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SOUL CONVERSATIONS:
Heart Religion through Spiritual Friendship for Emerging Adults

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Abstract

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Heart Religion through Spiritual Friendship for Emerging Adults
By Andrea L. Summers

‘Heart religion’ stands at the very center of what it means to be a Wesleyan, which is why this project aims to see Southern Wesleyan University students engage more substantively in Christian community in ways that form and transform. Students reported a disconnect between their desire for formative community and their positive experiences in community. Therefore, a guide has been created and tested which incorporates the historical theology of John Wesley’s doctrines, disciplines and dispositions of the heart, and of Aelred of Rievaulx’s spiritual friendship. The guide also incorporates the methodology of Wesley’s structured Christian conferencing with special attention to his band meetings, and the methodology of the monastic tradition’s spiritual direction with special attention to the desert mothers and fathers and Thomas Merton. This guide is a 21st century application of these historic theologies and practices which offer the authentic spirituality that emerging adults are open to and longing for.

John Wesley taught that the ‘stuff’ of transformation is a change in the dispositions of the heart. When our hearts long for more of God and God’s righteousness, we move toward holiness. As a result, the guide I have created for *Soul Conversations* offers a structured space where authentic vulnerability and an openness to the Holy Spirit merge to make deep transformation possible; a transformation that changes, not just belief and behavior, but also the very longings of the heart. All individuals who participated in the study reported growth in seven areas of Wesleyan distinctives; expressing a greater desire for God, increased engagement in Christian practices, a deeper realization of God’s love for them, a commitment to transformative relationships, an increased ability to do the right thing, a pronounced dependence on the Holy Spirit and a greater optimism for the future.

SOUL CONVERSATIONS:

Heart Religion through Spiritual Friendship for Emerging Adults

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction – The Need (Community and Campus Analysis)

‘Heart religion’ stands at the very center of what it means to be a Wesleyan, which is why this project aims to see Southern Wesleyan University students engage more substantively in Christian community in ways that form and transform. The church, including Christian universities, paints an impressive picture of the impact community can have on our lives and on the world around us. There is a great deal of talk around communing with God, but very little understanding of how to lean in to a deep knowing of God. There is much attention given to hearing from God, but great confusion around discerning God’s voice. There is considerable energy given to cultivating Christian community, but very few people who feel truly known. While the church sells 21st century discipleship forms as the answer to our spiritual deficiencies, and while these do spur us on to greater growth, they also fall short of the deep dependence on the Holy Spirit and the authentic vulnerability necessary for inner transformation toward holy love.

Therefore, a guide has been created and used which incorporates the historical theology of John Wesley’s doctrines, disciplines and dispositions of the heart, and of Aelred of Rievaulx’s spiritual friendship. The guide also incorporates the methodology of Wesley’s structured Christian conferencing with special attention to his band meetings, and the methodology of the monastic tradition’s spiritual direction with special attention to the desert mothers and fathers and Thomas Merton. This guide is a 21st century application of these historic theologies and practices which offer the authentic spirituality that emerging adults are open to and longing for.

So many of the opportunities for transformation afforded by the modern church are rooted in believing correctly or behaving rightly. But seldom established in the rhythm of the church are opportunities to surrender to God’s grace in ways that allow the longings of our hearts

to be transformed. Yet, John Wesley taught that the ‘stuff’ of transformation is a change in the dispositions of the heart. When our hearts long for more of God and God’s righteousness, we move toward holiness. As a result, the guide I have created for *Soul Conversations* offers a structured space where authentic vulnerability and an openness to the Holy Spirit merge to make deep transformation possible; a transformation that changes, not just belief and behavior, but also the very longings of the heart.

Four separate Soul Conversation groups met for an entire semester. Populated by students who shared a desire to grow closer to God and closer to one another, fourteen individuals all reported growth in seven areas of Wesleyan distinctives; expressing a greater desire for God, increased engagement in Christian practices, a deeper realization of God’s love for them, a commitment to transformative relationships, an increased ability to do the right thing, a pronounced dependence on the Holy Spirit and a greater optimism for the future.

Southern Wesleyan University: An Overview

Southern Wesleyan University is a private, nonprofit, Christian, liberal arts university located in Central, South Carolina. The university was founded in 1906 by the Wesleyan Church and still has strong ties to this denomination. The university serves approximately 1,600 students¹, just over half of those are enrolled as residential students at the 250-acre main campus in Central, South Carolina. With thirty-five major areas of study for undergraduates, SWU has strong degree programs in business, education, religion, music and criminal justice.

¹ "SWU Profile," Southern Wesleyan University, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.swu.edu/about/who-we-are/swu-profile/>

Southern Wesleyan competes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II as well as the National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) Division I. In fact, approximately one-third of SWU students play for one of the school's eighteen intercollegiate athletic teams.

SWU is ranked in the top two private colleges for diversity in the state of South Carolina and ranks in the top five among Christian colleges in the southeast². The average student to faculty ratio is eighteen to one. Tuition costs are very competitive for private Christian institutions with a net tuition of \$15,921. Financial aid is readily available with 80% of all undergraduates receiving some type of financial assistance³.

Southern Wesleyan University: Spiritual Life

Southern Wesleyan University is a “Christ-centered, student-focused learning community devoted to transforming lives by challenging students to be dedicated scholars and servant-leaders who impact the world for Christ.”⁴ SWU wants to see students grow spiritually and embody the character of Christ. SWU is committed to helping students integrate faith, living and learning into their education⁵. Faculty and staff sign a statement of faith prior to employment at SWU and students sign a code of conduct prior to enrollment. While students do not need to identify as Christians to attend, and some do not, most students profess some degree of Christian belief. Students have the opportunity to grow in their faith through required weekly chapel

² “2020 Most Diverse Colleges” Niche, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/most-diverse-colleges/s/south-carolina/>

³ Orr, Anna Rebekah. “Most Affordable Colleges & Universities.” accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.christianuniversitiesonline.org/cheapest-christian-schools-south/>

⁴ “Mission and Values,” Southern Wesleyan University, accessed [July 12, 2019] from <http://catalog.swu.edu/content.php?catoid=11&navoid=580#mission-and-values>

⁵ “Life at SWU,” Southern Wesleyan University, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.swu.edu/life-at-swu/>.

experiences with worship and guest speakers. The university also offers optional discipleship groups, ministry teams, local serving opportunities, global missions experiences, and encourages students to connect with a local church during their student career.

A Timely 21st Century Expression:

Young people are disappointed with and perhaps even desensitized by the Christian community they have been promised. When seventy-three SWU students from various disciplines populating General Education courses were asked about prior discipleship opportunities, 70% indicated they have felt 'disappointed' by these experiences. Christian communities, including churches and universities, tend to overpromise how lives will be changed if one simply joins a small group. Seventy-five percent of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I long for authentic relationships with other Christians, but have had trouble finding them in groups designed for spiritual growth." Inspired by sermons about authentic community, people of faith sign up for groups that underdeliver; groups whose structure, purpose and leadership are ill-equipped for fostering the kind of relationships that encourage deep heart transformation.

The curriculum available for discipleship today is usually either content driven, fellowship driven, or personality driven; all of which do not seem to satisfy the hunger young adults have for authentic relationships that open us up to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. A new form for spiritual transformation is more necessary than ever. A place where Christians can feel safe enough to move more deeply into confession, truth-telling, ask penetrating questions, challenge one another, and give and receive spiritual guidance.

Religious Experience of College Students

Young adults articulate a gap between their faith and their behavior. Adolescents that profess Christian faith still struggle with biblical literacy and theological Orthodoxy. And even those who believe the right things and know the right things do not seem to connect their belief and knowledge with changed hearts and lives. In a landmark study on the religious lives of American teenagers, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's research demonstrates that most of the youth identify with a Christian tradition⁶. Despite this exposure to faith, the majority lack the ability to speak articulately about their faith and believe that religion, itself, is not terribly important to daily life⁷. Smith and Lundquist suggest that most young people subscribe to a watered-down belief system called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism⁸. The irony is that there is no lack of resources for spiritual growth. In a culture that has more information about Christian living and scriptural interpretation than could possibly be consumed, young adults seem to be spiritually starving. Whether the disconnect is actual or simply felt, the reality is that there is a disconnect between professed belief and spiritual maturity.

Young adults also have a significant desire for authentically vulnerable relationships. Of the seventy-three SWU students from various disciplines populating General Education courses, an overwhelming 93% agreed that they “long for meaningful connection and honesty in [their] relationships with others.” But 59% of those same students agreed or strongly agreed that they “have trouble trusting other people,” while 52% admit that they “share too much with others and end up getting hurt.” Interestingly, 53% have “trouble finding authentic relationships with other Christians in groups designed for spiritual growth”. Young adults long for formative friendships,

⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 141.

⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 142.

⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 154.

but do not always know how to go about healthy relationships defined by vulnerability and spiritual friendship. Sixty percent of students surveyed agreed that it “is hard to know when to open up and share vulnerably with others.” There is a felt need in the gap between their ongoing desire for intimacy and their ability to develop intimacy in healthy and spiritually transformative ways.

CHAPTER 2: The Historical Theology of Soul Conversations – Wesleyan Transformation and Spiritual Friendship

How Transformation Happens: A Wesleyan View

Southern Wesleyan University is a thoroughly Wesleyan institution and, while not all its students identify with Wesleyan theology, this is the grounding theological tradition out of which spiritual transformation is fostered. Therefore, it is important to understand the ways that a Wesleyan theology of transformation informs this project. Specifically, Soul Conversations provide the context for Wesley's dispositions of the heart to be renovated and lives to be moved toward holiness.

When Wesley describes the image of God in which humanity was created in his sermon "The New Birth", he highlights three elements: doctrine (understanding), disciplines (will), and dispositions (affections). Collins points out that Wesley expresses this in other writings including The Doctrine of Original Sin when he writes, "They [Adam and Eve] evidenced the wrong state of all their faculties, both of their understanding, will and affections."⁹ Wesley suggested that these three elements; doctrine, disciplines and dispositions of the heart, work together to transform the whole person and to put one in a position of increasing responsiveness to God's grace, thus moving the person forward toward holiness.

And while Wesley emphasized the pivotal role each of these three elements play in the process of transformation, his emphasis on affective language and its connection to holiness comes from Wesley's caution against mistaking religion as outward works or external religion. Wesley emphasized and invested in the holy heart dispositions in order to fan them into flame as

⁹ Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley's Topography of the Heart," *Methodist History* 36, no. 3 (April 1998): 172

they transform the deep longings of the heart. He invested in them by providing space for deep intimacy with God and with others, and Soul Conversations is a modern expression of a similar investment.

Imagine the person who understands that the right thing to do is to forgive someone who has hurt them. This person may even gather the courage to speak words of forgiveness to the evildoer, thus willing themselves to do the right thing. But why is it, then, that the person can walk away from an encounter like this still harboring unforgiveness in their heart? Wesley would suggest that, while doctrine and disciplines do put us in a position to receive God's grace, there are times when there is a deeper work that is needed. There are moments and seasons when doctrine and dispositions are not enough because the very orientation of our heart needs to be transformed, and this is something that no amount of mental acquiescing and fist clenching can accomplish. This is where Wesley's affections or dispositions of the heart come in to play.

Doctrine, also referred to by Wesley as understanding, or belief, or orthodoxy, was important to him. In his sermon "On the Wedding Garment," he said, "wrong opinions in religion naturally lead to wrong tempers or wrong practices." True religion, for Wesley, could not exist without orthodox belief. Yet, he went on to say that "right opinion may subsist without right tempers." Though understanding is important and perhaps even necessary for redemption, it is never enough on its own. Right belief must also be met with right disposition.

Disciplines, also referred to by Wesley as the will or behavior, are also a key component of our created imago dei Wesley maintained that it is as we participate in means of grace such as works of piety (prayer, searching Scripture, the Lord's Supper) and works of mercy (active love for neighbor) that the Holy Spirit transforms our lives. This embodied expression of love for God and others also enables us to grow in love.

Dispositions, also referred to by Wesley as tempers or affections of the heart, are distinct from doctrine and disciplines, but still connected in important ways. Dispositions are standing orientations toward disciplines that are not easily shaken. Dispositions indicate “the direction of the will and the objects toward which it aims.”¹⁰ Likewise, holy dispositions indicate an openness and inclination toward right doctrine and this understanding helps holy dispositions to take root.

