divina* as contemplative practices have been implemented not only in churches and in believers' personal prayer practices, but also in secular school environments. Educators like the authors of *The Whole Person*³⁷ endeavor to integrate the body, mind, and spirit of humans to nurture the inner being. They understand that the ultimate goal of the entire process of education is the transformation of life rather than merely the transmission of knowledge and information in their educational settings. Through such transformative

³⁶ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, transl., by Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), vol. I, 138–39, quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 140.

³⁷ Jane E. Dalton, Maureen P. Hall, and Catherine E. Hoyser, eds., *The Whole Person: Embodying Teaching and Learning Through Lectio and Visio Divina* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019).

educational experiences, people become aware of themselves, others, and the world, living out their lives more meaningfully as relational human beings, building, preserving, and restoring good relationships with others at school, home, in the community, and in the wider world. The authors of *The Whole Person* remind us that,

Contemplative practices add a missing element in education that serves to enhance the rational and sensory, offering students pragmatic benefits for improving their relationship with themselves, other people, and the world (Dalton, 2016) These practices ‘have an inward or first-person focus that creates opportunities for greater connection and insight’ (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p.5) through present-moment awareness; these practices and opportunities are embodied and connect participants with their own interiority.³⁸

In order to connect to others in meaningful and fulfilling ways, the first step is to connect to oneself. No one exists and lives entirely independently: we are all interconnected, interdependent. Mary Keator, author of *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy*, reminds us that, “in terms of learning, ‘contemplative practices are nourished in states of relationality, connectivity, and insight as students learn to build meaningful relationships with self and others.’”³⁹ Science also testifies how contemplative practice such as deep reading impacts readers.

The field of cognitive neuroscience also contributes to the understanding(s) of deep reading. It has been found, for example, that when an individual engages in deep reading, areas of the brain associated with the conceptualization of the self become more active (e.g., Whitney et al., 2009).⁴⁰ In fact, at times the entire brain seems to light up. Such findings support the idea that individuals internalize material that is deeply read and use it as a method for exploring the self and its relation to the larger world.⁴¹

³⁸ Jane E. Dalton, “Artfully aware: Contemplative practice in the classroom,” *International Journal of Arts & Society: Annual Review*, 11, quoted in Jane E. Dalton et al., *The Whole Person*, 6. D. P. Barbezat & M. Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014), quoted in Jane E. Dalton et al., *The Whole Person*, 6.

³⁹ Mary Keator, *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018) quoted in Jane E. Dalton et al., *The Whole Person*, 6.

⁴⁰ C. Whitney, W. Huber, J. Klann, S. Weis, S. Krash, and T. Kircher, “Neural Correlates of Narratives Shifts during Auditory Story Comprehension,” *Neuroimage* 47, no. 1 (2009): 360–366, quoted in Jane E. Dalton et al., *The Whole Person*, 11.

⁴¹ Dalton et al., *The Whole Person*, 11.

The world recognizes contemplative practices as important pedagogical tools through which a person attains wholeness and is revitalized. Given that these practices are adapted and practiced in the school system, one can well imagine that they would also be beneficial and effective disciplines in modern faith communities. They can provide a basis through which we are rooted in and connected to God. By experiencing such communion with God, we also come to a new recognition of ourselves and learn to respond to God and others lovingly and justly.

Experience

Early Church theologians like Origen and Justin Martyr believed in “humanity’s capacity to know God through metaphoric images.”⁴² Metaphoric images are typically recognized through “the receptive fields of the human body, (i.e., the senses, physical, and spiritual).”⁴³

It was Origen, however, who ‘invented’ the spiritual senses. He derived the doctrine that there exists ‘a general sense for the divine’ which may be subdivided into ‘a sense of sight to contemplate supernatural things such as the Cherubim and Seraphim; a sense of hearing which perceives voices that do not resound in the exterior air; a sense of taste that can savor the bread that came down from heaven for the life of the world; a sense of smell that perceives what Paul thus describes; ‘We are a fragrance of Christ for God’; and a sense of touch, whereby John says that he had touched the Word of Life with his hands.’⁴⁴

Alejandro Garcia-Rivera unpacks Origen’s meaning further, explaining that “the material and the spiritual senses are not two distinct senses for two distinct types of experience, but different aspects of the same senses for the same kind of experience.”⁴⁵ Humans can experience the invisible God with God-given physical and spiritual senses. Since God creates humans for

⁴² Ahlborn and Arnold, *Visio Divina*, 43.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Contra Celsum, 1, 48 quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, op. cit., 368, quoted in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: the Liturgical Press, 1999), 171–72.

