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Running From Noise to the Silence of Prayer:
Encountering Lectio Divina and Contemplative Worship

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Abstract

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Noise has infiltrated the Church and Christian life. The church has become uncomfortable with silence and thus it is not often embraced or understood. Creating space for silence and reflection is often neglected and avoided. Because of the noise and lack of silence, it has become increasingly more difficult to hear and listen for the gentle whisper of God. The most accessible means of listening for God is through prayer. This project evaluates how a congregation shapes itself as the Body of Christ and how it responds when invited into the silence through the ancient prayer practice of *lectio divina* and a contemplative worship experience. Through surveys, personal interviews, and hands-on experience, the study reveals that the congregation, which considers itself an actively praying community, desires silence, yet lacks the space and the tools to experience silence in their daily life and Christian faith.

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Encountering Lectio Divina and Contemplative Worship

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I. Introduction

Elijah the prophet runs to the silence of a cave and waits to hear from God. When God comes near, Elijah steps out of the cave. He looks for God in the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, but God is not there. It is only in the sound of “sheer silence”¹ or the “gentle whisper”² that Elijah finally hears God speak.

Today it is a challenge to hear God speak for we are inundated with noise. Whether it is the sound of traffic, a TV, a siren, people talking, a YouTube video, or any number of social media outlets, noise fills our lives. So familiar is the sound of noise, that we have become accustomed to it and even expect it. We are often unaware of how noisy our lives are until there is quiet.

Stuart Sim in his book *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, argues that we need more silence in our lives and less noise, and that noise is being marketed as a commodity and is a means of exploitation.³ Thus, choosing silence “can become a political statement, a refusal to accept the swamping of our culture by the imperatives of big business corporations and multinationals.”⁴ For those who consider silence as something to be opposed, the opposite also becomes a political statement.⁵ Silence carries with it a counter-cultural label that threatens the accepted and mandated culture of noise.

The politics and culture of noise have also infiltrated the Church and the Christian life. The Church often does not embrace or understand silence. Programming is created around noise to keep the church busy and productive. Creating space for silence and reflection is often avoided

¹ 1 Kings 1:12, NRSV.

² 1 Kings 1:12, NIV.

³ Noise as a commodity can be interpreted as a tool used when selling a product for the purpose of increasing the power of the seller. Noise as a means of exploitation is the abuse of that power.

⁴ Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 2, accessed January 10, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵ Sim, *Manifesto for Silence*, 2.

and neglected. A prime example of this is in the Christian worship service. Many worship leaders fill the worship space with “noise.” Whether implicitly or explicitly, they consider silence to be “awkward” and so use words or music to prevent there being any. Think of times of transition and movement in worship, say before the service begins, as people go to and from Communion, or after the last prayer is said. Music is played or words are expressed so that the worship service is “seamless.” These moments of awkwardness may be attributed to a congregation’s lack of exposure to silence or their discomfort with it because of the cultural politics of noise. “We are conditioned by our age to be noisy...so much so that we are almost afraid to be silent,” notes George Groman.⁶ Consequently the congregation might interpret lack of silence or quiet in the church or the Christian life as a source of fear rather than a means of reflection and spiritual growth.

Yet one tradition which embraces silence, even in its worship, is the Quaker tradition. For Friends (as Quakers are called these days), silence is a means of reflection and contemplation. For Friends, silence creates the very space for worship and prayer and invites community and relationships. For them, silence is a means of “experiencing the Inward Light.”⁷ That is, one is more likely to experience the divine presence in the *sheer silence*.

The monastic tradition is one that also fully embraces silence. Men and women for centuries have devoted themselves to silence, prayer, and contemplation, and have physically separated themselves from the politics of noise to seek God in the confines of the cell or chapels of a monastery or convent and hear the gentle whisper of the divine.

But what if one is not part of the Quaker tradition or has not chosen a monastic life? How does a Christian experience silence and hear God in today’s busy, noisy world? The most

⁶ George H. Groman, “The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship,” (1973), 21, cited in Stuart Siim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 67.

⁷ Sims, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, 66.

accessible means is through prayer. Prayer allows for intimacy with God through words and silence. Prayer can happen anywhere and at any time. Prayer can be communal but is mostly individual, according to a Barna study. “Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray” found that 82 percent of those who pray, pray silently by themselves and only 2 percent pray collectively with a church.⁸ However, prayer is the language of the church (both communal and individual) and can be a way of inviting silence into spaces that the church and individuals often fill with noise. If like Elijah we are to hear the gentle whisper of God, then creating a space in the church and in the Christian life for silence and reflection is integral to experiencing and hearing the voice of God.

This project uses as its basic method of theological reflection that proposed by Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward in “Writing the Body of Christ’: Corporate Theological Reflection.”⁹ The primary purpose of their method is to listen and reflect on how “faith community shapes itself.”¹⁰ This is done by examining internal metaphors or practices that inform the identity surrounding the common narrative of the people. In this instance, the Body of Christ becomes a collective understanding of how the congregation is or can be formed through silence, contemplative prayer and worship. In part, this practice also examines a congregation’s willingness to be open and receptive to God working within their own context toward a new understanding of its identity.

This project uses descriptive research methods such as a case-study, a survey, questionnaires and observations, and several personal interviews to evaluate how a congregation in downtown Marietta, Georgia encounters God through silence and contemplative prayer, and

⁸ “Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray,” Barna Research, last modified August 15, 2017, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>.

⁹ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, “Writing the Body of Christ: Corporate Theological Reflection,” in *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: Canterbury Press, 2005), 109–37.

¹⁰ Graham, Walton, and Ward, “Writing the Body of Christ,” 109.

whether this encounter can be developed through additional contemplative practices within the congregation.

This evaluative process begins by observing a class on the spiritual life as a means to engage the conversation about silence, prayer, and contemplation. This is followed by a church-wide survey to discern how the congregation understands itself to engage with prayer and silence currently. Then follows a “hands-on” approach to encountering prayer and silence through an introductory session on the ancient prayer practice of *lectio divina*. The concluding component of the project is a contemplative worship experience that introduces music and sound as a means of entering into the silence, and then creates a space for the congregation to encounter God through *lectio divina*. The worship experience combines elements of sound, silence, scripture, contemplation, and prayer as a means of creating a space to encounter God. Questionnaires that attendees are asked to fill out prior to leaving the setting follow both the *lectio divina* session and contemplative worship experience.

II. Identifying the Problem

In 2018, after having completed two of my three years of doctoral studies, I moved as pastor to a different church. My thesis had been developed from the ethnographic study of my previous church context, namely to introduce the congregation to contemplative prayer and an ongoing contemplative worship experience. The church had become so focused on being busy and doing that the “cultural noise” had infiltrated the worship services. Silence was avoided at all costs and contemplation was not sought or encouraged as a spiritual discipline. At a Maundy Thursday service, I exposed the church to a contemplative worship experience for the first time. For many people, it was a very life-giving and holy experience and this prompted me to consider

further contemplative services. Yet before I had a chance to respond to that new interest, I moved to a new congregation. Rather than assume this new congregation needed or would welcome a similar experience, I first needed to listen to the new congregation, discern its pulse of busyness, and gauge its spiritual temperature.

The way I listened, discerned, and gauged what was going on there was through ethnography. Yale professor of pastoral care and counseling, Mary Clark Moschella, observes that “Ethnography is a way of immersing yourself in the life of people in order to learn something about them.”¹¹ And so, I began to immerse myself in my new setting via ethnography. What I discovered is that United Methodist churches in suburban Atlanta are not dissimilar. Though the new church in Marietta was not as preoccupied with busyness as my previous context, both churches struggle with the violence of noise in their daily lives as well as with developing contemplation, silence, and prayer as spiritual disciplines.

My current context, Marietta First UMC, has two identical traditional worship services, at 9 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. on Sundays. Both services follow the traditional order of worship from The United Methodist Book of Worship.¹² The setting of worship is in a newly renovated sanctuary with traditional elements: pews, a chancel area consisting of kneelers, choir loft, pulpit, lectern, piano, and organ.

Since 1833, the church has enjoyed a long and proud history within Marietta. It is part of the historic downtown, just off the Square. It is one of the founding churches of the community and historically has been a place of prominence, influence, and affluence within the city proper, and in many ways has been marketed as a commodity within its community. Meaning, people

¹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4.

¹² The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 16–32.

join this worshipping community because of its status and it's known membership of local power brokers.

The church experienced a painful split in 1999 at which time its custom was to have three worship services every Sunday morning, one of them being contemporary. After the split, the church eliminated the contemporary service and has for the past fifteen years held only traditional worship services. The church has a membership roll of 4,100 with Sunday worship attendance of about 1,100.

On one of those Sundays, at the close of the sermon I invited the congregation to the altar to kneel and pray with me as I ended the sermon. The congregation at the 9:00 a.m. service responded immediately and filled the chancel rail kneelers. The 11:15 a.m. service was different; only a few congregants kneeled at the chancel. Yet that people came forward at both services brought back shared memories within the congregation of a time before the "split" when people used to pray regularly at the altar. It was after that service and in the weeks that followed that people shared how important that time was for them. Some even shared that they had wanted to come forward but were unable to get out of their pews quickly enough to get to the altar before the prayer began. Nearly everyone who talked with me appreciated the time praying at the altar, and many specifically said, "We used to do this all the time before the split." Some said, "If you invite us to come and pray at the altar again, we will come forward. Just give us more time to get up there." I found these responses to be intriguing and it sparked in me an interest in learning more about the prayer life of the congregation.

In addition to the worship service, I have also been intrigued that even many leaders in the church when asked to pray defer to the clergy. They are often reluctant, expressing discomfort about and when praying aloud. A further curiosity is a prayer room in the church. It

was donated in memory of a deceased member whose photo and name is engraved on a plaque just inside the door. The room is fully furnished and has an antique kneeler with prayer books, prayer cards, candles, and a sign to place on the outside of the door, “Prayer Room in Use.” The room is located at the corner of a long hallway and is unmarked. There is nothing on the outside that lets people know this is a prayer room other than when it is in use. In the eight months that I have been at the church, I have only once seen someone in there and have never seen the sign hung on the door. If a church leaves a room dedicated to prayer open, that is a way of telling people of the importance of prayer in the life of a congregation’s past or its present.

These instances have prompted me to consider the prayer life of the congregation. How engaged is the church in a life of prayer? Is prayer an important part of the congregation’s life? What role, if any, does silence play in the congregation’s and individuals’ prayer lives? Would the church benefit from learning about a contemplative prayer practice? Would experiencing an ancient prayer practice and a contemplative worship service challenge the congregation to explore more ways of deepening their prayer lives? What role does scripture play in prayer? Could new resources help to lessen the noise and busyness of their lives?