Wesley subscribed to a holistic faith that included the mind, the heart and the body. A true Christian does not simply have an experience or believe a creed or perform a sacred practice. Rather, Wesley saw these three elements as fully integrated, used by God to enable growth in love and increase in holiness.

Wesley uses the terms dispositions, tempers and affections of the heart almost interchangeably throughout his writings and sermons.¹¹ These ideas are closely tied to Wesley’s understanding of holiness. Collins suggests that this affective language is so extensive, “ranging from Wesley’s early career to his old age, that it is virtually impossible to discuss his practical theology without it.”¹² According to Wesley, the dispositions of the heart indicate an orientation of the human heart toward an object¹³. These dispositions or tempers can be directed toward greater holiness by an orientation toward trust in God, or they can be directed toward greater evil with an inclination toward corruption. For example, Wesley describes inward sin as a “disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ” and as “pride, self-will, love of the

¹⁰ Collins, “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart,” 171.

¹¹ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3:171 (On Patience).

¹² Kenneth J. Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 166.

¹³ Collins, “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart,” 163.

world.”¹⁴ Dispositions of the heart are morally neutral, moving a human heart toward good or evil depending on the end toward which they are inclined.

Wesley links saving faith with dispositions of the heart in his sermon, “Salvation by Faith,” when he preached, “it [faith] is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart.”¹⁵ There is the idea implied here, and elsewhere in Wesley’s work, that dispositions are more than an inclination toward something or someone. Dispositions are also a result of those inclinations. That is, there is a longing for more of God, and there is a transformation of being or a heart-change as a result. This is what Collins called the “two-sidedness of the dispositions”;¹⁶ the orientation toward someone or something and the realized consequences of such an orientation.

His emphasis on this affective language and its connection to holiness comes from Wesley’s caution against mistaking religion as outward works or external religion. He preached in his sermon “On Charity” that “true religion, in the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers.”¹⁷ This tension is as true today as it was then. Wesley pushed back against the desire to keep religion external, defined by works or worship. Instead, he articulated another way; by investing in holy heart dispositions, however small, we fan them into flame and see the two-sided nature of these dispositions as they transform the deep longings of our hearts and broaden our good dispositions.

In Wesley’s view, dispositions are more stable than whims or feelings. While capable of change, these inherent qualities reflect the deep-seated longings of the soul in their constancy.

¹⁴ Outler, *Sermons*, 1:320 (On Sin in Believers).

¹⁵ John Wesley, “Salvation by Faith,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) 39.

¹⁶ Collins, “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart,” 163.

¹⁷ John Wesley, “On Charity,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons* 3, 306.

Clapper suggests that they “are more than feelings or sensations. They are standing dispositions which characterize a person over time.”¹⁸ Wesley alludes to this in *A Dialogue Between an Antinomian and His Friend* where he points out that faith cannot exist for a moment without “certain inherent qualities and dispositions which make us meet for the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁹

What are some of the dispositions of the heart that Wesley expounds upon as both movement toward and fruit of holiness? Wesley underscores such dispositions as faith, love, hope, humility and patience²⁰. One disposition which perhaps betrays the influence the Catholic tradition had on Wesley is his emphasis on humility as an enduring disposition that is inextricably tied to holiness. Wesley maintained that “there is no disposition... which is more essential to Christianity than meekness.”²¹ And his famous sermon, “The Circumcision of the Heart” underscored the disposition of humility as a trait of holiness.

But this was not a new idea original to him. In fact, Aelred of Rievaulx, studied in the next section of this project, had a dear spiritual friend named Bernard of Clairvaux. And Clairvaux’s work, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, likely influence Wesley’s understanding of humility²². Clairvaux emphasized a disposition of humility to position oneself to receive God’s grace, along with Catherine of Genoa’s *Purgation and Purgatory*²³ and the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Perhaps it is not only in Wesley’s emphasis on holiness and dispositions of the heart such as humility that he leaned heavily on the monastic tradition. In fact, much has been written about

¹⁸ Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections*. (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 163.

¹⁹ Wesley, John “A Dialogue Between an Antinomian and His Friend,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Thomas Jackson. :274;

²⁰ Clapper, *Religious Affections*, 160.

²¹ John Wesley. “. “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse IV. In *John Wesley’s Forty-four Sermons*. (London: Epworth Forest, 1977), 101.

²² Collins, *John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart*, 165.

²³ Collins, *John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart*, 165.

the Catholic nuances of Wesley's theology around liberty, human responsibility, and ecumenism. But more subtle, perhaps, is the way that the Catholic understanding of spiritual friendship may have influenced his methods for discipleship. Wesley was known for his structured bands, societies and meetings, and the kind of deep sharing, high accountability and defined organization of these gatherings are similar in many ways to the spiritual friendship described in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx.

He understood that as important as it is to believe the right things (doctrine) and to do the right things (discipline), these two elements on their own will only result in a measure of transformation. Sometimes, what is needed is an openness to God and to others that fosters the transformation of our dispositions. Toward this end, we turn to Aelred of Rievaulx and his theology of friendship understood as a sacramental channel of God's grace for deep heart change.

Spiritual Friendship: Aelred of Rievaulx

"You and I are here, and the third with us I hope is Christ."²⁴ These words were penned by Aelred of Rievaulx in *Spiritual Friendship* at the behest of his spiritual friend Bernard of Clairvaux. In this pinnacle work on spiritual friendship, Aelred describes what he believes to be a powerful locale for spiritual transformation in the safe space of authentic and intimate Christian community where people are mysteriously joined in the presence of Christ for deep friendship.

A renewed commitment to spiritual friendship is timely in today's society that has cheapened friendship with our ability to friend and unfriend at the click of a button. Spiritual friendship calls Christians to a relationship that has less to do with content learning, personality

²⁴ Aelred, of Rievaulx, Saint, Lawrence C. Braceland, and Marsha L. Dutton. *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 2010), p. 1

type or shared experiences and more to do with calling one another to the ancient discipline of friendship found in the monastic tradition, specifically the writings and life of Aelred of Rievaulx.

Aelred, a 12th century Abbot, wrote extensively about friendship and charity. While there were many, particularly in the monastic tradition and even among contemporaries like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint Thierry²⁵, that embodied and understood spiritual friendship, Aelred further explained it as a spiritual practice, a sacramental means of grace, and the love of God and of neighbor²⁶.

In 1110 Aelred was born in northern England, which was steeped in the traditions of Celtic spirituality²⁷, to a family carrying several generations of honorable church positions. Serving the church was a family business. However, rather than immediately following in the footsteps of his family, Aelred, instead, was educated and then served the royal court of David I of Scotland. Aelred continued to be involved in civic and political affairs throughout his life. After ten years as a court steward, Aelred was sent on a business trip to York and, while there, offered himself to the Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx as a monk. Combining his leadership skills learned in the royal court and his deep yearning for God and Christian community, Aelred served the Abbey well. Before long he was providing orientation and mentoring to new order members, and within eleven years he was the Abbott of Rievaulx where he served until his death in 1167²⁸.

²⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint, Abbot of Saint-Thierry William of Saint-Thierry, and Saint Aelred of Rievaulx. *The Love of God and Spiritual Friendship*. (Multnomah: Classics of Faith and Devotion, 1983),. xiii.

²⁶ Marsha L. Dutton. "The Sacramentality of Community in Aelred," *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167)*, 2017, 247.

²⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God*, xiii.

²⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Love of God* xiii

Aelred's most notable work is his treatise on spiritual friendship, which is a series of dialogues in which three monks join Aelred to examine their ideas about friendship in light of their faith. These friends go on to test their beliefs about friendship with scripture and experience. In so doing, Aelred further develops a theology linking human relationship with the love of God. He puts forth the idea that God is friendship, saying, "he who dwells in [spiritual] friendship dwells in God and God in him."²⁹

Aelred understood community to be sacramental, a "channel of grace created by God, drawing humans to God and joining them together in his presence."³⁰ Aelred understood an indivisible connection between spiritual friendship and contemplative life and practice. He saw the monastic community to be a life of intentional relationship. It, according to Aelred, was not an 'obstacle to some supposed spiritual perfection: friendship itself is Christian perfection.'³¹

Therefore, Aelred's spiritual friendship is Christocentric in its goal to conform one's self and one's relationship with others to the source and model of Christ. It is also firmly rooted in creation itself, suggesting that friendship is God's image in humankind³². He did not see community as made up of many individuals coming together. Rather, he understood Christian community to be many friendships uniting.

Aelred distinguished between carnal friendship and spiritual friendship, pointing to Augustine's description of friendship as "belonging to adolescents, as were Augustine and his young friend."³³ But he taught that even immature friendships can grow into spiritual

²⁹ Aelred of Rievaulx, Saint, Braceland, and Dutton. *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*, 65.

³⁰ Dutton, "The sacramentality of community," 246.

³¹ Dutton, "The sacramentality of community," 248

³² Dutton, "The sacramentality of community," 250.

³³ Dutton, Marsha L. "Friendship and the Love of God," *The American Benedictine Review*, 56 no. 1, (March 2005), 256.

communion with God. The hallmark of spiritual friendship, for Aelred, was together “touching the sweetness of Christ.”³⁴ He saw friendship as a path toward holiness.

Aelred drew from Ambrose who understood that friends are bound together by openness and emotional intimacy; building trust that allows them to open their hearts to one another. Quite different from a worldly friendship, Aelred suggests that spiritual friendship is a deep relationship based on self-disclosure and mutual acceptance. And the foundation for this kind of interchange of love is found in the Trinity itself.

Aelred’s reflections and guidelines on spiritual friendship are more pertinent today than ever. At a time when human love in all its aspects has been trivialized and de-sacralized, when the pleasure principle is given priority and erotic love is elevated above all other loves, he emphasizes the demands that authentic love inside friendship makes. The friendship he describes is so drastically different than the thing we call friendship today, that using the same word may be problematic. More than a source of joy or pain that this world has to offer, Aelred practiced and wrote about spiritual friendship as a special relationship that is both an expression of God’s love and a path to knowing God’s love. It is a friendship so hungry for intimacy with God and intimacy with the other, so marked by openness and so spiritually transformative that it “consists in the love and knowledge of God, when one who is the friend of another becomes the friend of God, according to the verse of our Savior in the Gospel: I shall no longer call you servants but friends (John 15:15).”³⁵

Aelred believed that the more vulnerable and intimate a person is with God, the more vulnerable and intimate he can be with a spiritual friend. At the same time, he believed that the more vulnerable and intimate a person is with a friend, the more vulnerable and intimate he can

³⁴ Dutton, “Friendship and Love of God,” 256.

³⁵ Dutton, “Friendship and Love of God,” 258.

be with God. And it is this willingness to live in openness with God and with others that Aelred found a sacramental means for transformation and a channel of God's grace. Aelred articulated this deep intimacy for Christ and for his friends in words that would make us blush today, but it is a life lived in openness to God and to the other that this current generation of faithful young adults long for. Aelred frames a theology of friendship whose purpose is ultimately larger than oneself and larger than the friendship itself. Not only do many young adults desire the formative friendship Aelred puts forth, but they believe it is possible. They, like many of the generations before them, simply do not know how to go about it.

Aelred's spiritual friendship provides, while not the only location, an important place for Wesley's holy dispositions of the heart to be fanned into flame. These two historical theologies, ancient as they are, dovetail in a powerful way to forge a subtly different approach to spiritual formation. In a hyper individualized society that simultaneously longs for deep intimacy, and a church culture that teaches the content of transformation but rarely provides the intimate space for it, Wesley's theology of heart change and Aelred's theology of friendship are more necessary than ever.

*See appendices G and H for further critical discourse regarding what I have learned about ministry to emerging generations in light of these historical theologies.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology for Contemporary Practice – Wesley’s Methodism and Monastic Spiritual Direction

John Wesley was so successful at uniting a theology of transformation and a means for fostering that transformation, that it was, perhaps, his greatest legacy. The breadth of his preaching and writing pieced together a language around dispositions of the heart, but he also set in motion a process for submitting oneself to God’s grace and the effectual change of these dispositions. Perhaps the genius of Wesley’s practical theology was not just his sensible integration of doctrine, disciplines and dispositions of the heart, but his methods for fostering these vehicles of transformation.