⁴⁵ Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 172.

loving relationships, God’s existence, intimate presence, love, and power can be experienced through multiple senses and “multiple intelligences.”⁴⁶

According to Justin Martyr, “images of God are embedded in experiences. Only through the experience of God does the human person come to know God.”⁴⁷ For him, to see God means to experience God and to experience the Word of God in our lives. Referring to worship, he particularly encourages “an active form of participation in what can become a routine event.”⁴⁸ Worship is an active form of participation which is a routine spiritual event, to which we bring our whole person—all our senses, our physical body, and our spirit—to experience God. Some people may experience God through only hearing the Word of God through the sermon and scripture reading, whereas others may experience God through music or movement. Some people might need to see and touch God/Jesus, like “Doubting Thomas,” through a combination of senses. Perhaps Thomas was a kinesthetic learner who learned particularly well through hands-on experience. In sum, *Visio Divina* is an active form of worship to which we bring our whole selves, listening to the Word of God, seeing metaphoric, created images, and experiencing God through the ears, eyes, and hands of faith.

III. Why is it appropriate for today?

A. Abundant Resources are Available

In the twenty-first century, we humans live in a humongous pool of images that are easily accessible via various forms of social media including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. We

⁴⁶ Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York: Basic Books, 2009)

He suggests that all people have different kinds of intelligences such as musical, body-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal intelligences. “It is of the utmost importance that we recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences and all of the combinations of intelligence.” p. 24

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 44.

can easily and extremely rapidly interact with one another even globally through the technology of the Internet. We can even visit museums in different countries virtually, and often for free, and have access to art, research documents, and so forth. More than at any other time in history, we can easily and quickly connect with other people and share images as well as our experiences, knowledge, information, stories, ideas, and interests. As the book *Screening the Sacred* reminds us:

Whereas in the nineteenth century popular novels and presses held the imagination of the American public, it seems that for contemporary Americans images are replacing texts in the ability to capture the imagination and to shape worldviews. Video images, movies, MTV-like programming, television in general, video games, and interactive computer technologies have captured the popular, intellectual, and religious imagination of Americans as books no longer do. Perhaps this is a comment on the postmodern context of our age: Visual images are replacing written texts as the conveyors of information and meaning.⁴⁹

People routinely share information and messages with various images, signs, and pictures, often using their own cellular phone cameras to capture and share with others the beauty of nature and people, and the moments of joy and beauty in life. We communicate a great deal through visual images and whether as professionals or hobbyists, we create our own artworks. Richard Viladesau in his book *Theology and the Arts* asserts that “God is the ultimate beauty, implicitly known as the ultimate desire of the human mind and heart. Revelation is the self-gift of God to humanity... Art is one of the primary embodiments of the ongoing history of this revelation and its communication.”⁵⁰ In this sense, we humans in this twenty-first century have knowingly or unknowingly desired and sought God, the ultimate Beauty, through what we create and share with others in our daily lives across countries and cultures. The fact of the

⁴⁹ Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (San Francisco: Oxford Press, 1995), 153, quoted in Richard A. Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 8.

⁵⁰ Viladesau, 218.

matter is that we live in a world of abundant created images, both ancient and contemporary. We live in a time in which visual images (often rather than words) are a prevalent and effective mode of communication mode through the internet which makes it accessible to imageries from different cultures that challenge us or help us to have various perceptions of God.

William Dyrness reminds us in *Visual Faith* that,

The contemporary generation has been raised and nourished by images; it has an inescapably visual imagination. Regardless of whether one considers this good or bad, for this generation, aesthetics counts more than epistemology...Our children and their friends... are often uninterested in our traditional word-centered media. Instead, they are looking for a new imaginative vision of life and reality, one they can see and feel, as well as understand.⁵¹

In this image-friendly context of abundant resources from different times and cultures, *Visio Divina* is a particularly appropriate and available spiritual discipline for those who want to experience God's presence and hear God's voice in the twenty-first century. It is an ancient practice, but it can enrich and deepen our spirituality along with advanced technology and beyond what advanced technology itself can do.

B. The Power of Artworks

The psalmist's declaration that "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure,"⁵² reminds us that God is far beyond finite human comprehension. Whether psalmists of yore or poets today, we humans try to capture experiences in words. Even words are insufficient, yet we still feel a need to express ourselves. Margaret Miles says that music and visual art "draw people closer to God, often by expressing what cannot

⁵¹ William Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 20–21, quoted in Richard A. Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 8.

⁵² Psalm 147:5, NRSV.

be put into words. They spark the religious imagination and enrich personal experiences of the sacred.”⁵³ Artists of all kinds express beauty, inspiration, and human emotion in a variety of ways through painting, music, dance, and so on, reaching for some form of expression beyond words. And often such artistic expressions not only capture some of that beauty but manage to do so across human barriers and boundaries of language and culture, creating a sense of unity among humanity. In this sense, artworks are powerful and go some way to revealing God—who God is and what God can do.