III. Theological Framework

Jesus would often set out to pray alone. He would go out to deserted places, quiet places, away from people and noise, and would pray.¹³ Jesus would make time to listen for the soft whisper of God. Our Scriptures suggest that prayer was an integral part of Jesus’ identity. By inference, it is an integral aspect of the formation of Christian identity. It is “a process of

¹³ Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15–16.

shaping.”¹⁴ According to Roberta Bondi, “we are formed by our prayer as we find our center in God because it is how we are made: ‘Our hearts are restless ’til they find their rest in you, oh God,’ said our fourth-century Christian ancestor Augustine.”¹⁵ Our restlessness is found in the violence of our noisy lives, where words, images, sounds, and actions bombard us. Yet instead of running toward God, we often find ourselves running away and into the noise. Jesus sought God in the solitude of prayer and models for us what contemplative prayer looks like in the Christian life. Jesus also taught prayer to his disciples by articulating the model of what we call the Lord’s Prayer. In the Book of Acts, the formation of the Christian community involved prayer. We learn that the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”¹⁶ The Apostle Paul challenges the believer that the Christian life is one of unceasing prayer;¹⁷ thus every action directed towards God becomes an act of prayer. The difficulty arises when the Christian life is caught up in the hustle and bustle of life and the violence of noise because that makes it difficult to live a life of unceasing prayer.

The early monastic movement originated as a means for laypersons to separate themselves from the noise of the world so that they could seek out and listen for the soft whisper of God and to live a profound relationship¹⁸ with God through a life of unceasing prayer. The monastic life was created to be a life unencumbered of the demands of the politics of noise. Not

¹⁴ Reidar Hvalvik and Karl Olav Sandnes, eds., “Early Christian Prayer and Identity: Introducing the Project,” in *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation* (Tübingen: Güldes-Druck, 2014), 4.

¹⁵ Roberta Bondi, *To Love and Pray: Conversations with the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁶ Acts 2:42.

¹⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Hom. Gen. 30.5, cited in Hvalvik and Sandnes, “Early Christian Prayer and Identity: Introducing the Project,” 3.

by chance is the first word in the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict the word *listen*: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”¹⁹

Listening is an important part of seeking God. Listening requires attentiveness to what is going on in us and in the world. Esther de Waal writes, “To listen closely, with every fibre of our being, at every moment is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking.”²⁰ In turn, listening requires an act of obedience because we are to act on what we have heard.²¹ The word obedience “derives from the Latin *obedire*, which shares its roots with *audire*, to hear.”²² To listen and hear from God also demands that one be willing to act on what one hears, to obey. Elijah, who seeks and finds God in the soft whisper, walks out to the entrance of the cave and the whisper that God speaks is, “What are you doing here Elijah...Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king of Aram...[s]o he set out from there.”²³ Elijah hears the soft whisper of God and obeys by his willingness to act on what he hears.

One of the ways that the early monastics listened for God was through *lectio divina* or holy reading. Michael Casey in his book *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, provides an historical perspective on this ancient pattern of prayer. At the time of St. Benedict, reading was part of a monk’s daily rhythm and prayer life. Books were scarce but because “the monks of the benedictine tradition regarded reading as an essential element in living the spiritual life,”²⁴ they went to great effort to ensure that the monasteries held reading material for monks of

¹⁹ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1981), 3.

²⁰ Esther De Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 43.

²¹ De Waal, *Seeking God*, 43.

²² *Ibid.*.

²³ 1 Kings 19:13, 15, 19.

²⁴ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 3.

each generation. “It was the rarity of books that dictated the style of reading.”²⁵ *Lectio divina* developed out of the circumstances in which the monks lived because books were rare and did not come in the easily handled paperback versions we have today. The books took longer to read and it was a more arduous and thoughtful process. Holy reading, praying the scriptures, requires a slow and thoughtful process, and the one who hears the words is thus more easily able to be attentive to the soft whisper of God. “We cannot hear what the text is saying if we refuse to listen.”²⁶ One cannot listen and hear in the politics of noise. The practice of *lectio divina* invites not just the monk but all those who seek after God to enter the holy silence and hear God speaking through the biblical text.

The way of *lectio divina* is one of practical theology in that it seeks “to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday.”²⁷ It originated and developed within a community to guide the community in its spiritual life. “Early desert traditions of spirituality... offer a significant alternative vision of theological learning, one rooted in a practiced spirituality, nourished by Scripture and other words that one encountered deeply, slowly, interpreted at the risk of transformation.”²⁸ *Lectio divina* was an embedded practice within the monastic community and was equal to the other patterns of life attributed to life in a monastery, namely the Divine Office and work. The motto *Ora et Labora* (Prayer and Work) often associated with St. Benedict is not directly quoted in The Rule, though it does envelop the monastic spirit. Incorporating a practical theology into daily life allows the monk and Christian to engage in dialogue with God and to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁷ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014), 5.

²⁸ Claire Wolfeich, “Spirituality,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014), 330.

reflect on their spiritual life; “theological reflection...is the heart of practical theological method.”²⁹

The monastic way of life, particularly through the use of *lectio divina*, can also assist non-vowed Christians today to enter the silence, away from the violence of noise, to a place where one can hear the soft whisper of God. For “[s]ilence creates a space for perceiving the presence of God.”³⁰ In fact, this seeking out of silence in the modern context is not too different than the early desert mothers and fathers running from the noise of their world into the silence of the cave. “Spiritual difficulties in the desert texts and those of contemporary culture with its emphasis on ‘productivity, mobility, and consumerism [all can be identified as noise] ... propels us to touch many things rather than living deeply into one thing, one tradition, one practice, one place, one verse.”³¹ *Lectio divina* is a means for the today’s Christian to encounter God while learning a practical theology that can be incorporated into daily life.

Lectio divina is comprised of four steps, movements, or moments. According to St. John of the Cross they can be summed up in paraphrase from Luke 11:9:

Seek in READING
and you will find in MEDITATION
knock in PRAYER
and it will be opened to you
in CONTEMPLATION.³²

These movements are *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), *contemplatio* (contemplation), and an additional fifth— *actio* (action).³³ These movements are not necessarily

²⁹ Paul Ballard, “The Use of Scripture,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014), 168.

³⁰ YouTube.com, “Space of Silence - Novy Dvur Trappists,” last modified October 2, 2012, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FT8tZzmEDVo>.

³¹ Wolfeich, “Spirituality,” 330.

³² St. John of the Cross, “Paraphrase of St. Luke’s Gospel 11:9, cited in Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 28.

sequential but are “basic ingredients” for prayer “as if one were cooking a good soup.”³⁴ Joseph Chalmers adapts these movements as Read, Reflect, Respond, Rest, Act.³⁵ This adaptation will be the one presented to the congregation.³⁶

IV. The Project

A Case Study: A Class on the Spiritual Life

This project began by observing a class on the spiritual life taught by an associate minister in the church. The primary resource for the class was Richard Foster’s *Devotional Classics* though only excerpts were used and it was not required reading.³⁷ *Lectio divina* was introduced in the first week of this six-week class, a class I observed. There were thirteen people in attendance and the class was held in the church’s chapel. The participants ranged in age from thirty to eighty, with four of the thirteen being male. Participants sat in pews and faced forward. The associate minister was at the front of the chapel and conducted the class from there. This was the first time that many of those in attendance had heard of and experienced *lectio divina*. Prior to the class, they had been given a handout and were encouraged to read 1 Kings 19 and Psalm 46.

After the introductory comments to the class regarding curriculum, subjects to be covered, expectations, etc., the female associate minister introduced the subject of silence. The question she asked was, “Why do we avoid silence, and what about it makes us anxious?” One

³³ Joseph Chalmers, O. Carm., *The Sound of Silence: Listening to the Word of God with Elijah the Prophet* (Kent, UK: Saint Albert’s Press, 2007), 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20–25.

³⁶ See Appendix for Lectio Divina (Holy Reading) Handout for details of each movement.

³⁷ Additional resources referenced: Reuben P. Job, *When You Pray: Daily Practices for Prayerful Living* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), and Sylvia Gunter, *Prayer Portions* (Birmingham, AL: The Father’s Business, 1995) and material presented to the North Georgia Annual Conference, 2018, written by Rev. Dr. Ellen Shepard, “The Art of Spiritual Formation.”

man in his fifties responded by saying that, “Silence or quiet isn’t the concern. It’s my mind. It’s hard to turn off and reset.” Another respondent, a woman in her forties, said the first thing she does in the morning is gets up and goes for a walk. She does not wear headphones or listen to anything; she prefers to walk in silence. Another woman in her sixties said she lies in bed when she first wakes up, thinking about God. A young woman in her early thirties enters the silence through breathing exercises and then settles into a place of rest. She said breathing helps calm her and keeps her focused. She is a recovering alcoholic, and breathing and meditation help to manage her stress and keep her connected to God. The class ended with an introduction to *lectio divina* reading from 1 Kings 19:11–18. Because by this time the class was nearing its close, the lesson on *lectio divina* was rushed and not fully experienced and there was no time for feedback.

After she completed the six-week class, I met with the associate minister for a follow-up. I had only attended the first class in its entirety and subsequently joined two of the remaining classes for short periods. In the follow-up, she shared that each class began with *lectio divina* before other spiritual disciplines were introduced (*visio divina*, The Examen, Iconography, Prayer Beads, Contemplation, Breathing, and Taizé). The associate minister did not ask the class to complete a follow-up survey, so it is only my brief observations and those of the associate minister that inform this project. At the second session, she did practice *lectio divina*, with the scripture being Luke 5:1–11. The participants were engaged and vocal about their experience, she reported. Several women in their thirties heard God speaking to them, one expressing that through the scripture she was being challenged to go deeper in her spiritual life; here, she referenced the text mentioning that the boat was sinking in the water. A couple in their sixties openly expressed that *lectio divina* made them feel uncomfortable. The man shared that he struggled with the concept of praying the scriptures and did not get much out of it. He said his

mind kept wandering and he was not sure what he was supposed to do or how it is that God “works” through this way of reading the Bible.

Upon reflection, the associate minister shared that because she had lots of things going on in her life she felt she had not been entirely “present” when she was teaching her classes. She felt that her lack of “presence” in the class prevented not just her but others from being able to experience fully *lectio divina* and the other spiritual exercises that she introduced. She shared that she had rushed through the readings and had not emphasized the quiet and silence in the most effective way. She also admitted that she did not prepare herself spiritually to teach the class and tended to talk too much, not trusting the participants or the silence. This confession on the part of the associate minister reveals how the violence of noise infiltrates even church leaders’ lives and prevents us at times from being fully present and connecting with God. This echoes what we heard earlier from Casey that, “We cannot hear what the text is saying if we refuse to listen,”³⁸ and we cannot listen and hear God if we refuse to listen. The associate minister also expressed this struggle with her own prayer life and not having “time,” and the tension between “being” (presence) and “doing” (productivity).