Contemporary Practice: Wesley’s Methodism

It was this commitment to deep heart transformation and movement toward holiness which led Wesley to develop the polity of the Methodist societies, classes, and bands, fostering an obedience to the will of God as experienced by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Soul Conversations have embedded in them the DNA of Wesley’s interlocking groups. Like Wesley’s groups, Soul Conversations are highly structured and highly dependent on the Holy Spirit. They both also require considerable commitment and considerable accountability and employ soul searching examination. Finally, both Wesley’s methodism and Soul Conversations demand authentic vulnerability and a willing heart.

Wesley encouraged the development of a system that would create space where transformation could happen. This system is what we know as Methodist societies, class meetings, and bands. For Wesley, Christian conferencing provided the primary avenue to foster

holiness of heart and life. There was a hierarchy of instruction for each group, tailored to a specific function and with a specific educational mode.³⁶

Wesley's societies emphasized understanding. They were similar to the size of what we, today, would call a small congregation. Doctrines and beliefs were delivered primarily through preaching, reading, hymn singing, and other forms of exhortation. Secondly, every Methodist became a member of the class meeting and was expected to attend regularly, or else be removed as a member of the society. The class meeting became a crucial tool for enabling Methodists to watch over one another in love and to encourage one another in their lives with God. To be a Methodist meant that one was involved in a weekly class meeting where they served the poor and answered the question, "How was it with your soul?"³⁷ Wesley wanted the classes to be a place of "mutual encouragement that each might learn something from the experiences of others."³⁸ Wesley commonly described class meetings as, "watching over one another in love."³⁹

The significance of the class meeting is more than the stability it gave early Methodism or the impact these meetings had on cultural reform. The class meeting was a means of grace by which Christians, in witness to the world, looked after one another in holy love by allowing God to direct their time and place in human history.⁴⁰ Interestingly, despite the significant missional growth and success that the class meetings brought to the Methodist movement, John Wesley understood that there was a deeper commitment than the class meeting. This commitment is of interest to Soul Conversations and what Wesley called bands.

³⁶ Kevin Watson, *A Blueprint for Discipleship*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009), 244–245.

³⁷ Kevin Watson *The Class Meeting*. (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2013), 25

³⁸ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resource, 1985), 110.

³⁹ Werner, David. "John Wesley's Questions: 'How Is Your Doing?'" *The Asbury Journal* 65 no.2, (Fall 2010): 72.

⁴⁰ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings*, 145.

Wesley desired bands to be the place where a holy redirection of the heart and the deep dispositions of the heart could be transformed. Bands were same-gender groups of, usually, three to five people and consisted of examining one's soul and seeking the transformation of one's motives, desires, and points of sin. Some, with only a cursory understanding of bands, might mistake them for accountability groups. But whereas accountability groups tend to focus on the will and the individual's effort to cause behavioral change, bands helped believers submit themselves to sanctifying grace that cultivates a desire for God and a holy love for others in growing Christian perfection. The emphasis is on what Wesley called dispositions of the heart. In bands, believers could, as Wesley put it, "pour out of their hearts without reserve, particularly regarding the sin which did still easily beset them, and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. In these intimate groups, participants experience being truly known and loved. Shame and isolation begin to ebb."⁴¹ Wesley purposed that the bands would facilitate deep heart change.

The central function of the band included "what Wesley termed 'closed conversation', by which he meant soul-searching examination; less of behavior or ideas, and more of motives and heartfelt impressions."⁴² Members of the band answered five questions in turn:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?⁴³

⁴¹ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 76-77.

⁴² Kevin Watson, *Blueprint for Discipleship*, 246.

⁴³ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 76.

Band membership meant vulnerability at the deepest level and trusting that those who know your sin will still love you as Christ loves you. Through openness to God and to one another, bands practiced spiritual friendship, humility, and hospitality. Wesley felt it was important to ground bands in a catholic grace that was open to anyone who would approach God with a willing heart.

Wesley's methods for transformation are pathways that lead us into more of God. These methodical structures are not the end, but the means, of grace. Furthermore, these Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in which the inner life takes shape over time in response to the Word and work of Christ. Our practices become a conversation between our doctrine, our disciplines and our dispositions. These patterns of communal action create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and the presence of God not only becomes known to us but transforms us.

While Soul Conversations do not seek to perfectly replicate Wesley's methodology, Soul Conversations have a deeply embedded Wesleyan spirit. Like Wesley's classes and bands, Soul Conversations recognize the mysterious role that the Holy Spirit plays in transformation when one willingly invests in spiritual friendships. Soul Conversations, like Wesley's interlocking groups, emphasizes God's grace and our cooperative response. Also borrowed from Wesley is a contemporary practice in Soul Conversations that emphasizes structure, deep investment, vulnerability and examination. Soul Conversations lean heavily on the practical structure of Wesleyan methodology with a shared purpose of facilitating a receptiveness toward God's grace and a movement toward Christian perfection within the context of spiritual friendship.

Contemporary Practice: Monastic Spiritual Direction

In addition to being thoroughly Wesleyan, Soul Conversations also incorporates the ancient practice of spiritual direction found in the monastic tradition, bringing another expression of Wesleyan transformation into contemporary practice. Spiritual direction's emphasis on discernment, prayer, listening to the other and listening to God are all integrated into Soul Conversations in intentional ways. Saint Teresa of Avila writes in her letters of spiritual guidance:

The monastic tradition has delved into the contemplative life since its inception. Spiritual depths previously practiced inside the monastic life have been made available to the mainstream in recent decades in response to a growing interest in the contemplative life. Protestant Christians are increasingly turning to monasticism for guidance in cultivating a reflective faith. The explosion of popular books and resources for personal awareness and wholeness points to this generation's search for inner meaning and fulfillment.

Jeannette Bakke, author of *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction*, said "Evangelicals are listening for God in ways that are different from our usual understanding of discipleship. We are looking at many Christian disciplines, including prayer, silence and solitude, discernment, journaling, and others. ... Spiritual direction is one of these disciplines many evangelical Christians are learning about and exploring."⁴⁴ In the last several decades there has been a growing demand for spiritual direction, with a corresponding rediscovery and development of the art. The numbers of those practicing spiritual guidance has increased and training courses for spiritual directors have multiplied.

Spiritual direction is an intentional relationship whose purpose is to help one find God in the circumstances of life. This relationship, or in the case of Soul Conversations it is multiple

⁴⁴ Chris Armstrong. "Got Your Spiritual Director, Yet?" *Christianity Today*, April, 2003, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/aprilweb-only/4-28-51.0.html>.

relationships, create space to nurture one's relationship with God. Margaret Guenther describes a spiritual director's role as 'midwives for the soul'⁴⁵. Much like a midwife, the director's role is simply to come alongside. The director does not do the painful work of birthing and the new life does not belong to her. But the spiritual director accompanies us on our spiritual journey in ways that point us to where God is at work by listening, encouraging, reflecting, praying, discerning and guiding. This companionship, according to Guenther, is important "as we are born again (and again and again) we need someone in the delivery room to help us."⁴⁶

This art of Christian guidance listens deeply to another person's life story with an ear for the movement of the holy. There is a listening for, not just the practical details of life but the stream beneath it all consisting of our deepest longings, motivations, hopes and fears. A classic question is, "Where is God in the midst of this experience?" Spiritual directors foster the relationship between a directee and God so that it can deepen and grow⁴⁷.

One of the fundamental theological factors that shapes Christian spiritual guidance is the belief that a God of unconditional love invites us, individually and collectively, to live and to act in partnership with God and with one another to bring about the reign of God. It includes both personal growth into the kinds of people God desires us to be and the struggle to create a society and a world that is more human and a clearer reflection of God's desires⁴⁸. Generally, Christians are drawn to spiritual direction by a yearning for God. Rather than desperate crisis, the Christian longs to understand the meaning of their life, to gain a sense of discernment and to understand how to live their life more fully.

⁴⁵ Alice Fryling. *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press. 2009).21.

⁴⁶ Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 21.

⁴⁷ William Francis Barry and William J. Connolly. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. (New York: Seabury, 1982). 21.

⁴⁸ "Tradition of Spiritual Guidance: Towards a Theology of Spiritual Direction." (2006).

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6462/a25343b8715a57e07bc89fd3f045f4b2876c.pdf>

Spiritual direction has been a part of the Christian tradition for centuries. This ancient practice of offering spiritual guidance to another goes back to the Old Testament. Moses gives spiritual direction to the Israelites and appoints 72 elders to help him with the responsibility. Eli helps Samuel recognize the voice of God. Elijah directs Elisha. In Jesus' ministry to the disciples we see spiritual guidance at work. Paul wrote letters of spiritual direction and counsel to the early church⁴⁹.

The desert fathers and mothers of the fourth and fifth centuries, seeking a revival of the purity of the ancient church⁵⁰ and communion with God in the barren land around Mount Sinai, continued the tradition of spiritual direction by offering guidance to the thousands that visited them there. It was out of these desert communities that the early monastic movement was formed.

The practice continued primarily through monastic communities, providing a major point of contact with the public, as people travelled to visit them and seek guidance for their spiritual lives. Famous saints like Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Ignatius of Loyola, not only offered spiritual direction, but regularly saw spiritual directors themselves⁵¹. Some of their letters of guidance are still read today. With exceptions like Holland and Belgium in the 14th century and France in the 17th and 18th century where laity formed groups for the purpose of spiritual direction⁵², the practice was predominantly set within monastic orders.

As Protestantism grew from the 16th century onwards, other forms of spiritual formation began to be emphasized such as bible reading, preaching, and spiritual disciplines. And so, it has

⁴⁹ Chester P. Michael *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 5.

⁵⁰ George E. Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), <https://www3.nd.edu/~undpress/excerpts/P01124-ex.pdf>. 17.

⁵¹ Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 6.

⁵² Christopher P. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 6.

only been in recent history that Protestant churches, with the help of writers like Thomas Merton, have widely considered the practice of spiritual direction as a part of the formation process. With this new availability has been a growing awareness of the contribution the laity bring to spiritual direction and the contemplative life.

Spiritual direction is a robust expression of Christian community. This is why there is such an overlap, in the monastic tradition, between spiritual direction and spiritual friendship. Friendship whose purpose is formation will inevitably provide spiritual guidance. And spiritual direction has the capacity to endear one to the other. Spiritual direction's emphasis on discernment, prayer, listening to the other and listening to God are all integrated into Soul Conversations. Like spiritual direction, Soul conversations are not typical small groups. It is not a study group or a place to simply find fellowship. It is not an accountability group or a topical study. It is a listening group. In soul conversation, like spiritual direction, we listen carefully and deeply to one another.

With a strong theological foundation in Wesleyan transformation and spiritual friendship, and with the structure and high commitment borrowed from Wesley's classes and bands, Soul Conversations also leans into the reflective listening and discernment that spiritual direction has to offer.

CHAPTER 4: Explanation of the Guide

I have taken what I learned from my research and from my own ministry experience to develop a guide for cultivating spiritual friendship within a defined group structure with the purpose of transformation in the Wesleyan tradition. This guide and the approach to Christian formation it offers will be unique in five ways.

First, in groups of three to four individuals, there is no Bible study, teaching time, unsolicited advice giving, perfunctory prayers or careless sharing. This more contemplative, prayerful, reflective, present experience creates a rhythm of Christian community that may feel foreign to many participants. Second, Soul Conversations fosters the spiritual friendship of the monastic tradition. Third, Soul Conversations emphasizes similar purpose, structure, accountability and boundaries to that of John Wesley's band meetings. Fourth, Soul Conversations creates space for participants to reflect, pray, listen to the Holy Spirit, listen to spiritual friends, meditate on Scripture, and pray for spiritual friends. Fifth, the focus of Soul Conversations is not on content (learning things or believing things) or behavior (doing things). Wesley calls these doctrine and disciplines. Instead, Soul Conversations establishes a defined space where authentic vulnerability and a growing dependence on the Holy Spirit opens Christians up to God's grace to transform the dispositions of our hearts. It is about listening carefully and deeply to one another and to God. The goal of soul conversations is not to answer all of life's questions, but to draw closer to God amid the questions.

Below are some frequently asked questions for those interested in Soul Conversations.

1. How big should a group be?

The ideal group size is three to four people, although it can also work with two or five. More than five and the time commitment becomes unwieldy and difficult to sustain long-term. Two people can also commit to this, however, the responsibility for discernment can grow burdensome for some people who do not have a great deal of experience in spiritual direction. Soul Conversations seem to work best when three or four people share the humble privilege of listening to and discerning with their friends.