Priest Richard Viladesau suggests that “beauty [is] a revelation of God...[B]eauty in sacred art [is] a human mediation of the transcendental divine word to humanity.”⁵⁴ He understands artworks to be “a locus of the faith tradition and an embodiment of religious practices.”⁵⁵ Thus, artworks function as texts of Christian theology, as an “aid to the history of theology, as a mode of reflection on and embodiment of Christian ideas and values.”⁵⁶ Gregory the Great believed that artworks “play an important role in the communication of the Christian message to the unlettered.”⁵⁷ Artworks are not only another “text” or way of representing (in this case) something about our faith and our God.

They have a transformative power that some, like Bishop William Duran, argue goes beyond what written words can do: “For painting appear to move the mind more than descriptions: for deeds are placed before the eyes in paintings, and so appear to be actually

⁵³ Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985), 118, quoted in Richard A. Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 88.

⁵⁴ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 123.

⁵⁵ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

carrying on. But in the description, the deed is done as it were by hearsay; which affected the mind less when recalled to memory. Hence, also, is it that in churches we pay less reverence to books than to images and pictures.”⁵⁸ His assertion is about art’s power and efficacy in moving and motivating human minds and hearts to contemplation and also action, rather than merely recalling something to memory. Indeed, artworks can be a kind of text, a means by which to convey aspects of our beliefs and the stories from our Scriptures, including for those who are illiterate and those whose eyesight deteriorated and hearing impaired.

Vision Divina is a contemplative prayer practice with the images of artworks, imagination in our minds and hearts, and all senses of human emotions, which is powerful, transformative, and inclusive in terms of participation. For example, Psalm 23 has rich visual images depicting God’s faithfulness and goodness in the picture like below or imagined in human hearts and minds. It says:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Psalm 23, NRSV.



Figure 1. Henry Ossawa Tanner, "The Good Shepherd," c. 1930 ⁶⁰

Religious pictures and images as a text function not only to illustrate the written scripture in colors, shapes, textures, and forms, they also uniquely serve as a text to evoke the viewer's emotion, imagination, and memory by encouraging, consoling, interacting, questioning, and motivating into action for the process of transformation. Images may ask the following questions related to "the content of Christian faith, spiritual world, or the present world in the process of transformation"⁶¹: Where is God inviting you to? What might you need to see, understand, or believe? How does your current life experience relate to what you see and reflect on? How might this image help you respond to God, to yourselves, and to others today?

In practicing *Visio Divina*, people can hear the word of God, see the presence of God, feel, interact, imagine, pray to God, and be transformed by God through the eyes and ears of hearts, not word by word or not by all the details of shapes and lines in an image, but through the

⁶⁰ Henry Ossawa Tanner, "The Good Shepherd," (c. 1930; Smithsonian American Art Museum) Oil on fiberboard. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

⁶¹ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 138.

eyes and ears of hearts. Thus, Visio Divina is an effective, powerful, and also inclusive spiritual discipline that can draw upon all the human senses and intelligence, thus including all people who have a desire to experience God despite their hearing or vision impairments.

C. Objection to Using images

Despite the power of images and despite our heavily visual twenty-first-century culture, many churches, their leaders, and members, particularly in the Protestant tradition, do not employ images or artworks in their worship, education, and spiritual disciplines. Many objects to using images in the church's life, focusing predominantly on words rather than on visual images or the broader arts to stimulate and enlighten the human senses. Richard Jensen, the author of *Envisioning the Word* explains, "Many of these objections come from intellectual circles in the church. At many levels in the church, there exists a strong prejudice against 'the word alone'... Words, that is, have been treated as the superior way of communicating the Christian message."⁶² Jeremy Begbie also acknowledges Protestant churches' imbalanced focus on words. He says, "The church has typically been dazzled by a kind of intellectualism, where the mind is effectively divorced from other parts of our humanity and forced to work at a high level of abstraction with a very restricted set of tools."⁶³ Viladesau states the reason for the neglect of art in Western theology as being "logocentrism"—preoccupation with the verbal, especially the written word.⁶⁴ According to Jensen, Begbie, and Viladesau, words are the Protestant church's

⁶² Richard Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 11.

⁶³ Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), xii—xiii, quoted in Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 11.

"Intellectual leaders included Erasmus, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin," Richard Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 49.

⁶⁴ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 125.

primary method of delivering the Christian message due to prejudice for the word alone as a superior method, intellectualism, and logocentrism.