To what extent the class had achieved its goals or had changed people’s practices could not be measured. All we could say was that the class had exposed a few people in the congregation to *lectio divina* and other spiritual disciplines for the first time. The associate minister’s admission reveals that the violence of noise does and can infiltrate our lives even when time is set aside for silence. “Listening is the attitude of the person who is open to God’s

³⁸ Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 9.

living and creative word. Prayer is listening to God, being open and receptive to God's influence."³⁹ To hear the gentle whisper of God requires an attentiveness in prayer to listen.

Survey on Prayer Life of Congregation

This project also involved sending out a church-wide survey to learn about the prayer life of the congregation, knowledge of *lectio divina*, and the congregation's experience of silence.⁴⁰

The survey garnered some surprising and some not so surprising results. Below are the results of this survey:

Congregational Survey Results⁴¹

<u>Frequency of Prayer</u>	<u>Posture in Prayer</u>	<u>Reason for Prayer</u>	<u>Prayer Practices</u>
50% Several times a day 14% Once a day 25% Most days 11% Occasionally or do not pray	70% Sitting with eyes closed 14% Kneeling with eyes closed 16% Other	87% Need help 77% To be close to God 16% Supposed to	43% Have prayer practice 57% No prayer practice
<u>Frequency of Scripture as a Prayer Resource</u>	<u>Likelihood of Using <i>lectio divina</i> as a Prayer Resource</u>	<u>Listening for God in Prayer</u>	<u>Comfortable in Silence</u>
7% Yes, all the time 32% Occasionally 19% Yes, but only rarely 36% Do not use Scripture	48% Yes 12% No 40% Don't know	59% Yes 34% No 6% I don't know what that means	72% Yes 5% No 22% Sometimes

It is not surprising that a large portion (68 percent) of those surveyed consider themselves to be active prayers since this questionnaire went out to a church distribution list. It is also not

³⁹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2005), 88.

⁴⁰ The survey went out via Survey Monkey to over 3,000 people. It was opened by 981 and 414 responded. The survey consisted of twelve questions. The beginning questions were demographic: age, gender, and church affiliation (not everyone on the list was a member of our church). The remaining questions were specifically about prayer, *lectio divina*, and silence.

⁴¹ In some instances, participants were able to respond to "all that apply" so final calculations may not always add up to 100 percent. Also, the nominal responses may not be recorded so final numbers may not calculate to 100 percent. See Appendix: "Survey Monkey DMin." for more details.

surprising that the majority of those who pray do so by sitting with their eyes closed, and that prayer is used primarily as a request for help. One of the most informative and surprising components of the survey was learning about prayer practices, prayer resources, or lack thereof, that participants use. Though many indicated they have prayer practices, a stunning 57 percent said they did not utilize any kind of prayer practice or use any prayer resources, and those that did use prayer resources varied in what they used. That a high number of people who consider themselves actively engaged in prayer have no identifiable prayer resource was surprising. In speaking with one woman about her prayer life, she did indicate that she prays but does not use any prayer resource because she “does not really know what to use” and because she usually prays when she is “doing something” because she feels guilty setting aside time specifically for prayer, even though she knows she shouldn’t. The infiltration of the noise of busyness can prevent even those who know the importance of prayer from experiencing a contemplative mindset when they pray. While the survey did ask respondents which resources they used, it neither asked for details regarding why one did use resources or why they did not. The survey reveals that there is a need to educate the congregation about prayer resources and practices, but it did not ask questions about how participants who do not use such resources approach prayer.

Another significant finding is that the respondents who identified scripture as a resource for prayer referred to this as “reading the Bible,” “memorizing scripture,” or “Bible study.” Scripture is a resource for prayer for many of those who say they use prayer resources. Only one individual specifically named *lectio divina* as a prayer practice that she regularly uses. The survey did not delve more deeply into how respondents used scripture as a prayer resource (only that they did so, in some way). Knowing this information would be important; it may be that

some respondents are in fact practicing the movements of *lectio divina* without having any formal knowledge of this ancient practice.

This leads to the question on the survey about the willingness to learn *lectio divina*. Respondents were asked if they would consider learning an ancient prayer practice such as *lectio divina* to help them with their prayer life. Many responded by saying yes, but many said they don't know if they would want to learn this practice. In part, the "not knowing" could be attributed to several of the comments shared in the survey, that they do not know what *lectio divina* is, and do not know whether or not it would be a useful prayer resource for them. That some responded that they would be interested in learning an ancient prayer practice indicates their desire to deepen their prayer and spiritual life. That there were some respondents who did not know whether they wanted to learn the practice raises the question of how the church is addressing spiritual formation within the congregation.

Also important is that while most (59 percent) respondents said they listen for God, a significant number (34 percent) said they do not. Those who answered yes gave responses such as, "I listen throughout the day," "I listen in times of crisis or trauma," "I listen when I need to make a difficult decision or need to know what to do about something." Many responded with "I don't hear God but I feel God's presence." Of the respondents who said "no," they shared that they "struggled to listen," that "their mind would wander," and that they "needed their surroundings to be quiet." The data indicates that those who do not listen for God, "struggle with it," "don't have time," or they "need a certain setting in order for it to take place." One respondent went so far as to say, "Listening was a practice I was taught as a child. I find that communal worship at most churches is oddly lacking in this area." One might argue that not only

is listening “oddly lacking” in churches but so are the teaching resources for congregations to engage or shape their members in “listening” for God.

The final and perhaps most surprising finding was that a large number of those surveyed about silence said they are comfortable in silence, specifically that they “enjoy it,” “crave it,” and that “it relaxes me, makes me calm.” Several respondents acknowledged the violence of the noise that they encounter in their daily lives: “Silence is a nice contrast to the cacophony of life,” “Silence is not always easy in today’s world,” and “The world is noisy!” One respondent went so far as to say, “I tried to generate interest in contemplative prayer years ago at MFUMC just in my discipling group but it was rejected as a concept. The general feeling was, if I wanted silence, I would stay at home.” Though the response was high for those who felt comfortable in silence, a number of respondents indicated that they are only able to do it for short periods of time because otherwise they “get anxious” and struggle “to focus.” One respondent shared, “Sometimes I need total silence to concentrate, other times I need some kind of noise (music) because then I find my mind wandering if it is too silent.” It is interesting to note that “noise” (or perhaps more specifically, sound) is not always perceived as a distraction but can be a means to help one concentrate and stay focused.

Though the survey was somewhat helpful, it was frankly limited in articulating the prayer life of the congregation—largely because the questions it posed were not sufficiently nuanced to offer detailed information. The congregation views prayer as important and realizes that prayer has helped to shape their Christian identity. Yet the survey did not reveal an identifiable and agreed upon meaning or practice of prayer. Almost half of those in the survey indicated that they would be willing to learn *lectio divina*, but the survey was limited by not asking a follow-up question of those who shared that they “don’t know” if they would, because the reason for their

response remained unasked and therefore unarticulated. Is it because they don't know what *lectio divina* is, or are there other reasons for them not knowing whether they'd be willing to learn how to do it? The survey also did not ask, and therefore did not reveal, whether those who were not interested in *lectio divina* would be willing to learn another prayer practice. However, the survey did reveal "there is a great need for more attention to the ministries of spiritual formation, spiritual renewal, and spiritual guidance"⁴² within the Body of Christ because of the congregation's desire to know more and because many are unfamiliar with practices such as *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina Session

Another component of this project was a one-time introductory class on *lectio divina*. The class was held on a Wednesday evening after the church supper in the intimate and relatively small space of the church reception hall. Round tables covered in tablecloths were each decorated with a candle and a magnolia branch, along with a handout⁴³ about *lectio divina* and a pen for note taking. The tables were set up in a circle with a small rectangular table at their center on which was a candle, a microphone, and a Tibetan singing bowl. The class had been advertised in the church bulletin, in the weekly e-blast, and during the announcements on Sunday mornings. Because this was the first time this church-wide class was being offered at the church the number of likely attendees was unknown. So while we had anticipated approximately thirty participants, unexpectedly over one hundred showed up for this class, plus a few more who trickled in later. The small reception hall was full and extra tables and chairs had to be brought in to accommodate everyone. The setting was intimate with the lights dimmed. Ten minutes before

⁴² Wolfeich, "Spirituality," 329.

⁴³ See Appendix: "Lectio Divina Handout."

the class began, a group of singers, adults and children, led by a music associate, came in and began to sing Gregorian chants. The purpose of offering chants at the beginning of the class was to discourage a lot of talking and to set the tone for the rest of the class. As people entered, some spoke quietly, a few loudly, but most entered the space acknowledging the silence and then the contemplative music and sat down without speaking. At 6:30 p.m., I welcomed everyone and introduced the topic of the class. I lit the candle on the center table to signify the presence of Christ, sounded the Tibetan singing bowl, and opened with prayer.

I began the hour-long session by explaining how we struggle with “noise” in our daily lives and noting that it is often difficult to quiet our minds and be silent to listen for God. I briefly shared the history of *lectio divina* in the broader Church, and described the steps of *lectio divina*. I read Psalm 91, partly because of its rhythm and cadence, and partly because of its familiarity to the group. I read the scripture three times (I share this because the congregation heard the scripture each time with the same voice) allowing thirty seconds to one minute in between readings. After I had read the scripture the third time, we had a longer silence (two to three minutes). After the silence that followed the third reading, I invited the participants to share what they had heard and experienced. I offered a closing prayer and the session ended.

Several things are worth noting about this session. First, the session was set up for thirty participants and as people began to fill up the tables and chairs, more chairs and tables were added. This began to happen about ten minutes before the class was to begin. By this time, the singers had begun to chant, and the “noise” of setting up tables and chairs disrupted the space. People continued to trickle in, even after the designated start time and because the space was completely full, it was difficult for them to find a place to sit. More chairs were set up (there was no further space available for tables) and the noise of doing this also disrupted the “noise.” The

space was not intended to be so crowded and this affected how some experienced *lectio divina* for the first time. During the first and second reading, a cell phone went off and rang into the silence. The owner of the phone was 90 years old and was not able to turn the phone off quickly. After the phone rang the second time, the owner did manage to silence his phone. This is worth noting because in the questionnaire a number of people expressed frustration about the ringing of the phone and noted how difficult it was to refocus after the ringing of the phone.

The disruption of the silence with the adding of tables and chairs and the cell phone ringing are important to acknowledge because they are indicative of the pervasive and intrusive nature of “noise” in our world and in our struggle to seek God in silence. It raises the question: What is meant by silence? Is silence the absence of sound, and if so, is this ever possible? Or is religious “silence” something different? If we define silence as, “The time of stillness used for private and corporate meditation in worship and devotion,”⁴⁴ then silence refers not so much to the absence of sound but to a space in which God can be encountered in stillness, meditation, and prayer. In that case, “noise” is not just a breaking of the silence but a disruption in the stillness one seeks for encountering God.