2. Who should participate?

Putting Aelred to the test, the defining criteria for Soul Conversations is not spiritual maturity or Biblical knowledge. According to Aelred, a desire for more of Christ is the defining characteristic of Spiritual friendship. Therefore, anyone can be a part of a Soul Conversations group if they have a spiritual hunger for more of Christ and a willingness to open up to God and others. It matters little how long someone has been a Christian or how spiritually mature they are. What matters most is that they have an authentic longing to be closer to the Triune God revealed in Scripture and they are willing to take steps toward greater vulnerability with others.

3. How often should a group meet?

Weekly is by far the ideal. However, groups can meet every other week provided they commit to longer conversations.

4. How long should a group commit to meeting together?

This is up to your group. Soul Conversation groups can be life-long, or they can meet for a season. Because it does take time to build deep trust, however, it is important not to give up too soon. A recommendation is to commit, initially, to meet for four months. At the end of four months of meeting weekly, a group can re-evaluate and decide if they are

ready to continue. If a group meets biweekly, then the recommendation would be to meet for eight months before re-evaluating. However, the real beauty of spiritual friendship will take much longer than four months to unfold.

Getting Started

1. First, pray for God to lead you to two or three people who are spiritually hungry for more of the Triune God.
2. Second, invite them to consider being in a Soul Conversations group. The initial invitation can be as simple as, “I’m getting a group of three or four people together to pray and to listen to God together. It’s not a Bible Study, though we do read Scripture. The focus is really on listening to God, listening to each other, and talking to God. If that’s something you’re interested in, let me know. I’d love to sit down with you so that we can talk more about what this is.”
3. Third, if they seem interested in Soul Conversations, then schedule a time to sit down with him or her. This can be one-on-one or all together, so that you can explain to them what Soul Conversations are so that they understand what they might be committing themselves to. Be sure you have a copy of the Soul Conversations Guide for everyone in your group. During this time, it is important to emphasize three things.
 - a. Confidentiality. Unless they or someone else is in danger, everything that is shared in a Soul Conversations group is protected inside the safety of that group. We agree to receive the honesty and vulnerability of our friends as the precious gift that it is.

- b. **Honesty and Vulnerability.** Committing to a Soul Conversation is committing to step out of our comfort zone and share more openly than we may be accustomed to. No one is forced to share more than they are willing. But each friend also agrees that vulnerability with one another and with God is a window into the soul and deeply connected to our spiritual formation. Therefore, each friend agrees to take careful, uncoerced risks toward increasing vulnerability inside the safety of the group.
- c. **Consistency.** Group members agree to show up. Ironically, the weeks we feel least like being with other people or sharing vulnerably or pushing pause on life are the very weeks we need Soul Conversations the most. It is the weeks that we feel like isolating or hiding or our lives are spinning out of balance that we most desperately need to be honest, to be heard, to be prayed for and to be prayed with. Not only that, but your friends need you. Some weeks a Soul Conversation is about the discerning question or the faith-filled prayer you can offer your friend, not what you immediately gain. Spiritual friends are committed to the relationship and the discernment process even when it is not easy. Having said that, it is important to add that life does happen. People fall ill and jobs require travel. But consistency implies a commitment to the group whenever it is possible, not whenever it is convenient.
- d. **Keeping the Time.** Sharing vulnerably often takes time. And in the moments when this happens and the Holy Spirit meets us, it is a beautiful thing that we do not always want it to end. But Soul Conversations should be committed to keeping the time. This is because the group is committed to Soul Conversations,

not just for the moment, but for the long haul. And while a three-hour prayer time might be possible for four people once a year, it is rarely sustainable on a weekly basis. Show your invitees the structure for Soul Conversations and point out the structured, yet also open-ended way that a group listens, prays, and listens some more. Another reason for this structure is the way that it keeps any one person from sharing too much and also keeps any one person from sharing too little. Everyone has the same amount of time to unpack their soul. In this way, no one walks away kicking themselves thinking, “Why did I talk too much? I hate it when I monopolize the conversation.” In a similar way, no one walks away thinking, “No one asked me how I was. I never had an opportunity to open up.” The time-keeping levels the playing field, not just for one another, but also for our inner critic that likes to beat us up after time with friends.

- e. Spirit-Centered. Nothing is shared that is not first prayed about. That is, no words of encouragement, no advice, no questions asked unless the spiritual friend has first spent a moment or a minute to ask God what is to be shared. There is no careless disclosing or unconcerned listening. There is a sense, in Soul Conversations, that there is no group leader or facilitator apart from the Holy Spirit. That it is the Spirit in the center of the room helping spiritual friends know how to listen and what to share.
4. Fourth, give them time to pray and ponder this opportunity, with a deadline you feel is appropriate. There will be people who will decline your invitation, and that is okay. Life is full of seasons and not everyone can commit to Soul Conversations, either due to logistical reasons, emotional reasons or spiritual reasons. Be sure to communicate that

you respect their discernment in the matter and be sure to resist the temptation to take it personally. If an invitee is unable to commit, you can either consider a smaller group size or you can begin praying about a new person to invite, instead.

5. Fifth, once you have a group of three to four people committed to the Soul Conversations journey, schedule a time and place to meet that works for everyone. A busy coffee shop or a home with teenagers listening in the next room is not the ideal location. Try to choose a spot where there will be privacy, no interruptions, and quiet.
6. Sixth, setting aside 30 minutes each, come ready to share your whole story. Obviously, you cannot share your entire story in the time allotted. But more than simply sharing your testimony or sharing all the places you have lived, this practice involves sharing all the things, big and small, good and bad, that have shaped you into the person you are today. This is a practice most Christians have never done. Typically, people tell their stories in small sound bytes over a long period of time. It is a profound and freeing experience to put who we are out on the table and be truly seen by another, receiving encouragement and prayer. Our spiritual friends often make connections in our story that we are not able to make all on our own. This practice also lays the groundwork for the weekly Soul Conversations and gives spiritual context for your life and your relationships. If someone is willing to share their whole story at their first gathering, then they are likely ready to take risks in terms of vulnerability and spiritual growth. When we are willing to open all of who we are, God will meet us in that place of honesty and courage. (See Appendix D for instructions and prompts for Sharing Your Whole Story)

Before We Begin

Once your group has set a regular time and place, assign your group members to the following tasks:

1. Scripture.

This person comes to Soul Conversations with a verse or short passage of Scripture already picked out for the group to read together. This can be a favorite verse, a passage he or she came across in personal scripture reading, or something they stumbled across at the last second as they were on their way to group. It is not something they need to have studied or exegeted or be an expert on. They will simply read it to the group in the translation of their choice at the appropriate time (see guide).

2. Prayer focus.

This person comes to Soul Conversations with an area for focused prayer. The individual will choose anything that group members can pray specifically about (see guide).

3. Timekeeper.

No preparation beforehand is necessary for this area of responsibility, other than showing up with a timer of some kind. This person is responsible for getting the group started (sometimes it is difficult to pull people away from the fun conversation of friends) and to make sure the group is spending enough time, but not too much time, in any one section of the guide. The timekeeper can use his or her discretion to linger a few minutes longer in one section or to move on early to a new section. But it is still important to keep things flowing (see the importance of time keeping above). The best way to do this is to set a timer for each section following the time estimates in the guide. As the group grows familiar with the rhythm of soul conversations, they may not even need to use a timer.

But that kind of flow takes time, so in the meantime, a timekeeper carries the responsibility of moving the conversation along with gentleness.

*See Appendix A for the Soul Conversations Guide.

**See Appendix B for the Expanded Soul Conversations Guide with additional notes.

***See Appendix D for directions and prompts for Sharing Your Whole Story (to be used at the first Soul Conversations gathering).

CHAPTER 5: Survey Measurements and Results

Soul Conversations establish a defined space where authentic vulnerability and a growing dependence on the Holy Spirit open Christians up to God's grace to transform the dispositions of our hearts. They also emphasize the intimate affection of Aelred's spiritual friendships. These Soul Conversations incorporate the structure, accountability and boundaries found in John Wesley's band meetings. And they incorporate the listening prayer and discernment emphasized in spiritual direction.

Fourteen students at Southern Wesleyan University participated in four Soul Conversation groups between September and December, 2019. Spiritual growth was measured in two ways. First, students were given an identical, fifty-question survey both before and after a semester of Soul Conversations. Second, students were interviewed after meeting in Soul Conversation groups for a semester and asked qualitative questions in order to elicit a more narrative snapshot of their experience.

Qualitative Interviews:

Southern Wesleyan University students were invited into soul conversations. The invitation was geared toward students with an interest in community discernment and with a desire to encounter God in formative ways. After one semester of participation, students were interviewed, each asked the same eight questions, in order to gather a narrative account of their Soul Conversations experience. They were each asked the following questions. Without exception, every student articulated an overwhelmingly positive experience of Soul Conversations. Through tears, one student shared in his interview, "I think one of the most important impact [Soul Conversations] has had on my life is it has kept me accountable to...

deep down inside, I DO want to grow closer to God, and I DO want to grow closer to these people, not just these people but all people.” Ben continued, “I can trick myself out of that sometimes, but I can’t trick myself out of it when there’s three people sitting there telling me that I need to do this because they know me.” (An edited video in the digital portion of this project is found online and excerpts from these interviews are found in Appendix F)

1. What was good about Soul Conversations this semester?
2. Did you do anything to improve on the guide or the process?
3. How has God used this to help you grow, if at all?
4. Has your view of friendship changed this semester, if at all?
5. Are you a naturally vulnerable person? How was it to share your story and to share each week?
6. How is this different, for you, from other discipleship groups you’ve been a part of, if at all?
7. Do you have a story to share about your Soul Conversations experience?
8. Will you keep doing Soul Conversations?

Seven Marks of the Wesleyan Tradition That Soul Conversations Can Nurture:

Students were also given a survey both before and after their semester of meeting in Soul Conversations. The values of the survey and corresponding results are outlined below. The

results are organized into seven marks of the Wesleyan tradition⁵³ that I believe Soul Conversations foster. For each of the seven marks, I created questions related to that concept. Students took the survey before and after a semester of Soul Conversations and I paid attention to shifts for both individuals and for everyone. Appendix C includes the survey questions for each category. Appendix E includes the survey results in detail. Below are results for each of the seven marks of the Wesleyan tradition.

1. Human Freedom

Humans are free to help shape their own spiritual growth (or stagnation) because of prevenient grace. Spiritual maturation requires that we partner together with God. Seeing oneself as a co-worker together with God toward spiritual maturity implies an ownership of faith that is empowering. Therefore, spiritual maturity is an active endeavor. When we are empowered to work collaboratively with God to cope with daily problems, we live out this concept of human freedom found in Wesleyan spirituality.

In response to the statement, “I partner with God in order to cope with daily problems,” respondents showed a 30% increase with 60% saying they agree or strongly agree at the beginning of the semester and 90% saying they agree or strongly agree at the end of the semester. In two other survey questions aimed at measuring human freedom, respondents stayed the same. For example, in response to the statement, “Spiritual formation happens as we live our lives,” 80% of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly both before initiating Soul Conversations and at the end of a semester of practicing Soul Conversations.

⁵³ I do not have any one or two sources for this. These are seven marks arrived at after several years of reading on Wesleyan theology and praxis and are a result of my critical thinking and deductions. However, I believe they hold up well to scrutiny and my project advisor, Dr. Kevin Watson, seems to agree.

Paige Rouse points to the freedom she felt in her Soul Conversations group when she shared, “Soul Conversations are very structured, but that structure ends up providing way more freedom. Freedom is something everybody craves, so we try to avoid structure because we think that will be an inhibitor of freedom. But the open-ended structure of this group means there’s just so much awareness of God and awareness of self... so that we can cover so much spiritual ground in an hour.”

2. Corporate Spiritual Practices

With an emphasis on confession of sin, guidance and prayer, Wesleyans believe that we take an active, participatory role in our spiritual formation. We lean into practices and relationships that will put us in a position to receive God's grace. Corporate confession was the bedrock of John Wesley's 'societies'. Prayer is a working with God and others to determine where Holy Spirit is at work in the world around us and to determine our future. Prayer makes a difference in our healing, our spiritual maturity, our discernment, and our sensitivity to the Spirit. Meditation is listening to god's voice, on our own behalf and on the behalf of others. Guidance is an interactive friendship with God that uses discernment and sensitivity to the Spirit. This is sometimes a solitary (you and God) endeavor and sometimes involves the discernment of spiritual friends as well.