The Protestant Reformation eliminated images and “made their appeal exclusively to the auditory sense, to the word alone”⁶⁵ from the church’s life, based on the theology that God is transcendent, unlike medieval Christianity. “The religion of immanence was replaced by the religion of transcendence.”⁶⁶ The belief was that “The infinite God cannot be immanent to humans through finite means.”⁶⁷ This theological view resulted in radical changes as part of the Protestant Reformation, focusing only on words, while the Catholic reform attempted to balance words and images. “protestant’s exit from the Catholic church was announced with the acts of iconoclasm intended to symbolize and enact the purification of the church.”⁶⁸ It damaged on church’s religious images, objects of devotion that were valued and worshiped with. Lee Palmer Wandel, the author of the book *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands*, states the following:

In the sixteenth century, in dozens of towns and villages, otherwise ordinary people—parish clergy, bakers, carpenters, gardeners, most employed and most of them citizens—broke into local churches and smashed up or burned thousands of long-beloved, familiar, treasured objects: altars, altar retables, crucifixes, carved and painted triptychs and diptychs, panel painting, architectural and free-standing scriptures, chalices, patens, candlesticks, and oil lamps.⁶⁹

John Calvin was a strong protester against images, whereas Pope Gregory strongly defended images as “the books of the uneducated.”⁷⁰ Calvin says, ““Whatever men learn of God

⁶⁵ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 48.

⁶⁶ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2, quoted in Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 48.

⁶⁷ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 48.

⁶⁸ Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3.

⁶⁹ Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 26, quoted in Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 49.

⁷⁰ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 54.

in images is futile, indeed false; the prophets totally condemn the notion that images stand in the place of books.’ By contrast, it is through the pure preaching of the Word that one comes to proper faith.”⁷¹ Calvin understood that humans themselves make images idolatrous, “seeking divinity on [their] own terms instead of the Creator’s...expecting to find the Creator in the created.”⁷² And also, some Protestant Christians, such as James Packer who was one of the most influential evangelicals in North America, and an editor of the English Standard Version of the Bible, have had a view of images as idolatry, based on the interpretation of the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”⁷³

Robert Johnston, who is the author of the book, *Reel Spirituality*, talking about the human condition expressed through modern cinema, says, “For Packer, idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods but in the true worship of the true God through the use of images. ... Packer concludes that God communicates best through word, not symbols....Word is seen as paramount over images.”⁷⁴ Images themselves do not make people idolatrous, but when people put anything before God, in other words, when people love anything more than God, then anything including family, material things, images is an idol and humans become idolatrous. Gregory of Nyssa says, “Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything.”⁷⁵ What makes people idolatrous is not anything or material stuff, or images, but people’s hearts where imagination dwells and dances. “The Talmud, for example, contains several passages which see the yetzer, or imagination, as the ‘primordial drive’ of the human being, the gift of God to his

⁷¹ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, quoted in Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 54.

⁷² Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 55.

⁷³ Exodus 20:4, NRSV.

⁷⁴ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 74–75, quoted in Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 12.

⁷⁵ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 1.

most excellent creation, the power to ‘form’ or ‘shape’ as the Creator.”⁷⁶ This primordial drive, imagination, in our hearts leading factor.

Either leads to idolatry or can if sublimated and oriented towards the divine way (Talmud), can serve as an indispensable power for attaining the goal of creation: the universal embodiment of God’s plan in the Messianic Kingdom of justice and peace....In short if the evil imagination epitomize the error of history as a monologue of man with himself, the good imagination (*yetser hatov*) opens up history to an I-Thou dialogue between man and his Creator.⁷⁷

While strong protesters against images, Martin Luther himself appreciated images for his soul, arguing that,

God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 176.

⁷⁷ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 46, quoted in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 177.

⁷⁸ Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, Church and Ministry II, ed. Conrad Bergendorff (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1958), 81–82, quoted in Richard Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 58.



Figure 2. Lucas Cranach the Elder, Wittenberg Altarpiece (1547)⁷⁹

Luther must have been a visual learner. He could grasp something by visualization, forming mental images in his heart, not only through hearing and reading but through seeing as well.

God gives us humans multiple senses through which to experience God’s love likewise shown in multiple dimensions. God also grants us imagination through which we can form mental images in our “heart,” like Luther did to see God and feel God’s presence. Our imagination is one of the gifts from God infused in humans, which is not bounded by space and time. Thus, we also are not bounded or constrained by anything as we seek God, but only can be bounded by our human

⁷⁹ Lucas Cranach, *the Altar Triptych*, 1547, Church of St. Marien, Wittenberg, Germany, accessed on March 9, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140215031210/http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/cranachs-wittenberg-altarpiece.html>

Neil Macgregor in the book, *Seeing Salvation: images of Christ in Art* with Erika Langmuir, writes, “The altarpiece is, as Luther would have wished, the word made paint: and while every picture may tell a story, only a particular kind of picture can preach a sermon. The sermon here is on the Lutheran doctrine of salvation” (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 202.

will or choice. To seek God through only one sense is not a sin, but a way of limiting oneself. If one seeks God, the ultimate Beauty, through one's imagination and all one's senses, that opens one to more ways of experiencing God.