At the close of the *lectio divina* session, participants were asked to fill out a brief survey about their experience.⁴⁵ Of the over one hundred participants, seventy-eight responded.⁴⁶ Of those who responded, there was a unanimously positive response to the session, with comments such as, “very positive,” “powerful,” brings joy,” “calming,” “made me stop and be still, which I don’t often do,” “realize I need more time to be with God,” and “this changed my prayer life for

⁴⁴ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 259.

⁴⁵ See Appendix: “Questionnaire: Wednesday evening *lectio divina*.”

⁴⁶ Extra copies of the “Lectio Divina Handout” were made to accommodate the unexpected number of participants, yet because people continued to trickle in well past the beginning of the session, some participants may not have received one after all.

the better.” A few had experienced *lectio divina* before and appreciated having more direction through the process. When asked about the biggest challenge or frustration, the interruption of the cell phone was not far from the top of the list. The primary challenge or frustration was “other thoughts,” “racing thoughts,” and finding it “hard to stay focused.” One participant expressed that they were “not able to silence the noise,” and several expressed that it was difficult to get quiet and stay focused in a large group. However, many expressed no challenges or frustrations. Several expressed that initially the silence made them “a little uncomfortable” but that over time they became accustomed to it.

Towards the end of the session, participants began to share what they heard from the scripture. A number of people shared the images, thoughts that came to mind, and what they thought they heard God speaking through scripture. One individual shared how she had been seeking an answer to a question and she heard it through the scripture (oratorio). Another shared how he was wondering what to do about a situation in his life and heard the answer and now he knows what to do (actio). These comments speak to Casey’s observation that “*Lectio divina* involves allowing ourselves to be led to God by an experienced guide.”⁴⁷ The role of scripture was powerful because it was used as a guide to lead people to hear the gentle whisper of God.

The survey asked participants whether the silence made them uncomfortable and 99 percent said no. They responded with comments such as, “it was comforting,” “I like silence,” “loved the silence,” “I relish it,” “comforting,” and “welcome it.” One individual expressed that they were not uncomfortable in a group setting but would be uncomfortable doing it privately, and another expressed that in the group setting it was hard to experience silence. One individual responded that the silence “was confusing but not in a bad way.” When asked if they heard the

⁴⁷ Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 15.

soft whisper of God, over half said “yes.” Others said, “not yet,” “no but I felt God’s presence,” “didn’t get there,” “perhaps,” “maybe,” “no, but getting closer,” and one said, “I didn’t hear a whisper, but I felt peace.” In both this survey and the initial survey about the congregation’s prayer life, many expressed how they “feel God’s presence” even though they might not hear words spoken by God. Feelings play a part in the religious experience, particularly when words are not able to capture the experience or are not used.

The final survey question asked participants whether they would consider incorporating *lectio divina* into their prayer life. Nearly every participant said yes, they would. Some even said “absolutely,” and “would love to.” One responded with “already do,” and a few with “maybe,” or “possibly.”

The one standout in the survey responses from those who experienced *lectio divina* was how they encountered scripture through a prayerful, meditative process. Many enjoyed hearing a familiar scripture in a new way and hearing God speaking through it. Several expressed thanksgiving about being able to pray the scriptures, instead of only seeking head knowledge. For those who said they heard the *soft whisper* of God, that whisper was expressed through images in the scripture or ways that the scripture brought other images, ideas, and thoughts to mind. I received two follow-up emails about the experience, both from men, one in his seventies the other in his early sixties. Both emails expressed what they “thought” the psalm said and sought out resources quoting those interpretations in the email. Both admitted to going home and thinking more deeply about the scripture and God. Their responses speak to what Daniel Wolpert says about reading, namely that “[w]e read in a mechanical, consumer-oriented manner. We read to acquire information.”⁴⁸ And it could be argued that this stance has also infiltrated our reading

⁴⁸ Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 40.

of Scripture, so much so that it is difficult to hear the gentle whisper of God when one is instead accustomed to acquiring information.

Overall, the *lectio divina* session was very positive. The size of the group and the positive responses suggest that members of the congregation are interested in and desire something new, different, and deeper from what they are currently experiencing in their prayer and study lives. It also reveals that they are open to new ways of experiencing scripture and broadening their understanding of prayer and how one encounters God. For me it was particularly telling that the majority of the participants, who range in age from twenty-plus to ninety, do not run from silence but desire it and wish they could experience it more often. It also further magnifies the “violence of noise” in our day-to-day life and in our culture. Is this something that the church could help remedy by creating spaces of stillness and silence, or teaching people how to find stillness even in the midst of noise, so that people can experience the holy presence of the gentle whisper of God? One participant expressed that they wished we could have “wonderful holy silence in our sanctuary.” Is there a place for holy silence in worship? And if so, what might this look like?

The Contemplative Worship Experience

The final component to this project is the introduction of a contemplative worship experience to the congregation of MFUMC. This component builds upon the prior two components. Many in the congregation have now taken the church-wide survey on prayer, and quite a number of people attended the introductory session on *lectio divina*. A contemplative worship experience would bring these together in a corporate worship setting. It would incorporate music *into* the contemplative experience (noting that it was only an element used *prior to* the actual *lectio divina* session) as a means of entering into the silence of prayer and

contemplation and subsequently to assist in leading the congregation out of the silence into the “noise” of daily life.”⁴⁹ The purpose of including a contemplative worship experience as part of this project was to expose the congregation to a worship experience other than what they typically encounter on Sunday mornings, particularly in how they experience, prayer, silence and music collectively.

This service took place in the main sanctuary of the church at 5:00 p.m. on a Sunday evening on the second Sunday of Advent. The sanctuary lights were dimmed and there were candles at the foot of the chancel area. Holy Communion was laid out at the Communion Table in the chancel area. A music stand and microphone were on the floor in front of the chancel steps for the readers. Greeters handed out the orders of worship to everyone and welcomed them into the silence.

The service began with an antiphonal chant. There was a welcome, an invitation to worship based on Psalm 62:5–8, and then the choral group sang a responsive chant. I then introduced *lectio divina*. Each Order of Worship included an insert on the movements of *lectio divina*. The text read was John 1:1–14, chosen because it was Advent and because we had promoted this service as a way to seek refuge during the busyness of the season. After each reading there was a call to silence.⁵⁰ The scripture was read three times by three different readers with thirty seconds between readings, alternating between female and male voices. After *lectio divina*, a third musical piece was introduced. The service concluded with Holy Communion, a final closing musical piece and a benediction.

⁴⁹ See Appendix: “Contemplative Worship Experience,” Order of Worship. Adapted from Discipleship Ministries of The UMC, *Maundy Thursday in an Alternative/Emergent Mode*, by Taylor Burton-Edwards, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/maundy-thursday-in-an-alternativeemergent-mode>.

⁵⁰ E. Lee Phillips, *Breaking Silence Before the Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 78.

After the contemplative worship experience, participants were invited to fill out a questionnaire inserted in the Order of Worship. There were approximately fifty-five people in attendance and forty-four responded to the questionnaire. There were five questions asked on the questionnaire. The first asked participants why they had chosen to attend the contemplative worship experience. Many reasons were offered. A number of people responded that they were looking for a new worship experience in which to encounter God. I thought people would come out of curiosity, which several did, but because worship is a sensitive subject for MFUMC (as stated earlier), I thought offering a new and different worship experience might be viewed as a threat rather than a welcome new experience. Several participants expressed that they attended because they like contemplative experiences. There were five respondents who came because of their experience in the *lectio divina* session offered earlier, and one attended because of the associate minister's spiritual life class.

Those who attended were also given an opportunity to share in the questionnaire what they liked most and least about the service. The overwhelming response to what they liked most was the time of quiet, reflection, stillness, and peace. Many also expressed pleasure at being able to participate in Holy Communion and having the scripture read three times. Many shared that there was nothing about the service that they disliked, with the exception of the music, which will be addressed below.

The one element of the worship experience that seemed to spark the most responses both positively and negatively was the music. As we planned the contemplative worship serve, we intentionally chose particular kinds of music. Because this contemplative experience was about *running from noise to the silence of prayer*, we chose chant to embody this monastic metaphor. The music associate created music for this worship experience. Of those who filled out the

questionnaire, when asked what they liked most about the contemplative experience, ten indicated that they specifically liked the music. When asked what they liked least, sixteen respondents indicated it was the music, with eleven respondents specifying the middle musical selection. In explaining the choice of music, the music associate shared:

I intended to preserve the sanctity of silence through slowness, clarity of language, and focused musical tone...I believe that for this setting, unaccompanied human voices would serve as the optimal support to the “inwarding” nature of the liturgy. Voices can be direct but gentle, and there is an unmatched intimacy to a small collection of voices singing with calm intent.

The schola of ten singers (ranging in age from 8 to 75) began in the narthex, singing unison monody from Psalms 4, 31, 91, and 134... After the introductory spoken liturgy, we quietly moved deeper into the center aisle, forming two groups that faced each other. There we sang an Anglican psalm-chant by James Turle of Psalm 26, vss. 3-11.⁵¹

Directly after the *Lectio Divina* portion, the nine singers had formed three groups... in three different areas of the sanctuary. There, we performed a 2011 piece entitled “non-deterministic ‘amen’ (for two or more groups of singers)”... Here, the seven syllables constituting “*verbum caro factum est*” provided the textual content for the piece, derived from the Latin translation of John 1:14 — “And the Word was made flesh.”

This piece is somewhat oppositional to the balance of the service’s music, in that once the sounds begin, there is no silence whatsoever. However, the sounds produced are soft throughout, and the rhythm of production is according to each individual’s pace of breath only. A singer sings until the point of comfort, takes a... breath, and re-produces

⁵¹ Brian J. Parks, “Explanation of service music for Contemplative Worship” abbreviated. Message to Reverend Julie Boone. E-mail of 10 January 2019.

the note. The intention is to come very, very slowly out of silence, establish and move through slowly changing pitches, and then to very slowly reduce to total silence again... the intent was to create a parallel canvas to the silence, one in which sound was not a disruptor of silence, but rather a complement[ary] space.”⁵²

The music component is important because a number of people indicated that they found the music “distracting,” that it “broke concentration,” and that they were “not sure the tonal music piece worked in a meditative way.” Others commented on the uniqueness of the music and enjoyed how different it was, and one individual noted, they “wouldn’t change a thing.” The music that was shared was not music the participants would have been exposed to in a Sunday service. The music was a distraction for many, either because of its unfamiliarity or the style of the music. That the music served as a source of disconnection in this contemplative experience raises the question of how it is being interpreted. Was the music perceived as merely “noise,” just as the cell phone going off in the *lectio divina* session was considered “noise” and a distraction? Is music a similar distraction in contemplation? What, if any, role does music play when seeking God in the silence?