At the beginning of the semester 60% of respondents reported praying meaningfully with other Christians once a week or more. At the end of the semester 90% of respondents reported praying meaningfully with other Christians once a week or more. At the beginning of the semester 40% of respondents said that they practiced confession in the context of Christian community once a month or more. This practice increased by 60% over the course of the

semester with 100% of respondents practicing confession once a month or more, and 50% of those said that they practiced confession once a week. There was also a reported increase in seeking guidance from other Christians. Before initiating Soul Conversations, 40% of participants sought out guidance from others, and after a semester of Soul conversations 90% of participants said that they sought out guidance from other Christians. And while 70% of students already experienced spiritual growth as a result of prayer with other Christians, by the end of the semester 90% of students reported experiencing spiritual growth due to prayer with other believers. Student Paige Rouse said, “I consider Soul Conversations to be a sort of liturgy in my life that I keep coming back to again and again.”

3. Sanctification

God imparts righteousness making it possible to live a holy life which looks like a life of holy love. This perfection (not to be understood in a static sense) of love and obedience is a transformation that only God's grace through the Spirit can accomplish. But our active role is to put ourselves into positions where we are made aware of our sin and brokenness and where God's grace can change our innermost motivations and purify our intentions. Sanctification can work both gradually and instantaneously. The ongoing rhythm of reflective, corporate and personal disciplines is our cooperative work in this process over the long haul.

At the beginning of the semester 60% of participants indicated that they had a rhythm of practices that put them in a position to receive God's grace and by the end of the semester that percentage increased 40% to include every single participant (100%). Before beginning Soul Conversations, most respondents already agreed with statements like “I engage in practices that I believe give me a greater love for God,” (80%) and “Others would say that I am growing in my

obedience to God,” (80%). Never-the-less, it is still noteworthy that their agreement with these statements, after participating in Soul Conversations for a semester, became even stronger, with 90% agreement and 100% agreement, respectively.

So much of a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification has to do with a deep knowing of God’s love and living out of that love. And so, it is noteworthy that students reported, repeatedly, a greater sense of God’s unique love for them. Paige said, “I feel closer to God than I ever have. But at the same time, Soul Conversations has opened my eyes to God’s multifaceted-ness. I have more questions and more wonder and awe for God’s bigness than ever before.” Paige went on to share through tears, “My spiritual friends said yes to loving me. And they do that every week, and that’s huge. That’s the manifestation of God’s love in my life.” And Ben passionately poured out, “If I’m not sure that God loves me in a particular week, I show up to the group and people love me really, really well. And then I’m like, ‘Okay, yeah. You love me, God.’”

4. Transformative Relationships

Wesley, and Christ, emphasized loving one's neighbor as oneself and this affirms the importance of human relationships in the process of spiritual formation. There is a sacred space that exists when horizontal relationships with others join our vertical relationship with God. This is created when groups covenant to love one another, to be authentically vulnerable, to tell their whole story, to receive and honor the truth of another, and to define their friendships by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Key ideas here are vulnerability, holy love for another, and enjoying a friendship with God together. Wesleyan theology would maintain that sanctification must be a cooperative/collaborative endeavor, not only with God, but also with Christian community.

Spiritual maturity is not a solo sport. Friendships like these reflect who we really are and hold us accountable to what God calls us to become.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the greatest change Soul Conversations provoked was in the area of transformative relationships. At the beginning of the semester 70% of participants had a spiritual friend that they felt they could be their authentic self with and at the end of the semester 100% of participants attested to this kind of spiritual friendship in their lives. Before Soul Conversations 40% of students shared vulnerable things with trusted others every week, and by the end of a semester of Soul Conversations 70% shared vulnerably every week. By the end of the semester 100% of participants agreed that real relationships with other Christians were vital to their spiritual growth. Also, over the course of the semester of Soul Conversations there was a 20% increase in agreement with the statement, “vulnerable friendships with other people have helped me understand how to be closer with God,” so that 100% of students agreed. The vast majority at 90% indicated that they had friends, before beginning Soul Conversations, that they could share anything with. What is noteworthy is that the degree of agreement increased and, by end of the semester, 100% *strongly* agreed. Participant Ben Wyant shared that “We can have intimacy with God, maybe, what does that mean if we aren’t sharing that with other people? And so that’s what Soul Conversations look like. It’s a very practical and regular way that we can open up and share our relationship with God.”

The transformative power of spiritual friendship came up again and again in interviews with students and some of the most powerful moments in those interviews centered around this idea. Chandler shared, fighting back tears, that for most of his life he had given up on a deep friendship while simultaneously longing for it desperately. “Oh, they’ll come in my life and then they’ll just leave really quick,” Chandler explained. But he went on to say, “Soul Conversations

has taught me that it's possible for people to love me for who I am. Spiritual friendships are, in some way, a reflection of how God wants to be my friend." Still not finished, Chandler poured out, "They have been able to speak to the deepest parts of myself and the parts that I hate the most. They've shined light in these spaces, and that's a reflection of what God wants to do and does for me." Paige also shared with a smirk, "I'm kind of frustrated because I can't do shallow relationships anymore and that's because of Soul Conversations. I have seen what deep intimacy looks like with God and with other people. I just cannot be satisfied with anything less than that."

5. Religious Affections (Dispositions of the Heart)

Not to be confused with religious feelings or religious experience, religious affections are the intentions of the heart that the Spirit purifies through sanctification. Wesley distinguishes between belief, behavior and affections. While disciplining oneself to practice right behavior and agreeing to right belief are important contributors to spiritual maturity, the transformation of the heart by the Spirit is integral. For example, a Christian might believe that forgiveness is key to their spiritual maturity and a Christian might offer words of forgiveness to another. How is it, then, that this same Christian can still harbor bitterness in their heart? There is some length of spiritual ground to be covered that cannot be traversed by belief or behavior, but must also involve what Wesley calls the transformation of the heart's affections. There are some longings of the heart that only the Holy Spirit can change.

Some of the survey questions aimed at measuring any change in students' heart affections showed little or no difference between the beginning and the end of the semester. Unfortunately, one of the questions was confusing to students saying, "The key to my spiritual growth is

holding right beliefs (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided). This poorly worded question tried to get at Wesley's assertion that simply believing the right thing does not change us. However, most students either answered this question with 'undecided' or by agreeing. It is possible that students were hesitant to disagree with the statement because they do think right belief is very important. But while this question seems to have backfired, perhaps more helpful was the question, "I experience God changing my heart in ways that I would be unable to change all on my own." It is not surprising that students would agree with a statement like this. But more indicative of impact is the frequency with which students reported experiencing this kind of heart change. 30% reported experiencing this once every two to three weeks at the beginning of the semester, and 90% reported experiencing it every two to three weeks at the end of the semester.

Ben pointed to the change in the inclinations of his heart when he said, "There were times when I didn't want to grow closer to God, especially at 9:30pm on a Tuesday night. So many times, I just wished the group text didn't go off and I could just go to sleep early. But then I remembered that each week we meet with God. And that throughout this semester I can't go a week hiding from the face of God. That's something that I have done in my life, many times." Sawyer, on his way to baseball practice, sat down to share about his experience with Soul Conversations. He confessed, "My relationship with God has grown beyond compare. And that is what I've wanted for so long, I just have not known how to do it." Hayden shared a similar sentiment, saying, "My relationship with God has gotten so much better. Just being able to hear more clearly where God is directing me, that kind of stuff... it keeps my heart open."

6. The Role of the Holy Spirit

We tend to compartmentalize our conversations with others from our conversations with God. And yet, transformation happens at the intersection of these two. And standing in the center of that intersection is the Holy Spirit. Wesleyan theology teaches that God's grace (prevenient, convicting, saving, perfecting, sanctifying, glorifying grace) is imparted by the Spirit. The Spirit's role in the process of spiritual formation is paramount, and so gathering in Christian community that intentionally invites the Spirit in and relies on the guidance of the spirit in conversation with God and with each other puts us in a place to receive God's grace and to mature spiritually.

Meaningful conversations on a weekly basis with other Christians where both are aware of God's presence went from 40% at the beginning of the semester to 80% at the end of the semester. And the other 20% reported having these meaningful, spirit-filled conversations at least once a month. It is significant that 60% of participants admitted to compartmentalizing conversations with others from conversations with God before joining Soul Conversations. And equally significant that this percentage decreased to only 40% after a semester of Soul Conversations. Also, while at the beginning of the semester only 40% of students reported sharing weekly with other Christians in ways that relied on the Holy Spirit for guidance, by the end of the semester, 90% of students reported this communal reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Hayden shared about his Soul Conversations experience saying, "You don't see many small groups not have a specific leader. We don't have a leader. The Holy Spirit is our leader and we say what's on our hearts, not worried about what the other person thinks because they're going to listen and love you through it." Ben shared similarly, saying, "I think I am always disappointed with [small groups]... and so I heard about Soul Conversations and the idea that

this was supposed to be Spirit led. And I was like, maybe that's a factor I'm missing. What does it look like for God to lead a small group? And I was pleasantly surprised.”

7. Eschatological Optimism

One of the fundamental theological factors which shapes Wesleyan theology and Soul Conversations is the belief that a God of unconditional love invites us, individually and collectively, to live in partnership with God and one another to bring about the reign of God. Bringing about the reign of God includes growing into the people God has created us to be and it means creating a world that reflects God's justice and God's love. Soul conversations allow space for people to respond to this invitation. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, we have a confidence that God's victory over evil is already won. Therefore, there is a confident hope that the personal and societal transformation we long for and work toward are possible both now, and into the future in increasing measure. This optimistic view of God's reign in the present and the future assures us that the work of Soul Conversations has eternal value and will eventually be brought to completion.

Fifty percent of students, at the beginning of the semester, believed that the best years of their life were ahead of them. Interestingly, by the end of the semester, 90% of these same students believed that the best years of their life were ahead of them. And while an overwhelming majority of participants said that they dream about ways God can use them to change the world around them at 90%, by the end of the semester it is still worth noting that 100% of students said that they had these hopeful dreams.

When asked to consider what he might take with him from Soul Conversations, Hayden said, “Walking away, whatever that looks like in the future, I know I've got three friends that

love me for who I am. I look at everyone differently because of them. And I can be vulnerable with more people and know that it's okay to hurt sometimes." Paige shared, "These friends are the manifestation of God's love in my life. I get to be that for them too and that is the most precious experience. I feel like I can face anything."

* Appendix C has the complete list of survey questions organized under the above value headings.

* Appendix E has more detailed survey results.

* Appendix F has transcript excerpts from the qualitative interviews.

CHAPTER 6: Reflection and Limitations

Soul Conversations is a practice that carries a tremendous amount of promise. Similar to the way that spiritual friendship in Aelred of Rievaulx's day and Christian conferencing in John Wesley's day were antidotes for nominal Christianity, I believe that Soul Conversations is a Wesleyan expression of social holiness fit for the 21st century. The practice is not without its limitations, however. And its greatest limitation is evidenced in this study.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle for Soul Conversations is its initial attrition. That is, 46% of the students who indicated an interest in being a part of Soul Conversations never met for an initial group conversation. I believe there are two primary reasons for this. One reason is because the onus for gathering spiritual friends is on the participant(s). Because of the nature of deep intimacy required of Soul Conversations, it is not something that people can be assigned to indiscriminately. This initial responsibility may inhibit some from ever beginning. Secondly, while some students were initially intrigued by the idea of Soul Conversations, it is possible that when they learned the degree of commitment and consistency, they did not feel ready. Participants are encouraged to share their whole story at the very first meeting, and while this is intimidating for anyone, it may be too great of an obstacle for some.

However, it is likely that this limitation of Soul Conversations is also a tremendous asset. It is noteworthy that the attrition rate from interested students to those who participated was 46%. But it is also interesting that the attrition rate from students who met for their first conversation and students who continued meeting for the entirety of the semester was zero percent. Not one student, who hurdled the obstacles of initial commitment, left Soul Conversations. Put another way, the retention rate of Soul Conversations was 100%. In fact,

every single participant made it to every single weekly gathering for the entire semester. Attendance at these weekly Soul Conversations was one-hundred percent.