IV. The Project: Practicing Visio Divina in First United Methodist Church of Torrington

A. The Church's Background Information

My current church and ministry context, First UMC of Torrington, was originally erected in 1843 in downtown Torrington, Connecticut. In 1965, it was moved to its current location a few miles away. The Church has been a beacon of the gospel, worshipping and working together to carry out God's mission no matter what they have encountered with God's help. I have served FUMC since July 2021. As a Korean American, I immediately observed a lack of diversity in the community in terms of age, ethnicity, and race. The population is aging and lacks diversity. Through Mission InSite⁸⁰, I have gathered demographic data about the studied area. In terms of Ethnicity in the Torrington area, 90 % of the population is White, 5.3 % is Hispanic/Latino, 1.7% is Asian, and 1.3% is Black/African American. People are mostly concerned about financing their future/savings/retirement funds, day-to-day financial matters, and fear of the future or the unknown. The interesting finding is about religion. The top eight of twenty-one reasons identified by people outside a religious congregation or community for not participating in one are that they:

1. Think religious people are too judgmental
2. Consider religion to be too focused on money

⁸⁰ MissionInstie

3. Don't trust organized religion
4. Are disillusioned with religion
5. Don't trust religious leaders
6. Think religious people have strict/inflexible beliefs
7. Don't believe in God
8. Don't find religion to be relevant to their lives

I have observed that as a faith community, First United Methodist Church also lacks diversity in terms of practices of spiritual discipline. They have not often met for communal prayer (outside of Sunday worship). Members are not comfortable with praying publicly, instead of designating a few people (such as lay servants, the lay minister, and the pastor) to pray on their behalf in worship, in a small group meeting, and during other fellowship events. However, I have observed that many members believe in the power of prayer, the necessity of prayer, and who have a deep desire to pray, but lack confidence in the practice of prayer or know only one way of praying. Thus, I want to introduce a new prayer practice, *Visio Divina*, as a way to encourage and enrich their prayer lives in a non-threatening way. Yet in welcoming, accepting manners despite different perspectives of God in the church and community there is a lack of diversity and understanding of God and Christians.

B. Practice of Lectio Divina

Before practicing *Visio Divina* with church members, I introduced the ancient monastic prayer practice called *Lectio Divina* during last year's Advent season through a four-week long session, since *Visio Divina* has all the components of *Lectio Divina*—*lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. There were three participants in this prayer group, out of over seventy Sunday worship attendees. They told me that they had not heard and did not know anything about *Lectio*

Divina. Each session lasted for an hour, in which participants listened to the word of God, reflected on the word of God, responded to God by prayer, and rested in God. Most of the hour was filled with silence and deep breaths. These experiences were very new to all of them, yet all prayed for about an hour at each session, which was not usual for them at all. One of the participants commented that it was an excellent exercise showing the value of quiet meditation in which we asked the Holy Spirit to speak to us. The challenge was to focus our wandering minds and to spend time coming to a deeper understanding of what the scripture was saying. This participant appreciated being introduced to a new practice and was eager to incorporate the practice into his prayer life. Lectio Divina was the foretaste of Visio Divina, promoting interest and informing different ways of prayer.

C. Practice of Visio Divina

After a four-week session of Lectio Divina during the Advent season, I offered Visio Divina for a three-week session. There were three participants in attendance and those sessions were offered via Zoom due to COVID-19 and treacherous winter conditions in New England. And also many images are available online. I said some introductory words about Visio Divina's origin and explained its six movements, which all participants followed with some further explanation and guidance. The six particular movements I used are based on Stephen J. Binz's book, *Transformed by God's Word*. (There are other possible movements and other orders in which one can follow the movements. Some practices include five and some six movements. I chose six movements because participants had already experienced Lectio Divina, so I figured the practice would already be somewhat familiar and not too taxing for them. I have experienced Visio Divina to be an effective method for spiritual discipline through which participants can have the following benefits: Soaking oneself in deep, silent prayer, strengthening imagination/

recognizing the power of imagination, accepting other's perspectives, stirring conversation among believers for joyful, meaningful fellowship, and developing lay leadership.

The first session's Scripture passage was 1 Corinthians 13:4–7:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”⁸¹

The image I used was a photo⁸² by an unattributed photographer, one of the numerous images related to the passage of love available online.