The overall experience of those who participated in the contemplative service was positive. When asked whether they felt uncomfortable at any point during the service, most said, “never,” three said, “rarely,” and four said, “occasionally.” For those who did experience moments or periods of being uncomfortable, it would be interesting to know what caused this and whether it was during the silence or the music? Of all those who filled out the questionnaire, most shared that they would be willing to attend future contemplative worship experiences, with the exception of two who said, “possibly,” and one who said, “no.” The one who responded “no”

⁵² Parks, “Explanation of service music.”

shared that they came to the service seeking a new experience, that at no time during the service did they feel uncomfortable, that what they loved most about the service was Holy Communion, and that what they liked least were the responsive readings. I wonder why it is that this participant would not come again?

V. Assessment of the Project

This project set out to evaluate how a congregation encounters God through silence and contemplative prayer. This was evaluated through the lens of a session on *lectio divina* and a contemplative worship experience. In the project, I learned that prayer is an important part of the congregation's spiritual life. Their prayer consists largely of seeking something from God, either for themselves or for others, and a desire to be close to God. An overwhelming number of members (57 percent) do not have any prayer practices or do not use prayer resources when praying, and only some use scripture occasionally or not at all. Despite this, the study revealed that the congregation desires to grow deeper in their prayer life and in their relationship with God. This was evident in their responses to the survey on prayer and in the *lectio divina* session and questionnaire.

The project reminded me of the importance of scripture for the Body of Christ. It is a tool for information and transformation. Henri Nouwen says, "We receive the word into our silence where we can ruminate on it, mull on it, digest it, and let it become flesh in us. In this way *lectio divina* is the ongoing incarnation of God in our world."⁵³ It is when the Word becomes flesh in us that we can engage action (*actio*) into the world. Through this action we become the active Body of Christ in the world. Since this project did not engage the *actio* (action) part of the

⁵³ Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 91.

congregation, an important follow-up study might be to establish how the congregation might be transformed by additional experiences and how these experiences could be reflected through actions in their day- to-day lives.

The project also revealed the struggle that the congregation has with silence. The role of silence is a paradox. The congregation desires a space, place, and time for silence and even enjoys silence, and yet members of the congregation rarely seek out silence or make it a priority. This may have to do with one finding of the survey—that an overwhelming number do not have, nor do they use, prayer resources. This lack of resources may prevent them from seeking out silence or spending time in silence. This project also revealed the interest the congregation had in the session on *lectio divina*. The number of attendees could be interpreted as a desire by the congregation to learn a new way of prayer and a new spiritual practice by which to seek God. Since they have now learned a “tool” for prayer, it would be interesting to offer a follow-up session to see how many would attend and how many would be repeat attendees. It would also be interesting to know whether, after having learned the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, any participants incorporated it into their regular prayer life and whether as a result of this they experienced a deeper life with God, a life that leads to transformation.

The project also revealed that the congregation is eager to learn new spiritual practices as a way of experiencing God. In part, it shows that the congregation desires to “feel” and “hear” from God more often in their daily lives. The one inhibitor to this experience is “noise,” which, as stated earlier, can be found in many daily scenarios and has become a part, not just of daily life, but also of church life. Both the *lectio divina* session and the contemplative worship experience show that “noise” is unavoidable. How then can one learn to balance “noise” and silence in daily life with a life of unceasing prayer? Perhaps learning prayer practices can help a

congregation with more than just tools to deepen their prayer lives but also to develop a contemplative way of living and worshiping that allows them to hear the gentle whisper of God, perhaps even when life is not silent.

VI. Work Begun and Unfinished

This project began as a study into a congregation's prayer life. What this project did not have an opportunity to examine was how the prayer life of a congregation can change and grow over time when exposed to and formed by an ancient prayer practice such as *lectio divina*. In follow-up conversations with three church members who attended the *lectio divina* session, I found that none of them has yet incorporated *lectio divina* into their prayer life nor have they changed any aspect of their prayer life. A new spiritual practice takes time and discipline. It is not something one learns or is shaped by through one session. All three are from different stages in life: a professional married woman with two elementary school age daughters, an empty-nester, and a retiree. All three indicated that they value silence and reflection, but said that a lack of time and a noisy life prohibit them from sitting down for any length of time to pray. All three indicated how meaningful and important the session on *lectio divina* was to them but that it was not something they have considered incorporating into their prayer life. Though this was disappointing, it did reveal that spiritual formation needs to be a more intentional and on-going experience within the life of a congregation in order for real change and transformation to be experienced.

I also asked all the three whether they would welcome there being more silence in Sunday worship services and whether they thought this could help facilitate contemplation during the time of prayer. All were hesitant in responding and thought it "might" be welcomed.

The retired gentleman replied, “I think I would be fine with it, but I think others would not be.” I will need to spend more time considering how, where, and to what end to incorporate silence into a Sunday worship service. Leading the congregation into and out of the silence will need to be part of the educational component of developing spiritual formation into the life of the church.

Additionally, the congregation will need more exposure to *lectio divina* and additional prayer practices if this is to become a source of identity and part of their narrative as the Body of Christ. Introducing the congregation to the works of Richard Foster⁵⁴ and Benedict J. Groeshel⁵⁵ as resources for prayer and spiritual formation might help them to develop the discipline of prayer in their busy, noisy lives. Offering a small group as a source of discussion and practice of these works and spiritual practices might strengthen the likelihood of those disciplines becoming habits and forming people spiritually.

VII. Conclusion

The violence of noise has infiltrated the daily life of people, even Christians. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find and experience silence in our homes and in the church. The noise, particularly of social media, has inundated people with words ideas, images, and information. To perceive this as silence because nothing is being spoken aloud is not quite true. In *Manifesto For Silence*, Stuart Sim quotes Quaker George Fox, “It is a strange life for you to come to be silent; you must come into a new world.”⁵⁶ For many of us today, it is indeed strange to be silent and perhaps this is why it is such a great challenge because it is so unlike our world and how we live our day-to-day lives.

⁵⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

⁵⁵ Benedict J. Groeshel, C.F.R., *Listening at Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

⁵⁶ Sim, *Manifesto for Silence*, 63.

Many Christians hunger for spiritual food and desire to know God in new and deep ways. We have seen that the gentle whisper of God can be found and experienced in silence. If the Church desires to cultivate deep, prayerful Christians who are not always stressed because of the busyness of their lives, then it must create a place of quiet and stillness that is different than what is experienced in the world. This might mean not only setting up a prayer room but actively encouraging people to use it throughout the week—and using it oneself to model that habit. It might mean incorporating moments of silence and contemplation into a Sunday worship service, or encouraging congregants to embody the metaphor of prayer by coming to the altar to pray. It might mean creating spaces where people come together and pray the scriptures, or listen for God, or share with one another—which in turn might give them the opportunities to become used to praying aloud with others. It might mean encouraging people to learn and practice spiritual practices which invite silence and reflection. It might mean creating contemplative worship experiences that challenge participants to listen for God in the liturgy of the church. If it is true that “God is silence itself,”⁵⁷ then it is imperative for the church as the Body of Christ to help people seek out the silence and find God.

Many of us go through life unaware of the “noise” in our lives. It is only when silence interjects itself into the noise at a welcome point that we become aware of our need for something more. What we discover is that we can no longer hear the divine voice that calls. “Contemplative silence is a fragile little flame in the middle of a raging ocean. The fire of silence is weak because it is bothersome to a busy world.”⁵⁸ Seeking after God will cost each of us something. We must consider what price we are willing to pay. Perhaps this is why it is a “luxury

⁵⁷ Raimundo Panikkar, “Quote” cited in Susan Heyward, “Silence,” *The Oblate Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 127.

⁵⁸ Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2017), 57.

good”⁵⁹ because not all of us are willing to pay the price. But I believe that the church can make seeking after God a coveted experience, and that that experience can come through practices such as *lectio divina*.

⁵⁹ Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015),12.

Appendix

LECTIO DIVINA (Holy Reading)

HANDOUT

“...go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then there came a voice...” (1 Kings 19:11-13a, NRSV).

What is *lectio divina*? It is an ancient prayer practice of the church. It originated in the early monasteries, particularly Benedictine monasteries. These monasteries followed the Rule of St. Benedict and monks ordered their lives after a Rule of life. As part of this Rule of life, *lectio divina* or *holy reading* was identified as an important means of prayer and a seeking after God. *Lectio divina* is a slow, reflective way of reading the holy scriptures. This way of reading that became a pattern for prayer developed during a time when books were rare and the ones that were available were cumbersome and took a long time to read. It was not uncommon for the monks to be read slowly because the text was difficult to decipher. This slow way of reading became a way for monks to pray. This way of reading and praying is not a means of gathering information but a pattern of prayer that allows one to seek and find God in Scripture.

Why *lectio divina*? There is no right or wrong way to engage in holy reading. It is a way to slow down from our life, to step away from the ‘violence of noise,’ and to enter the heart of God through the scriptures. It is a way of slowing down to listen and hear what God might be speaking to us today. The heart of God is love and love is what binds us to God and to one another. The scriptures are the living Word of God and God speaks of this love through the living Word. Henri Nouwen shares that, “[s]piritual reading is food for our souls. We receive the word into our silence where we can ruminate on it, digest it, and let it become flesh in us. In this way, *lectio divina* is the ongoing incarnation of God in our world.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 91.

The Movements of *lectio divina*

READ (*lectio*) - The first movement in holy reading is *lectio*, a reading of the Scripture. This is where the listener first encounters God. A particular passage is read slowly three times. Each time the listener pays attention to the words, images, and ideas. The idea is not to quickly move through the Scripture but to read it slowly, listening like the Prophet Elijah, for the *soft whisper*.

REFLECT (*meditatio*) - When something grabs the attention of the listener this is where one reflects on what is being said. This movement has been compared to an “animal quietly chewing its cud [and] was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God.”⁶¹ It is a repeating and reflecting upon the Word of God.

RESPOND (*oratorio*) - St. Cyprian said, “In Scripture, God speaks to us, and in prayer we speak to God.”⁶² This is the movement in *lectio divina* when the one who prays lifts their heart and words to God.

REST (*contemplatio*) - It is in this movement when words cease to be a part of the prayer. It is here in contemplation and rest when the listener enters the deep silence. Resting in God and in the presence of the living Word and what the living Word is revealing to the listener.

ACT (*actio*) - *lectio divina* is transformational prayer and after having encountered God the listener discerns what God is asking of them and how they are to go forward into the world as having encountered the living Word.⁶³

⁶¹Jane Tomaine. *St. Benedict's Toolbox: The Nuts and Bolts of Everyday Benedictine Living*. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005), 34.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Joseph Chalmers, *The Sound of Silence: Listening to the Word of God with Elijah the Prophet*. (Kent, UK: Liguori, 2007), 25-26.

lectio divina RESOURCES

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An Introduction to *lectio divina*
Wednesday, November 28, 2018
6:30 - 7:30 p.m.
Marietta First UMC Reception Hall

Room Set-up: Round tables with 6 chairs each organized in a circle. A table will be setup in the center of the circle with a candle that will be lit when the class begins. On the table is also bell chime that will single the beginning of the session. As people enter there will be the Gregorian Chant playing softly. This is to discourage talking which is a natural occurrence when there is silence upon entering a room.