Now, compare that with typical small group attrition rates and attendance rates at Southern Wesleyan University and there is an unmistakable difference. Student Chandler Myers said it this way, “Other groups have been anywhere from ‘Hey, let’s hang out and talk about scripture’ to ‘Let’s talk about scripture so much we don’t interact with each other at all’, to ‘We’re going to say that we’re gonna do stuff, but we’re really just hanging out.” But [Soul Conversations] has been just so rich and so deep and it’s covered a lot of spiritual ground and spiritual growth in a relatively quick amount of time.” While typical small groups tend to ease people into community with low commitment and low risk, Soul Conversations asks people to do quite the opposite. The church has bought in to our culture’s hyper-individualism and on-demand expectations. In a culture where anything can be returned and everything comes with a no-money-down-risk-free trial, calling Christians to the deep, slow work of heart change is a difficult sell. And how can Christian practitioners, who have not done this careful, discerning labor of love themselves, call or inspire their people to it? The church wants to plug-and-play discipleship methods and Soul Conversations will not fit the bill. If contemporary small groups are a gradual slide into community, Soul Conversations means jumping into the deep end. Ben used this analogy first, when he shared, “If the whole process of relating with God and other people is swimming... then [Soul Conversations] is jumping in.”

If efficiency is measured by creating large-scale programs that can accommodate tremendous numbers of people at a time, then Soul Conversations will never be efficient. But if efficiency is measured by covering tremendous spiritual ground in a structured and Spirit-centered way, then perhaps it is. I found it fascinating that three students chose to use the word

‘efficient’ when describing Soul Conversations because of the spiritual ground they were able to cover in a concentrated amount of time. Perhaps in this way Soul Conversations are efficient, but they are not easy.

Encouraging students past the initial hurdles of finding group members and diving into the deep end of spiritual intimacy is a true challenge. But the students who leaned into this opportunity voiced, repeatedly, how meaningful and transformational this commitment was and how specifically it met longings for connection with God and others that they had carried. When asked if there was anything more he wanted to share about Soul Conversations, Hayden Peters did not hesitate and poured out his heart. He said, “I’ve learned that it’s OK to hurt sometimes and I don’t have to be alone in that hurt. I went to two years of college without doing this and I thought I was fine. And now Soul Conversations has given me something I didn’t even know I needed. Something that I desired, but that I didn’t even think I could get, at least not in this capacity.”

Soul Conversations represent a Wesleyan understanding of the Christian life. Yet, stepping into this space is not for the faint of heart. It requires a desire to do something painful, an awareness of the brokenness we are in, and a desire for the beauty that is on the other side. Some call this tension holy desperation. Student Paige Rouse put it better than I could, when she stated simply, “I think Soul Conversations are the birthplace of revival. I’ve experienced this in my own life. And now my heart is burdened for my campus and my country and the world. I will continue to do Soul Conversations for the rest of my life, period.” Perhaps Paige is on to something. Aelred of Rievaulx brought tremendous renewal to his Abbey. Wesley brought unprecedented renewal to 18th century England. Renewal movements, throughout history, have

had little room for nominal Christians. No doubt, I stumbled on to Soul Conversations out of a desire for personal renewal in my own life, and continue to find it there.

Despite the somewhat unwieldy and non-attractational nature of Soul Conversations, I cannot give up on them. As I sat in room 202 in Nicholson-Mitchell and listened to students articulate the impact that Soul Conversations had on their lives over the course of only one semester, I was in awe. Tears streamed down several students faces as they expressed a love for God and a love for others that they had never known. Without fail, student after student shared the way their longing for more of Christ was met in profound and unexpected ways. Students talked about an explosion of discernment, not having been able to see God anywhere to suddenly seeing God everywhere.

As I write this last section, a new semester has started. I have not promoted Soul Conversations on campus or invited any students into Soul Conversations, as I did last semester. And yet, all the groups that were a part of this study continue. In addition, seven new groups are forming; four groups including fifteen men and three groups including nine women. One of these is a group of young men on the university's baseball team. Students are sharing their transformative experiences with other students and word is spreading. They reach out to me and ask me how to start their own group. I was meeting with one young woman and simply walking her through the guide, explaining the structure and process. I looked up to see tears streaming down her face. "I have been longing for this for such a long time," she barely whispered.

The limitations of Soul Conversations reflect, perhaps, the greatest obstacles to spiritual transformation itself. We like the idea of being on a journey of faith if it does not require too much faith. We dream of the promised land, but refuse to leave our current comfort. We want to make room for God if it does not impact our overcrowded calendars. We want to know ourselves

as long as we do not see anything ugly. We love celebrating the resurrection if we do not do any dying. We make plans to save up for the pearl of great price so long as we do not have to sell everything we have.

The reality is that spiritual transformation together in Christ's presence for the sake of others is missing in so many people's experience of church discipleship. And while Soul Conversations is not the only answer to this longing at the heart of some Christians (and dare I say non-Christians) today, it is a promising, faithful, Wesleyan practice that puts us in a place to receive God's transforming grace.

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Soul Conversations Guide

Promises we make to each other:

- ⇒ Confidentiality
- ⇒ Honesty & vulnerability
- ⇒ Consistency
- ⇒ No advice giving or 'that reminds me of...'
- ⇒ Keeping the time

Centering: becoming present to God, yourself, your friends

3-5 minutes

1. Pray to open your time of silence.
2. Now ask God to focus what you want to share during 'soul care questions.'
 - Imagine 'all the things' swirling around like autumn leaves on a windy day. Imagine you and God, together, allowing them to fall to the ground. Imagine tucking a specific one in your pocket to share with your friends later.
 - What is the freest you've been this week? The least free you've been this week?

Scripture: listening

5 minutes

1. Choose a verse or a short passage (not too long).
2. Take turns reading this passage out loud, maybe in different translations.
3. Is there a word or an idea that stands out to you?
4. Ask God how it might connect to your everyday life.

Prayer: focusing

5-10 minutes

1. Someone in your group offers an area of focused prayer. It can be anything.
2. Each person prays (silently or out loud) around the place where the topic intersects their daily lives.

Soul Care Questions: reflecting

15 minutes for each group member

1. Sharer talks – friends listen: 8 minutes
 - Set the timer for 8 minutes. The first sharer has all this time to unpack their situation. Friends listen deeply to the sharer.
2. God talks – friends listen: 2 minutes
 - Friends take two minutes to pray/reflect about what has been shared and listen for any promptings from the Spirit.
3. Friends talk - the sharer listens and then responds some more: 5 minutes
 - The friends ask the sharer any questions that they feel might help point the sharer to God's presence in their situation.
 - a. Resist trying to control the conversation, resist giving advice.
 - b. You may find one or two of these questions helpful.
 - Can you tell us more about that?
 - How did that make you feel?
 - What nudges from God do you sense?
 - How would you like God to help you in this?
 - Where is God in this situation?
 - What is the Spirit whispering to your spirit right now?
 - There are questions you can ask the sharer to close out their time in a helpful way. Choose one
 - What is God's invitation in all this?
 - What is God inviting you to do, hear, be, or let go of?

Close: blessing

3 minutes

- One person prays out loud over the sharer.
- The next sharer takes his/her turn and you repeat the conversation/reflecting process until everyone has had an opportunity.

Appendix B

Soul Conversations Extended Version

Soul Conversations is not a typical small group. It is not so much about studying information or finding fellowship and accountability. It is a listening group... we listen carefully and deeply to one another and to God. The goal of soul conversations is not to answer all of life's questions, but to draw closer to God amid the questions. The ideal group size is three to four people.

Promises we make to each other:

- Confidentiality
- Honesty & vulnerability
- Consistency
- No advice giving or 'that reminds me of...'
- Keeping the time

Centering: *becoming present to God, yourself, your friends*

3-5 minutes

1. Imagine God welcoming you in.
2. Ask God to focus what you want to share.
3. Try one of the following exercises to help you quiet your soul and discern what God wants you to bring to your conversation today.
 - a. Imagine 'all the things' swirling around like autumn leaves on a windy day. Imagine you and God, together, allowing them to fall to the ground. Imagine tucking a specific one in your pocket to share with your friends later.
 - b. Think through four spheres: inner self – relationships – current situation – outer world. Is there an area that is 'noisier' or 'out of balance' than the others? Why? This may be where the invitation is for today.
 - c. Parker Palmer wrote "The soul is like a wild animal... it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around." Imagine God gently coaxing you out of the bushes, asking the same simple question God asked Adam and Eve, "*where are you?*"
4. OR try asking yourself one of the following questions.
 - a. What is the truth about what is happening in your life right now (not what you think should be happening)? The place where we actually are... THIS is where we can find God.
 - b. Matthew 6:21 says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What is consuming your attention right now? This may be the same thing your heart is treasuring right now.
 - c. What is something you desire or long for in your life right now? Where does this desire come from?
 - d. What is the freest you've been this week? The least free you've been this week?
 - e. Where is the voice of your inner critic so loud, today, that you can't hear the whispers of the Holy Spirit?

Scripture: *listening*

5 minutes

1. This is less of an informational reading and more of a formational reading of Scripture. You're not breaking the verse or passage down, but listening imaginatively.
2. Choose a verse or a short passage (not too long).
3. Two or three of you read this passage out loud, maybe in different translations.

4. Spend a minute reflecting on the passage (can be silent or out loud). Is there a word or an idea that stands out to you?
5. Talk to God about how it makes you think or feel.
6. Ask God how it might connect to your everyday life.

Prayer: *focusing*

5-10 minutes

- Someone in your group offers an area of focused prayer. It can be anything. Here are some ideas:
 - Friend or family member far from God
 - A person you know struggling with depression
 - A current event that has recently hit the news
 - A word like 'rest' or 'patience'.
- Launch immediately into prayer, no explanation is needed first. Each person prays around the place where the topic intersects their daily lives.

Soul Care Questions: *reflecting*

15 minutes for each group member

You are not solving problems for each other or answering questions. You are simply helping one another find God in their situation. The Holy Spirit is the center of this time. The sharer is not center stage, the friends are not center stage... the Spirit takes center stage as we seek discernment by opening up and by asking gentle questions that point us toward God. You are opening yourself up to the Holy Spirit so that Spirit can draw out and help you see the truth that is already there (John 16:13). Depending how the Spirit leads, this can be a time of confession, forgiveness, encouragement, release, freedom, joy, celebration or grieving together.

1. **Sharer talks – friends listen: 8 minutes**
 - a. Set the timer for 8 minutes. The first sharer has all this time to unpack their situation. We often start out sharing practical things... but as the minutes go by you will begin to uncover the longings, desires, motivations, hopes and pain behind the logistics. This is where the Holy Spirit meets us. Friends listen deeply to the sharer.
 - a. The sharer may already know what he/she wants to talk about, coming out of the 'centering' time above. If not, simply answer the question, "how is it with my soul?"
 - b. To the extent of their ability to do so, the sharer is open and honest.
2. **God talks – friends listen: 2 minutes**
 - b. Everyone takes two minutes to pray and reflect about what has been shared and listen for any promptings from the Spirit. You may be chomping at the bit to say something or ask something. Check first with the Spirit and see if this is something that will be helpful to the sharer.
3. **Friends talk: the sharer listens and shares some more – 5 minutes**
 - c. The friends ask the sharer any questions that they feel might help point the sharer to God's presence in their situation.
 - a. Resist trying to control the conversation or other people's thoughts and trust the Holy Spirit to direct the conversation.
 - b. Resist giving advice, unless it's asked for. Instead ask questions, help the sharer make connections and offer affirmation.
 - c. Here are some good, open-ended questions to help them discern God in the middle of their situation. Don't ask all these questions! Usually one or two is enough.
 - i. Can you tell us more about that?
 - ii. How did that make you feel? (Feelings are our honest response to life. Sometimes feelings are gift showing us where God's truth has perhaps penetrated our mind, but not our heart)
 - iii. In your quietest moments, what nudges from God do you sense?

- iv. How would you like God to help you in this?
 - v. Where is God in this situation?
 - vi. What do you think the Spirit is whispering to your spirit right now?
- d. Soul conversations are not about finding answers and tying things up with nice-neat bows. But it is good to help one another come to a place of closure. Here are questions you can ask the sharer to close out their time in a helpful way. Choose one.
- i. Where is God's invitation in all this?
 - ii. What is God inviting you to do, hear, be, or let go of?

Close: *blessing*

One person prays out loud over the sharer.

The next sharer takes his/her turn and you repeat the conversation/reflecting process until everyone has had an opportunity.

Keep in mind...

- One of the best things we can do is just be silent. We tend to want to fill up all the space with talking. But that leaves little room for God to speak. Do not be afraid to invite the sharer and the group to be quiet for a minute as you listen.
- Do you feel stuck? Sometimes the sharer doesn't have any more words and a follow up question doesn't quite fit. Here are two questions you could ask if the group feels stuck.
 - How do you sense we should help you right now?
 - Is there any question you would like us to ask you?