We started the session with breath/Jesus prayer to quiet participants' hearts and to center ourselves in the presence of God. I read the short Scripture slowly three times while participants sat comfortably in their homes home. We gazed at the image while I asked the following questions:

What do you notice in this image? What attracts you to this image? What repels you in this image? What emotions, memories, thoughts, or questions come up? Do you have any bodily sensations in response to the image and the memories, thoughts, and questions? What scriptures come to mind? Where do you see yourself in this image? Where do you see God in this image? What is happening in your life that is reflected in this image?⁸³

We reflected, thinking about the meaning and message through the image and the Word of God.

We prayed silently, responding to God with what we were feeling, thinking, and hearing in our

hearts. We rested quietly in God. In all, the practice took about thirty minutes. Afterward, I

invited all participants to share what they had experienced. Their initial response was silence and

stillness. No one was able to voice their thoughts and feelings immediately. I felt they needed

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, NRSV.

⁸² Unidentified photographer, *the concept of unity, cooperation, teamwork, and charity*, accessed Jan. 29, 2022, <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/love>.

⁸³ Therese Kay, *Meeting God through Art: Visio Divina* (North Haven, CT: independently published, 2019), 19–20.

time to gather themselves before sharing. I asked them if the silence had made them uncomfortable. One of the participants commented that silence was required and expected, so he did not feel uncomfortable. They certainly “soaked” themselves in contemplation without talking and without any interruption in the presence of God. It offered an opportunity for them to practice waiting for God in silence.

Visio Divina is a contemplative prayer practice that creates a space in our hearts and minds to be with God, to listen, reflect, respond and rest. Humans in this twenty-first century are surrounded by numerous images, but also ceaseless noise. If we do not intentionally pause and set aside a time for contemplative prayer where our souls can breathe and are replenished by the Spirit of God in silence, the wind of noise in our environment will dry our souls without any moisture of mercy and grace of God. Visio Divina enables us to rest and be renewed in God.

The second session’s passage was 1 Corinthians 15:12–20:

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died[a] in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.⁸⁴

The image for this session was *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh.⁸⁵ We went through the six movements one by one after praying the Jesus prayer. I asked participants to read the

⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:12–20, NRSV.

⁸⁵ Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/starry-night.jsp>

scripture slowly one by one so we could hear the same passage three times, but with different voices and tones. We gazed at the image with trust, reflected, responded in prayer, quieted ourselves in stillness, and rested in silence. All told, it took about the same time (about 30–35 minutes) as the first session. When I invited people to share if they had something on their hearts and minds, unlike at the first session this time people shared more openly what they had experienced and some of the things that had come to mind.

One participant shared that when she looked at the small village depicted under the starry sky, she felt God's protection over the people in the village and also thought of God's protection over all people at night. Another participant enthusiastically shared his realization that the church is at the right-center of the village and that this represented for him that God is the center of our lives and the big dark tree stands, reaching out to heaven. He recognized the existence of evil in the world. The other participant felt the resurrected Jesus Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit in the image.

These three participants saw the same image for the same amount of time, but they each saw, felt, and interpreted the image in totally different ways, sharing great insights that the picture often evoked only for them. Each one's interpretation was unique and insightful and opened the eyes of each one's heart in a different way. I believe that they used their imagination, their unique experiences through which they saw and appreciated the image, and were guided by the Holy Spirit. Wilda C. Gafney says, "The sanctified imagination is the fertile creative space where the preacher-interpreter enters the text, particularly the spaces in the text, and fills them out with missing details; names, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on...Sacred imagination tells the story behind the story, the story between the lines on the

page.”⁸⁶ In the practice of Visio Divina, a viewer enters into the image with sacred imagination through which they seek God’s presence and voice.

Imagination is an “indispensable function of our soul”⁸⁷ and is as important for our theological reflection as is analysis, reasoning, and intuition. “The power of Visio Divina is its potential to ignite people’s imagination with spiritual, theological, artistic wisdom. It serves as a resource that enables the community to see rightly, to grow as disciples, and to strengthen its commitment to the mission of the Gospel.”⁸⁸ When people gaze at an image with trust, attention, and expectation of what might happen, the image wakes up their physical and spiritual senses and activates the movements of their souls through its colors, shapes, and spaces.

Viladesau says, “Art reveals significant aspects of the particular human situations to which God’s word is addressed, and on which theology must therefore reflect if it is to be relevant and intellectually responsible. Art is also one of the means by which the message is presented in a way that is persuasive and attractive, giving a vision that can lead to moral conversion and action.”⁸⁹ The moment of gazing at an image creates in human minds and hearts a space where a human’s imagination can fly and dance beyond their limits, barriers, and incapacities. Imagining God’s will and activity helps us to recognize our reality right. It leads us to the path of discipleship and further commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ.

⁸⁶ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanish Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 3–4.

⁸⁷ Immanuel Kant said “the imagination is the blind but indispensable function of the soul.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Dent, 1993), 144, quoted in Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* (London: Equinox publishing Ltd., 2005), 1.