Each person will receive a handout describing what *lectio divina* is and why one should experience it. There will also be a handout to additional resources. Each person will also receive a notecard and pen to write down thoughts, images, and words.

The session will begin with a description of *lectio divina*.

Read Psalm 91.

Encourage folks to look at the handout to discern the various movements with the prayer. Work slowly through the text and session. End with a few moments of silence. Invite folks to share (pay attention to time, this is only a one-hour session).

Hand-out Questionnaire and ask attendees to fill out if they feel comfortable.

~ Questionnaire ~

Wednesday evening *lectio divina*

1. Was experiencing *lectio divina* a positive experience? Explain.

2. What was your biggest challenge or frustration during the session?

3. Did the silence make you uncomfortable? Explain.

4. Did you hear the *soft whisper* of God? Explain.

5. Is this a prayer practice you would consider incorporating into your prayer life?

Psalm 91

- 1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
- 2 will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.'
- 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
- 4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
- 5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
- 6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

- 7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
- 8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

- 9 Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
- 10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

- 11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
- 12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
- 13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

- 14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
- 15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
- 16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP

December 9, 2018 • 5:00 p.m.

GATHERING MUSIC Antiphonal Chant: Psalms 4, 31, 91, & 134 Schola Wesleiana

WELCOME Rev. Julie Boone

INVITATION TO WORSHIP *Based on Psalm 62:5-8*

Leader: In the quietness of first moments our worship ascends unto God.
How have you come?

People: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God"

Leader: Is your hope in any other?

**People: "God only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;
I shall not be shaken.**

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is Christ.

Leader: Trust in God at all times, O people; pour out your heart before the Lord;

All: God is our refuge for us." We wait before the Lord.

Adapted from Phillips, E. Lee. "Breaking Silence Before the Lord." Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1986.

RESPONSE TO THE READING Psalm Chant: Psalm 25:3-11 (*J. Turle*) Schola Wesleiana

LECTIO DIVINA: Running from Noise to the Silence of Prayer and Meditation

CALL TO SILENCE

SCRIPTURE READING JOHN 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him
not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power
to become children of God, who were born,
not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

MUSIC "Verbum Factum Caro Est" (*B. Parks*) Schola Wesleiana

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Pastor: This is the table of love. At this table, Christ, who loves us, is with us.

People: He is with us, and we are his. We belong to God. And so we pray:

**We are yours, all yours, blessed Triune God,
all our lives, all our thanks, all our praise,
all our fears, all our grumbling, all our hesitations,
all our loves, all our joys, all our passions,
we give them all to you, with bodies, and minds and voices.**

Yours, all yours!

Pastor: Yours the blessing, yours the praise,
from the unimaginable silence before the creation of the world,
beyond the farthest reaches of time and space, we may ever find,
from infinity to infinity, everlasting to everlasting,
you are God, boundless in love and power.

People: What are we that you should notice us?

What are we that you should love us?

**What are we that you should call us into covenant with you,
a covenant we continually broke and you continuously sustained.
Mercy! How full of mercy!**

Pastor: How can we but praise you, joining our voices with the song of angels and saints,
seraphim and martyrs, strangers and family in every generation:

**People: Jesus Christ who comes in our God's name, you are worthy, worthy!
Lamb of God for all creation slain, you are worthy, worthy!
Hosanna to our King! Hosanna to our King!**

Pastor: You are holy, O God!

You are worthy, O Christ

Worthy in your birth! Worthy in your living!

You preached the good news that God's kingdom has drawn near
and gathered disciples, then and now, to learn and show the world
what life in God's reign means:

healing for the sick.

new life for the dead,

cleansing for the lepers,

sight for the blinded,

food for the hungry,

freedom for the possessed,

love poured out for all.

**People: Worthy the day you were born in a manger among dirt and animals,
you born a humble king and taught your disciples humility.**

Pastor: Worthy too, the night we betrayed you,
when you took the bread, blessed it and broke it,
and gave it to your disciples.

Worthy when you told them,

"This is my body broken for you. Remember me."

People: We remember.

Pastor: Worthy when you took the cup,
praised God and shared it,
and worthy when you said,
"This is my blood of the new covenant for you. Remember me."

People: We remember.

Pastor: We remember, and we praise you with our lives
and these gifts of bread and wine,
proclaiming with one voice into the silence the mystery of faith:

People: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Pastor: Come upon us, Holy Spirit.

Come upon these gifts.

Make them be for us Christ's body, Christ's blood.

Make us one body in Christ enlivened in love by his blood.

One in heart, one in mind, one in you, Holy Spirit,

as you move us to pray for the church and the world:

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: That healing may come for people who are sick,
and peoples who are torn and weary:

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: That many dead and left for dead may be raised,
and death itself vanquished:

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: That all who are unclean may receive your cleansing grace:

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: That all who are possessed, oppressed, distressed,
depressed and downcast may be set free at last.

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: That we may love one another, and all your creation,
as you have loved us.

People: Hear us, Lord.

Leader: Even so, come and break into our silence and fill this feast, Holy Spirit, tonight we eat it
anew at the marriage supper of the Lamb!

**People: All blessing, honor, glory, and power be yours,
Holy Triune God, now and forever.
Amen!**

MUSIC

"O Magnum Mysterium" (*T. L. Victoria*)

Schola Wesleiana

BENEDICTION

Rev. Boone

Rev. Julie Boone, Senior Minister

Rev. Brian Smith, Associate Minister • Rev. Lori Ethridge, Associate Minister

Brian Park, Music Associate • Anne Cumings, Candidate for Ministry

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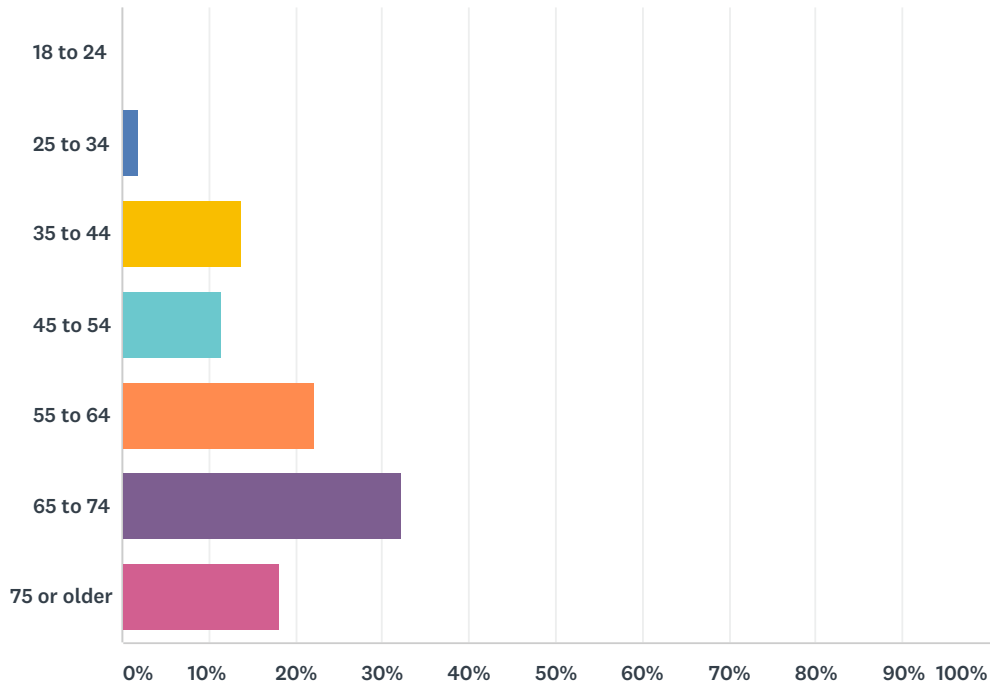
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CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

Sunday, December 9, 2018
5:00 pm

Q1 What is your age?

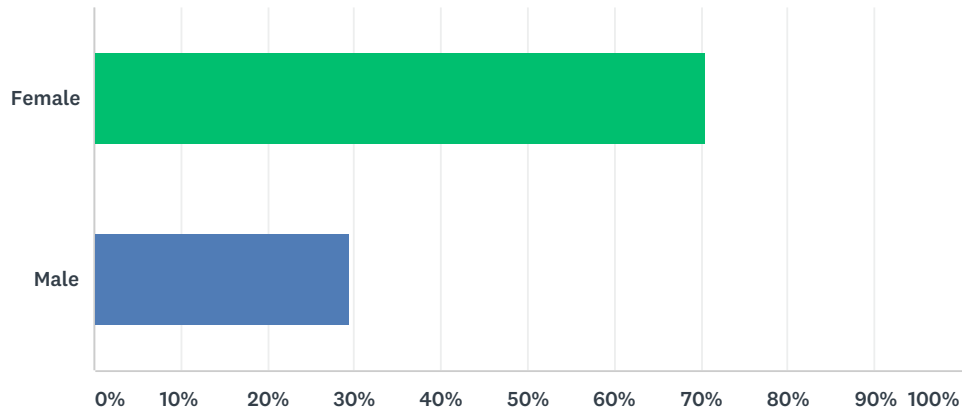
Answered: 414 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
18 to 24	0.24% 1
25 to 34	1.93% 8
35 to 44	13.77% 57
45 to 54	11.59% 48
55 to 64	22.22% 92
65 to 74	32.13% 133
75 or older	18.12% 75
TOTAL	414

Q2 What is your gender?