Appendix C

Measurement Tool Survey QuestionsHuman freedom

1. I partner with God in order to cope with daily problems. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
2. Spiritual maturity is something that just happens to us as we live our lives. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. I am free to help shape my own spiritual growth. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
4. I have an active role to play in my own spiritual growth. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

Corporate spiritual practices

1. About how often do you pray with other Christians? (At least once a day, Several times a week, Once a week, Less than once a week, At least once a year, Never)
2. There are people in my life who I can go to for spiritual advice. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. About how often do you practice confession to God in the context of Christian community? That is, rather than private confession, you practice confession that is heard and received by other Christians? (At least once a day, Several times a week, Once a week, Less than once a week, At least once a year, Never)
4. I experience spiritual growth as a result of prayer with other Christians. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

5. I believe confession of sin is a private thing practiced alone with God. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
6. In order to cope with daily problems, I seek the guidance of other Christians that I trust. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

Transformative relationships

1. About how often do you share something with someone else that makes you feel vulnerable? (Never, Less than once a year, About once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2-3 times a month, Nearly every week, Every week)
2. I have 2-3 friends who I could share anything with, good or bad. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. I do not have anyone in my life that keeps me accountable. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
4. I do not have anyone in my life that knows my whole story, the good and the bad. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
5. Real relationships with other Christians are good, but they are not a vital part of my spiritual growth. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
6. Vulnerable friendships with other people have helped me understand how to be better friends with God. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

7. When another person shares something vulnerable with me, my response is to pray with that person. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
8. When someone shares something vulnerable with me, I can be trusted to have discretion and not share that truth with others. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

Sanctification

1. I engage in practices that give me a greater love for God. (At least once a day, Several times a week, Once a week, Less than once a week, At least once a year, Never)
2. I regularly engage in practices that give me a greater love for other people. (At least once a day, Several times a week, Once a week, Less than once a week, At least once a year, Never)
3. Others would say that I am growing in my obedience to God. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
4. I have a rhythm, in my life, of practices that put me in a position to receive God's grace. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

Religious Affections

1. I sometimes have desires that are contradictory to what I believe is right. (Never, Less than once a year, About once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2-3 times a month, Nearly every week, Every week)

2. The key to my spiritual growth is holding right beliefs. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. Sometimes I struggle with temptation and have found that if I try hard to do the right thing, the temptation will go away. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
4. There are some things about me that I am incapable of changing on my own. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
5. I experience God changing my heart in ways that I would be unable to change all on my own. (Never, Less than once a year, About once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2-3 times a month, Nearly every week, Every week)

The role of the Holy Spirit

1. I have meaningful conversations with other Christians where we are both aware of God's presence as we share. (Never, Less than once a year, About once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2-3 times a month, Nearly every week, Every week)
2. I usually compartmentalize my conversations with others from my conversations with God. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. I share with other Christians in settings where we intentionally rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance. (Never, Less than once a year, About once or twice a year, Several times a year, About once a month, 2-3 times a month, Nearly every week, Every week)

Eschatological Optimism

1. I am excited about what God is doing in my life. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
2. When I think about the future, I have confidence God will see me through whatever lies ahead. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
3. Sometimes I wonder if the best years of my life are already behind me. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)
4. I dream about ways that God can use me to change the culture around me. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, undecided)

The need for Soul Conversations:

Previous experience with conventional discipleship forms:

1. I have tried to engage in groups with the purpose of spiritual growth before, and I have often felt disappointed.
2. I long for authentic relationships with other Christians, but have had trouble finding them in groups designed for spiritual growth.

Believing rightly and perceived spiritual maturity.

1. My beliefs about God and Scripture line up with what most Christians believe to be right or orthodox.
2. My Christian beliefs are important to me, but they don't seem to affect the way I live very much.

A longing for intimacy and an ability to have healthy relationships

1. Being open and honest with others has, in the past, resulted in pain and hurt for me.
2. I am good at discerning when to take risks to share vulnerably and when to be more private.
3. I am good at knowing if a person is trustworthy or not.
4. It is easy for me to open up to anyone and share anything about my life.
5. I prefer to keep my deepest thoughts and feelings to myself.

Appendix D

SHARING YOUR WHOLE STORY (start to finish)

Obviously, you can't share your ENTIRE story in the time allotted. But more than simply sharing your testimony or sharing all the places you have lived... this practice involves sharing all the things (big and small) that have shaped you into the person you are today.

HOW DOES OUR GROUP DO THIS?

1. Decide together how much time each person will have to share their story. Then have a timekeeper who sets a timer and keeps the group moving.
2. Your group may need to meet more than one time to get through everyone in your group.
3. Make sure you factor in between 5 and 10 minutes at the end of each person's sharing time. When your friend has finished sharing, everyone:
 - a. Takes a moment (not long... maybe 30 seconds) to pray and ask God what God would like you to share. Maybe you see a pattern or a theme running through their story that you want to affirm. Maybe you have words of encouragement that God wants to you to share. Maybe there is a follow up question you feel nudged to ask.
 - b. Take a few minutes to share your encouragement with your friend.
 - c. Pray for your friend. Your group can even lay hands on the sharer, if you feel comfortable.
4. Maybe each person has 30 minutes to share and then 5-10 minutes for feedback/prayer. If there are four people in your group, then you'll need to block out two 1 ½ hour meetings.
5. The only rule (other than confidentiality, OF COURSE!) is no advice-giving or "that reminds me of the time..." responses. The group's posture is one of listening and then reflecting back God's love.

HOW DO I GO ABOUT SHARING MY 'WHOLE' STORY?

Think about your life in terms of:

1. Early childhood
 2. Later childhood
 3. Teen years
 4. Young adult years until now
- It's good to ask yourself what was happening in the INNER WORLD and the OUTER WORLD in each of these seasons.
 - Next, think in terms of "formative experiences". These could be positive or negative, but what are the experiences that worked to shape your identity, your fears, your insecurities, your callings, your passions and your view of God.
 - Finally, think around the idea of ongoing themes, ongoing struggles, ongoing sins, and ongoing opportunities that keep on showing up in your life.

Jot down some notes on a piece of paper or an index card to help you jog your memory when it's time to share. Be willing to take risks in terms of vulnerability. Be willing to open up all of who you are – God will meet you in that place of honesty.

Appendix E

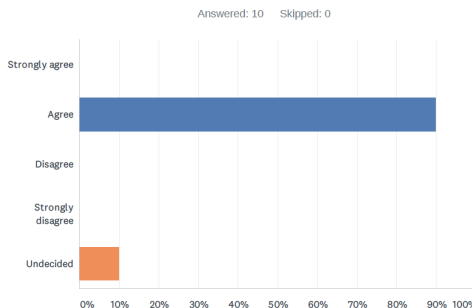
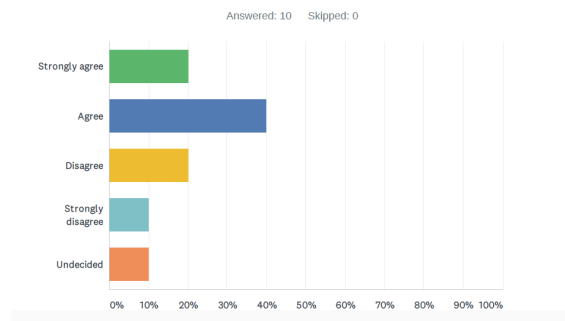
Below is a sample of results from survey questions (complete list of survey questions in appendix C). The left column shows student responses before participating in Soul Conversations. The right column shows student responses after participating in Soul Conversations.

Before

After

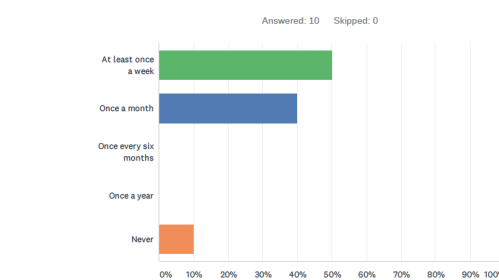
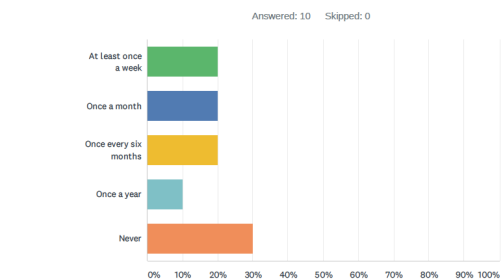
Q36 I partner with God in order to cope with daily problems.

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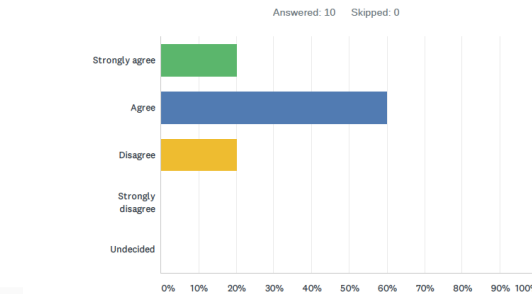
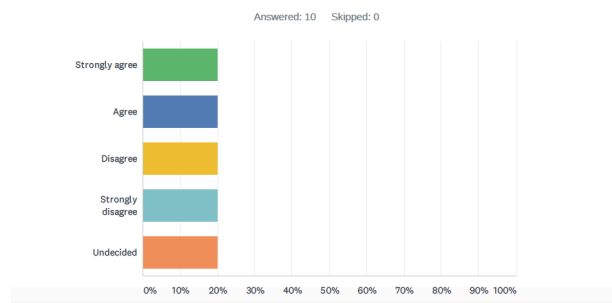
Q44 About how often do you practice confession of specific sins to God in the context of Christian community? That is, rather than private confession, you practice confession that is heard and received by other Christians?

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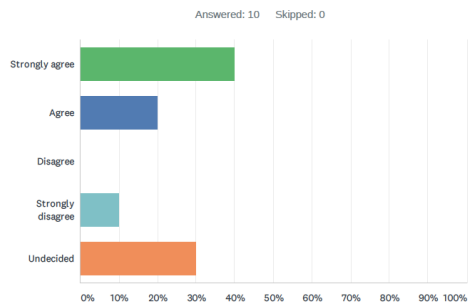


Q41 In order to cope with daily problems, I seek the guidance of other Christians that I trust.

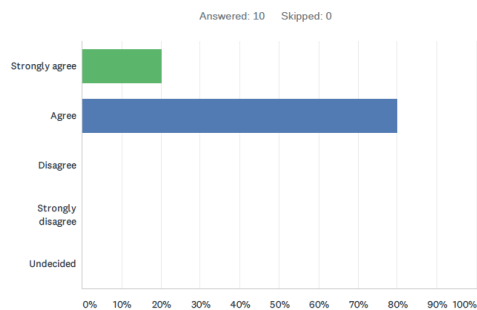
Q41 In order to cope with daily problems, I seek the guidance of other Christians that I trust.



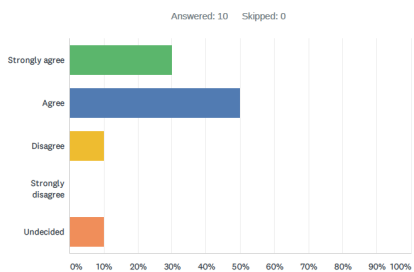
Q40 I have a rhythm, in my life, of practices that I believe put me in a position to receive God's grace.



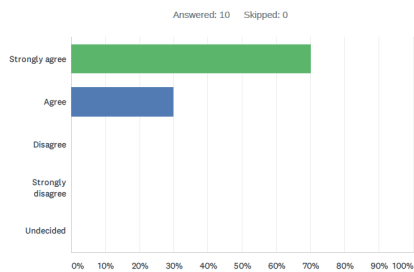
Q40 I have a rhythm, in my life, of practices that I believe put me in a position to receive God's grace.



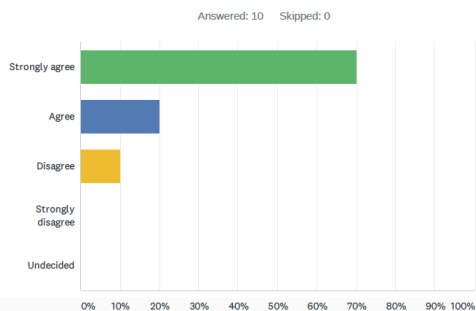
Q50 Vulnerable friendships with other people have helped me understand how to be closer with God.