⁸⁸ Barbara Sutton, *Seeing the Word: Program Manual* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 5, quoted in Mark Alan McCormick, “Incorporating Visio Divina into Preaching Preparation” (DMin. Thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2011), 26, accessed January 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸⁹ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 124.

The third session's passage was Matthew 7: 12–13:

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The image I used was *Golden Rule* by Norman Rockwell.⁹⁰ His illustration depicts many nations, races, and ethnicities with various colors, and shapes, yet the words in the illustration, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” remind humans of what we are called to do and seem to be a focal point that unites humans in diversity. One participant read in the illustration human dignity regardless of all our differences in terms of race, age, gender, and culture. Another participant found his own life of past, present, and future in God through the image. Another participant saw others in other religions and cultures, putting himself in other persons' shoes. I found that the more we practiced Visio Divina, the more participants engaged in conversations and embraced others' perspectives without judgment.

As images can be viewed and interpreted in numerous ways in the practice of Visio Divina, biblical texts also have different meanings and can be viewed and interpreted in a variety of ways. Richard Jensen in *Envisioning the Word* states, “Narrative criticism is a relatively new tool for studying the Bible. One of its central elements is that biblical texts have a surplus of meaning. Biblical texts speak differently to different readers/hearers.”⁹¹ However, sometimes the differences in biblical text interpretations are not well accepted and not embraced in theological conversations. During my observation in the sessions of Visio Divina, I have learned that images open up and stir up conversations among participants about what they felt, thought,

⁹⁰ Norman Rockwell, *Golden Rule*, 1961, accessed February 10, 2022, https://www.nrm.org/2014/02/golden_rule

⁹¹ Richard Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 99.

understood, and heard. One participant said that “I see it as a creative way to create conversation in a group.” Participants embraced others’ different perspectives and experiences as they were without any judgment and enjoyed diverse perspectives. While Scripture is often viewed in one dimension, sculptures or any artworks are easily viewed in multiple dimensions. The Practice of Visio Divina can be used in a way that “the arts open up opportunities for multiple shared interpretations of the text.”⁹² And its practice helps people to accept and embrace others’ different interpretations and perspectives as “Art reveals in a unique and accessible way the polyvalency (multiple meanings) of Scripture.”⁹³ The practice of Visio Divina certainly enables people to listen and embrace others’ perspectives and generates a space of interactive and inspirational conversation, joyful fellowship through images and words of God.

The faithful participants of the three sessions of Visio Divina were church leaders. They serve the church—in my current context—as a certified lay minister, lay servant, and lay leader. They lead small groups, meetings, and ministries. I have observed a potentiality that the laity can certainly lead the practice of Visio Divina at the church or at their home. I asked one participant if he would like to lead Visio Divina in the future, and he responded, “Of course. . . It doesn’t require vast knowledge to go through the steps you appeared to be doing.” He was certain and confident that he as a lay servant could lead and guide and nurture others through the practice of Visio Divina.

⁹² Ofra Backenroth, Shira D Epstein, and Helena Miller, “Bringing the Text to Life and into Our Lives: Jewish Education and the Arts,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (2006): 467, quoted in Maren Sonstegard-Spray, “Reading the Bible with Rembrandt: Graphic Exegesis in Christian Education” (D.Min., Thesis, Candler School of Theology, 2019), 11, accessed February 10, 2022. ProQuest.

⁹³ Doug Adams, “Changing Patterns and interpretations of Parables in Art,” *ARTS* 19, no. 1 (2007):5-13, quoted in Sonstegard-Spray, “Reading the Bible with Rembrandt,” 10.
“Adams adopts the term ‘polyvalency’ to mean multiple interpretations.”

Binz says, “In recent years, Lectio Divina has been liberated from monasteries and religious houses to become the heart of lay spirituality... Visio Divina is undertaken by lay people throughout the East, through the liturgy of the Church and also through personal prayer at the home.”⁹⁴ Visio Divina is one of the spiritual disciplines through which the laity’s spirituality can not only be strengthened, deepened, and broadened but also their leadership can be stimulated and developed. It is an effective discipline, but a simple spiritual discipline by following steps in which mind, heart, emotion, imagination, will, desire is needed to seek God rather than a vast knowledge of God, Scripture, and Christianity. Art historian Lars Raymond Jones says, “As a devotional methodology and representational model, Visio Divina effectively empowered devout beholders to access divine grace without priestly mediation and implied the beholder’s potential experience of the divine corporeally manifest through the image as ‘imagistic real presence.’”⁹⁵

God’s grace is available for everyone through any means such as images, words of God, sacraments, good works, artworks as we eagerly and fervently seek God’s presence in our lives no matter who we are either clergy or laity, and we all are called to do ministry as Christians in this world. For the sake of the ministry of Jesus, Christians need to use all our given means, gifts, and resources and need the collaboration of clergy and laity. Ann A. Mitch at Lewis Center for Church Leadership says,

Late twentieth-century theology has reclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity, emphasizing God as an interdependent, dynamic, community of three equal, distinct, inherently interrelated persons. This relational, non-hierarchical image of the triune God provides a

⁹⁴ Binz, *Transformed by God’s Word*, 20.