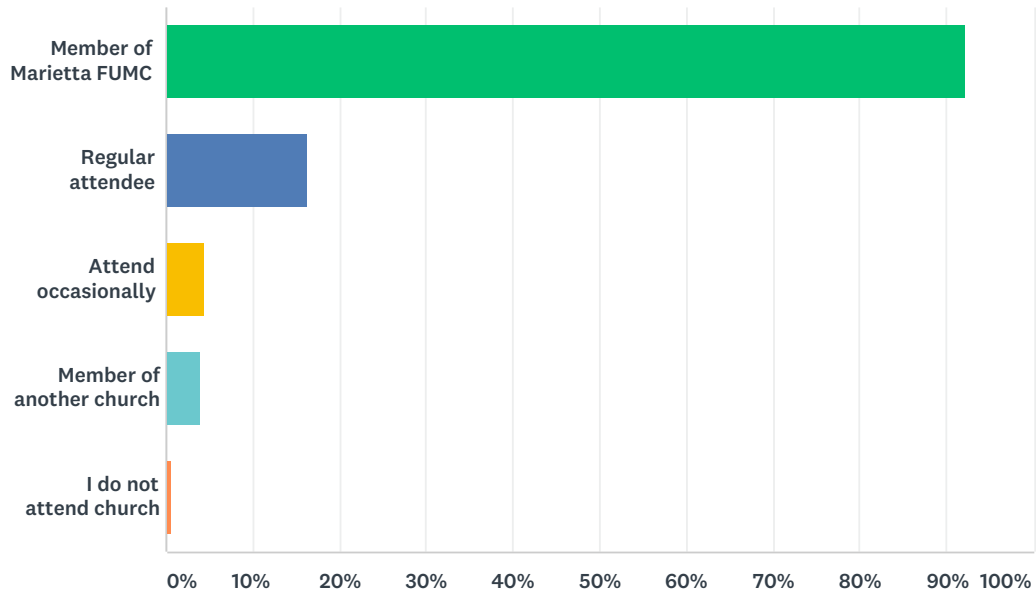
Answered: 414 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	70.53%	292
Male	29.47%	122
TOTAL		414

Q3 What is your church affiliation?

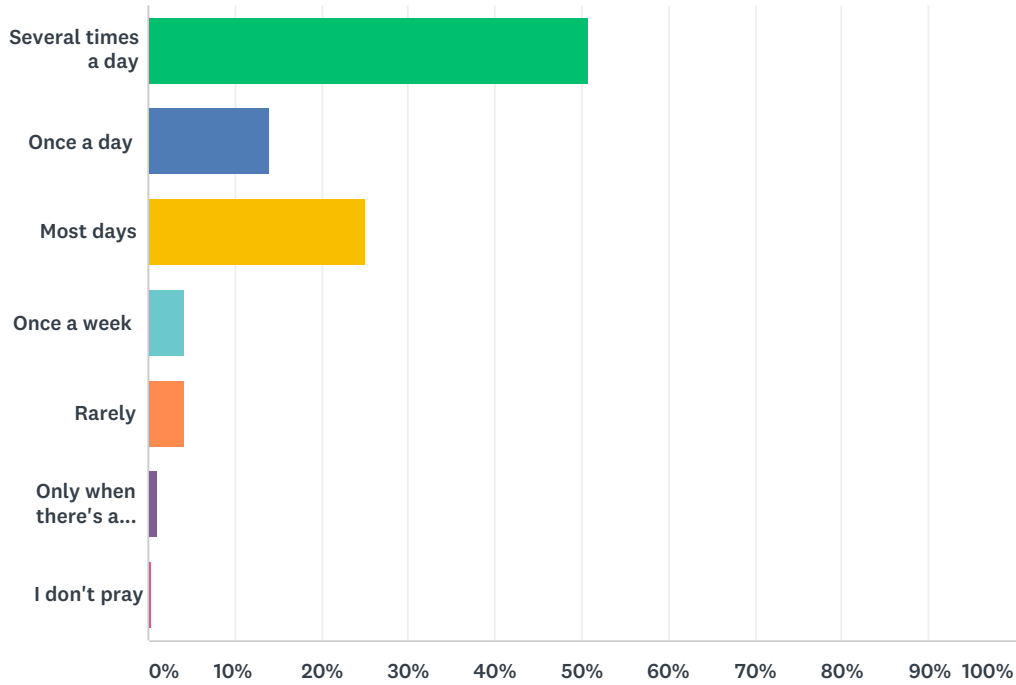
Answered: 411 Skipped: 4



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Member of Marietta FUMC	92.21%	379
Regular attendee	16.30%	67
Attend occasionally	4.38%	18
Member of another church	3.89%	16
I do not attend church	0.73%	3
Total Respondents: 411		

Q4 Do you pray? How often?

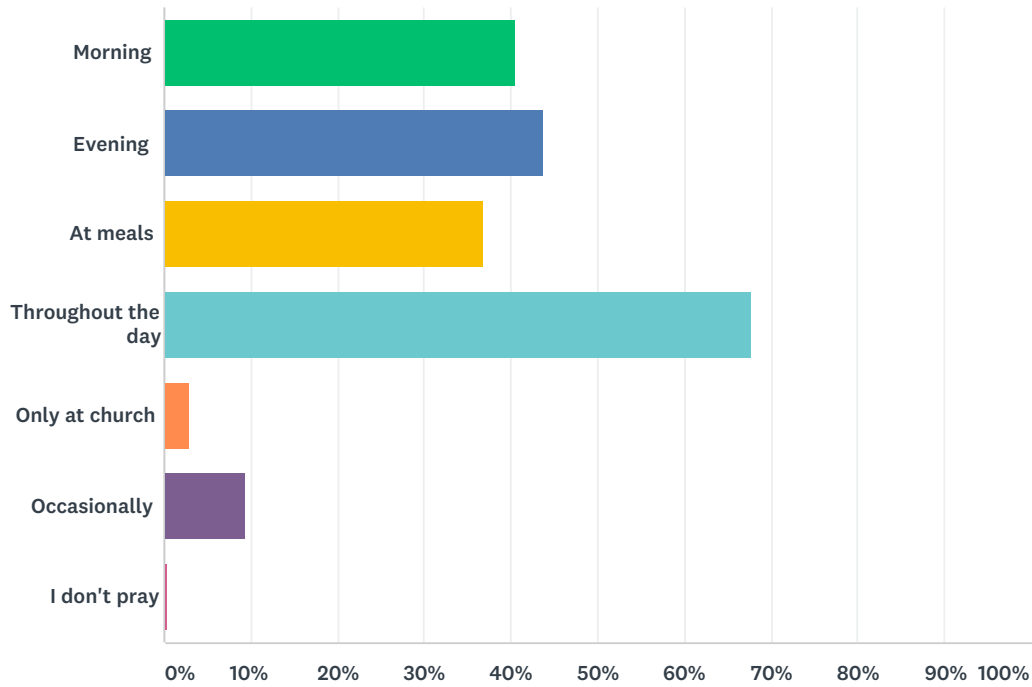
Answered: 399 Skipped: 16



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Several times a day	50.88%	203
Once a day	14.04%	56
Most days	25.06%	100
Once a week	4.26%	17
Rarely	4.26%	17
Only when there's a crisis	1.00%	4
I don't pray	0.50%	2
TOTAL		399

Q5 When do you pray? Click all that apply.

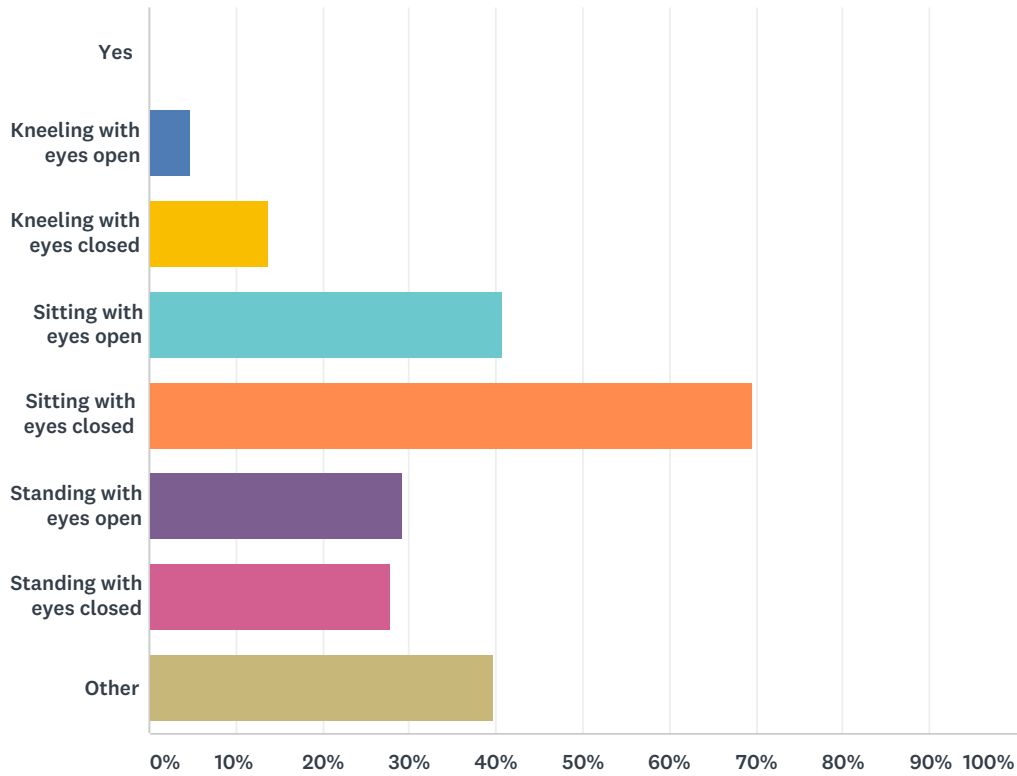
Answered: 413 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Morning	40.68%	168
Evening	43.83%	181
At meals	36.80%	152
Throughout the day	67.80%	280
Only at church	2.91%	12
Occasionally	9.44%	39
I don't pray	0.48%	2
Total Respondents: 413		

Q6 How do you pray? Check all that apply.

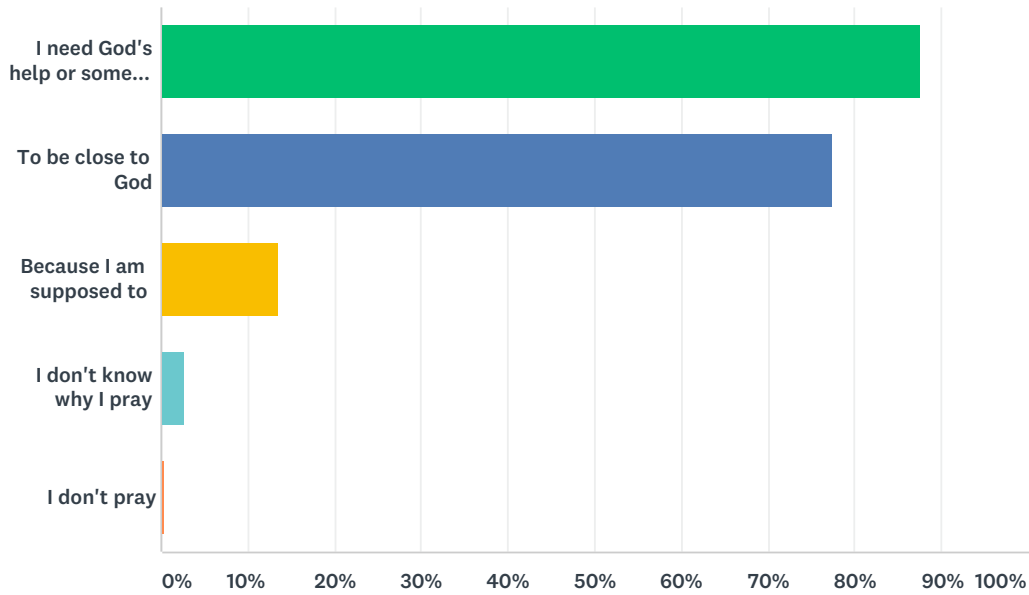
Answered: 411 Skipped: 4



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	0.00%	0
Kneeling with eyes open	4.87%	20
Kneeling with eyes closed	13.87%	57
Sitting with eyes open	40.88%	168
Sitting with eyes closed	69.59%	286
Standing with eyes open	29.20%	120
Standing with eyes closed	27.74%	114
Other	39.66%	163
Total Respondents: 411		

Q7 Why do you pray? Check all that apply.

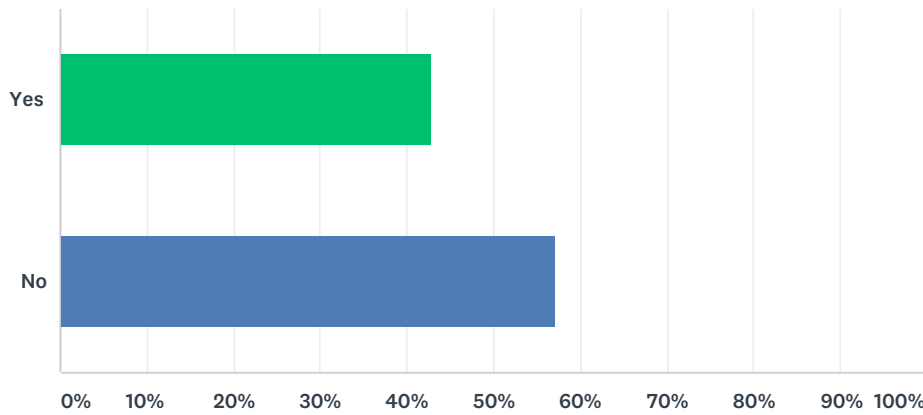
Answered: 412 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I need God's help or someone I know needs God's help	87.62%	361
To be close to God	77.43%	319
Because I am supposed to	13.59%	56
I don't know why I pray	2.67%	11
I don't pray	0.49%	2
Total Respondents: 412		

Q8 Do you have any prayer practices or prayer resources that you find most helpful? If yes, please explain.

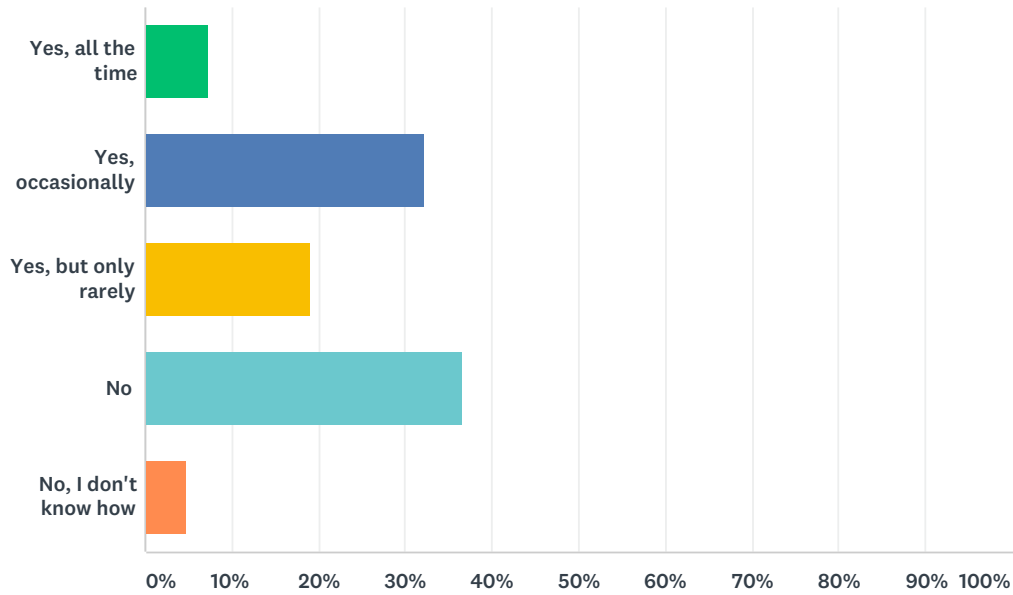
Answered: 398 Skipped: 17



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	42.96%	171
No	57.04%	227
TOTAL		398

Q9 Do you use Scripture when you pray?

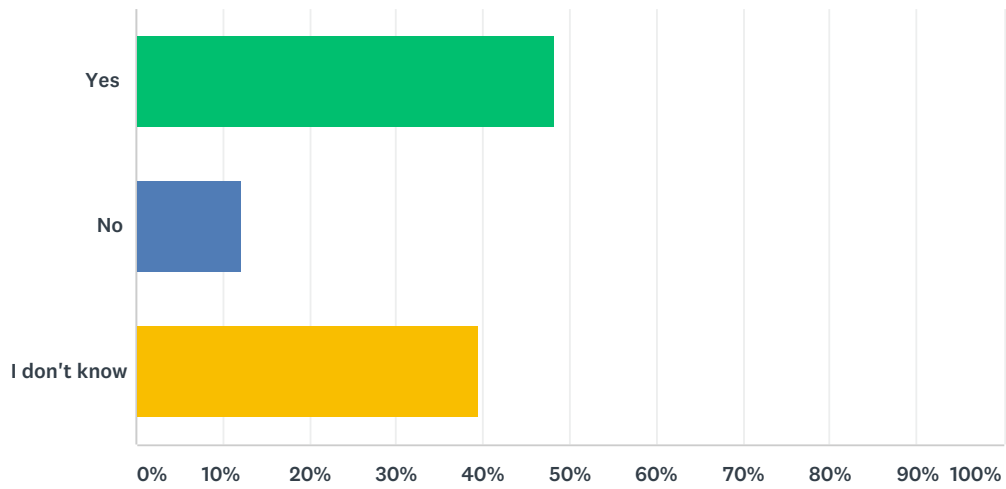
Answered: 410 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes, all the time	7.32% 30
Yes, occasionally	32.20% 132
Yes, but only rarely	19.02% 78
No	36.59% 150
No, I don't know how	4.88% 20
TOTAL	410

Q10 Would you consider learning an ancient prayer practice such as Lectio Divina (Holy Reading) to help with your prayer life?

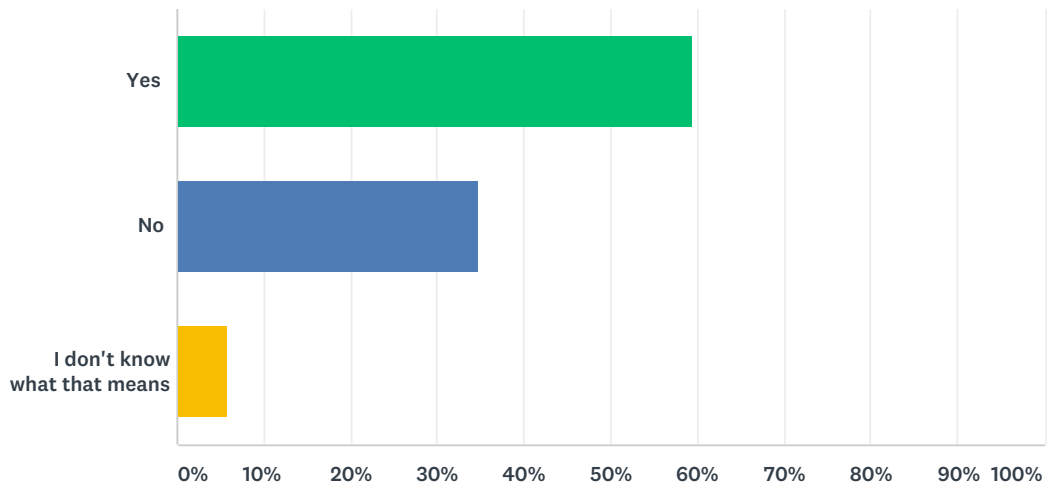
Answered: 410 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	48.29% 198
No	12.20% 50
I don't know	39.51% 162
TOTAL	410

Q11 When you pray, do you ever sit and listen for God? Please explain your answer.

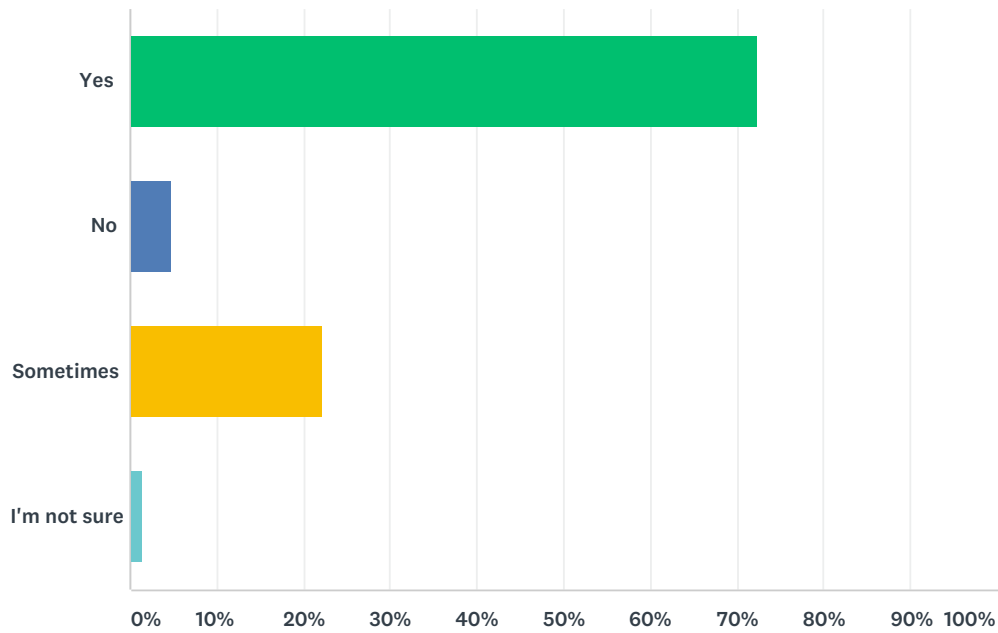
Answered: 395 Skipped: 20



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	59.49%	235
No	34.68%	137
I don't know what that means	5.82%	23
TOTAL		395

Q12 Do you feel comfortable sitting in silence? Please explain your answer.

Answered: 410 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	72.44%	297
No	4.88%	20
Sometimes	22.20%	91
I'm not sure	1.46%	6
Total Respondents: 410		

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