⁹⁵ Lars Raymond Jones, “Visio Divina,” abstract, (Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1999), accessed Jan. 13, 2022. Proquest Ebook Central.

compelling model for collaborative ministry—a model for how laity and clergy can minister side by side in a relationship that is mutually affirming.⁹⁶

The image of the triune God—three persons in One—certainly represents that we are all distinctive, relational, unique, equal to serve God. The Practice of Visio Divina certainly creates an opportunity for the laity serves as a leader as much as the clergy does in a faith community or their home.

D. Conclusion

In this noisy, busy, messy modern world, we Christians would like to encounter God in our prayer, yet many are still struggling with their prayer life. Simply many people do not know how to pray although they want to pray and have an intimate relationship with God. However, the church has ignored the fact that each individual has been created with multi-sensory and has neglected to provide various spiritual disciplines. The majority of churches in the State regardless of size, location, race, ethnicity, social-economic status, is in lacking of various spiritual disciplines, especially visual stimulation in their worship, fellowship, and prayer life. The church should be given many choices, and the liberty of spiritual discipline, as they find that the ways to God. Clergy has a responsibility and privilege to meet the church's spiritual needs and the means for spiritual growth.

Visio Divina is an ancient monastic contemplative prayer with the word of God as well as images. We modern Christians live in a world where abundant images are available through

⁹⁶ Ann A. Michel, "Toward a Compelling Theology of Lay Ministry," Leading Ideas at Lewis Center for Church Leadership, November 29, 2017, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/toward-a-compelling-theology-of-lay-ministry/>.

social media and online so we can easily adapt the ancient contemplative prayer practice in terms of resources. It is still an effective contemplative prayer practice through which modern Christians can pray not only with the word of God but with images that stimulate our visual senses and increase our imagination as we seek God.

Visio Divina helps participants to be with God in silence where their souls hear the words of God, reflect, respond to God, and rest in God. Especially, images lead participants to imagine, evoke our human emotions, touch our hearts and minds beyond what the words of God only can do. Imagination goes beyond any cultural and language barriers, limits. It stirs conversations in one's heart as well as among participants. It enables us to embrace others' different perspectives, generating joyful fellowship as well. Furthermore, it is a great opportunity for the laity can lead others in a small group where people can be nurtured and edified by the laity's leadership. Visio Divina is an ancient monastic contemplative prayer practice, yet it still serves as an effective prayer practice, edifies us, and enriches our spirituality in the twenty-first century beyond current contemplative practices centered on the words of God.

E. Appendix

A. Six movements of Visio Divina

1. **Lectio** is best described as listening deeply to scripture as we read. We savor the word of the sacred literature, appreciating the images, envisioning the scene, feeling the sentiments, and allowing the words to move from our heads to our hearts. We read slowly and carefully, studying the words and characters, the images and metaphors.
2. **Visio** is gazing upon an image, trusting that God will illumine our minds and hearts through the image. We look at the image not as spectators but as participants in the relationships and holy actions that the image evokes.
3. **Meditatio** is reflecting on the meaning and message of the sacred text and the sacred image. After listening carefully and gazing attentively, we let the text and image settle within us and penetrate the deepest parts of our being. We let the encounter awaken within us new understandings, questions, and challenges. Our reflection forms connections between the ancient forms of the Gospel and our contemporary lives.
4. **Oratio** is a verbal and prayerful response to God's word as experienced in the sacred text and icon. If we have truly listened and gazed as God is revealed to us in words and images, we will naturally want to respond to God. In this way, Lectio Divina and Visio Divina become a kind of dialogue with God, as we receive God's word and respond to God in prayer.
5. **Contemplatio** is simply a quiet resting in God. There arrives a time in our verbal prayer when words become unnecessary and no longer helpful. Our spoken response has taken us as far as it can in our relationship with God. Contemplatio is wordless silence in the divine presence. We simply receive the transformation embrace of God who has led us to this moment.
6. **Operatio** is faithful living in Christ. Lectio Divina and Visio Divina lead not only to a changed heart but also a changed life. This practice must make a difference in the way we live. Operatio is the word of God lived out in generous service, concrete witness, faithful commitment, and in works of mercy.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Binz, *Transformed by God's Word*, 21-25.

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