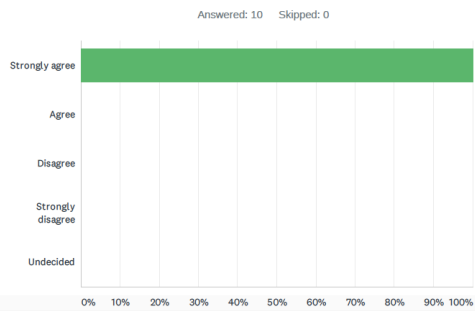
Q50 Vulnerable friendships with other people have helped me understand how to be closer with God.



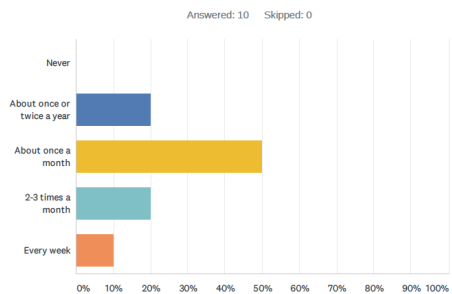
Q42 I have 2-3 friends who I could share anything with, good or bad.



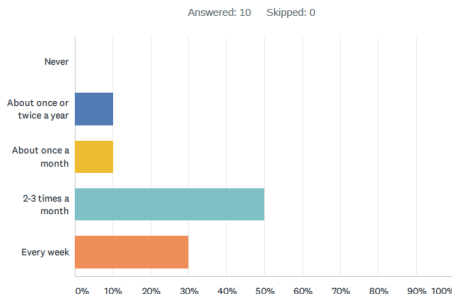
Q42 I have 2-3 friends who I could share anything with, good or bad.



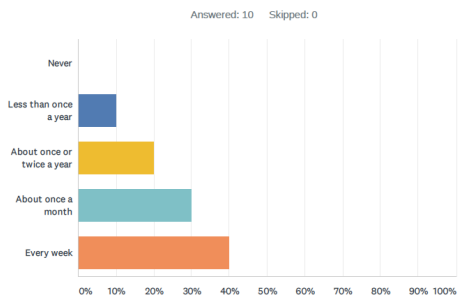
Q43 I experience God changing my heart in ways that I would be unable to change all on my own.



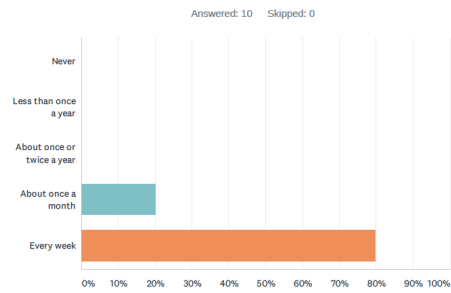
Q43 I experience God changing my heart in ways that I would be unable to change all on my own.



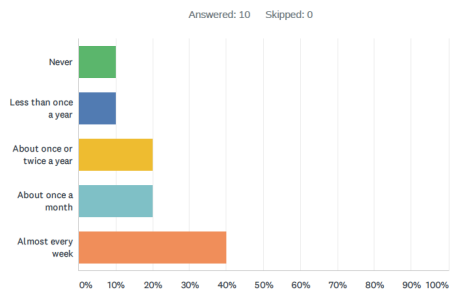
Q15 I have meaningful conversations with other Christians where we are both aware of God's presence as we share.



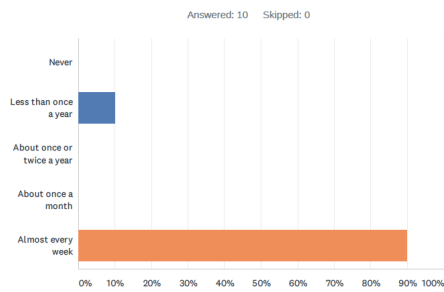
Q15 I have meaningful conversations with other Christians where we are both aware of God's presence as we share.



Q33 I share with other Christians in settings where we intentionally rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance.



Q33 I share with other Christians in settings where we intentionally rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance.



Appendix F

ABBREVIATED QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Chandler Myers :

It's not your typical Bible study. It's not an average small group. I think a lot of that is because it's so focused on, let's listen to what God has to say and let's just talk about that.

Paige Rouse:

I don't know if you would consider this, but I consider it the liturgy in my life something that just is really comforting to go back to and, so, yeah.

Ben Wyant:

I think that longing, if I were to try to pinpoint it, it wouldn't just be to have deep relationship with God, but that's it, that's the desire, but also to have that with other people. Somebody always would say to me, I forget whose words these are, but they really ring true in my head, is that the greatest gift you can give humanity, or other people, is your intimacy with God. And so, yeah, we can have intimacy with God, but what does that mean if we aren't sharing it with people? And so, that's what that Soul Conversations group looks like is, it's a very practical and regular way that we can open up and share our relationship with God.

Chandler Myers :

The best way to explain Soul Conversations is that it's a conversation between each other, but also with God. God is talking to each of you, for each of you and through each of you.

Paige Rouse:

Soul Conversations has taught me that as a daughter of God, God wants to speak to me as an individual, but He also wants to do that corporately, and corporately doesn't have to be in the dark, in a huge worship service. Corporate can be with three other people and that's not cheating me out of the experience of hearing from God. That's actually a gift that I can partake in, in hearing from Him. As His daughter, I've just really benefited from learning how to be His daughter amidst community like that, like Soul Conversations. I feel like I can sit down with somebody, know them, I know what to ask and I know what to listen for. And when I pray for them, it just seems like this sharper discernment. So, I think Soul Conversations ultimately is really sharpened by discernment for people, and for myself, which is awesome.

Hayden Peters:

I think the whole reason behind why I said yes, is cause it wasn't, I'm saying yes to fake friendship, I'm saying yes to vulnerability, and to be uncomfortable and to just open up with no boundaries. Like having a specific set aside time to say, "All right, I'm getting super vulnerable. I'm going to get uncomfortable and I'm just going to be honest," and that's what the group was based around. I'd never had anything like that before. I've been in small groups, where you have to work your way up to it, but I mean, the first time we met, we sat down and we went through our stories, and just being open like that is why I like Soul Conversations. That's why I'm a part

of it. That's why we made it happen again this year, is because it was just necessary to have that group, to be just so open with each other.

Hayden Peters:

I would explain it as, not simplified, but a different type of small group, but it's not really a small group. In a small group, you think like, "Oh, we get together. We have fun. We hang out," and we do that. But what this is based around, is soul conversations, like how our soul is doing. In order to be a part of this, you have to find people you trust, find people that you can love, find people that you can be open with, and you have to get vulnerable and you have to be discerning to the Holy Spirit. And you have to understand that some days you're going to go in not wanting to be there, some days you're going to go in there upset, or just down or just carrying weight, and you can't hide that, and you can't go in and say, "Oh, I need to say something, but I can't."

Hayden Peters:

You have to go in, knowing that, what's on your heart, what God is calling you to speak to, you have to be able to say that. You have to be able to walk in and say, "This is what I need to talk about tonight." And you're going to learn to trust those people. You're going to learn to love those people and you're going to learn that they love you and they trust you, and that they're going to point you back to God, no matter what you're going through.

Ben Wyant:

I think that you can hide from God at church on a Sunday morning. It's really sad, but I mostly say it from my own experience. I show up to church. I serve, even. I have conversations with people. I sit through the sermon. I go through worship. I get out, go to my car, go to lunch, and I don't have a meaningful connection with God.

Ben Wyant:

I believe in the power of deep, vulnerable small groups, but I think that I am always disappointed with the imperfections of them, or have been throughout my time, throughout my life. I've just always been disappointed in, oh, well, if people just aren't opening up or people were opening up, but this isn't scripture focused, or something like that, or somebody feels pressured to something.

Ben Wyant:

And so then I heard about Soul Conversations and the idea that this was supposed to be God or Spirit led, and I was like, maybe that's a factor I'm missing is, I'm probably disappointed because all of these people are leading small groups, and people are imperfect. What does it look like for God to lead a small group? I still was hesitant to trust or, not to trust, I think I went all in with the group, but I kept my expectations low, just because of my experience with small groups, but was pleasantly surprised.

Chandler Myers :

I went to Sawyer, and I said, "Hey, here's this thing. You want to learn more about God, right? You want to get closer to Him?" He's like, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, well, here it is." I also thought of Russell, and I said, "Okay, here we go." And so, I asked him. I was like, "Hey, I don't know

how you'd feel about this, it might be a little weird. It might sound weird, I don't know. But do you want to get closer to God?" And he said, "Yeah, I do." And so, I told him about it, and he was like, "Yeah, let's try it. Let's do it." And so we did.

Alicia Brosco:

You do go deeper, pretty fast. It's not like, you get to know each other for four months and then you start to get to the real stuff. It's right off the bat. You're like, yeah, this is what's going on. It doesn't give you an opportunity to hide. Being on a small campus, it's really easy to put on the face and say, "Oh, yeah. Everything is great." But inside you're like, "No, everything isn't great." It forces you to be real with yourself, and with others, and with God, getting caught up and just going, going, going, the work. I think it's important to take that moment and stop and reflect on what you're doing, where you are with God and where you are with others.

Sawyer Price:

Me and a few other guys who's reading, we started a Bible study group for the baseball team. Basically, we wanted everybody to come out there. It's funny because I approached them about what we do in Soul Conversations. I said why don't we take this route towards Bible study because it's easy when people say like, "Hey, let's go to Bible study." A lot of people are a little resistant, like "Ah, I don't want to go to Bible study." We want this to feel more like Soul Conversations is. Every time I come out of the room with Soul Conversations, my chest feels much lighter. I feel lifted almost in a sense of where I'm in a good mood, I'm happy, and I got to learn about God just a little bit more every single day.

Sawyer Price:

And I would definitely say it's different, cause I'm, like again, you're a little bit more vulnerable like you said. And with smaller groups, a lot of times people think of smaller groups maybe 5 to 10 people where you limit it at two to three, which is really cool cause then that gives you a chance to realize "Hey, these two are the only two that are going to know about this, and it gives me a chance to actually open up and go on a deeper level with them." I would definitely say that Soul Conversations is very special, at least as special to me, and I definitely, if I could, I would definitely convince everybody to do it.

Hayden Peters:

You don't see many small groups not have a specific leader. We don't have a leader. We meet knowing one person is going to bring scripture, one's bringing prayer, one's keeping the time and the other is just there. And that rotates every week. And so, we don't have a leader. We don't have someone that says, all right, this is what we're doing this week. We know we're coming in, and we're going to say what's on our hearts, not worried about what the other person thinks because they're there to listen and to love you through it.

Hayden Peters:

We don't walk into group thinking, I can't tell them about this. We walk into the group; I can't wait to tell him about this cause I know they're going to pray about it. I know they're going to love me through it. They're even going to give me advice if I want it. It's not I'm walking in to being shamed. I'm walking into being loved, and yeah, that's what does it for me.

Chandler Myers :

I think the story, like sharing your story, I think that piece is huge. Honestly, I think it's foundational because if you don't share your story, if the people who you're in the group with don't know about you, they don't know where you're coming from, you're going to have to explain a lot more... I don't know, it just brings in this element of these people know me, they know the good and the bad. It brings in an element of trust, but also a safety, like, yeah, I know that they know about me.

Chandler Myers :

Other groups have been anywhere from, "Hey, let's just hang out and talk about scripture" or "Let's completely talk about it and not interact with each other at all" or "We're going to say that we're going to do stuff, but we're really just hanging out and talking." So I don't know, I've been a part of a bunch of different groups that looked very differently, but this one has been just so rich and so deep and it's covered a lot of spiritual ground and spiritual growth in really a relatively quick amount of time.

Paige Rouse:

Soul Conversations is very structured, and I think that's what makes it ultimately very different from anything I've ever done before. Soul Conversations, in comparison to maybe a discipleship group, or a small group, with that structure, there ends up being way more freedom. I found that in a discipleship group or a small group, that freedom is something everybody craves, but ultimately, we try to avoid structure because we think that will be an inhibitor of freedom of the Holy Spirit to move and speak.

Paige Rouse:

I've been really surprised by how God has completely moved within structure and, yeah, I also think that there's just so much awareness of God in Soul Conversations, as well as awareness of self. That all happens in an hour. I say this every week with my group, but we cover so much spiritual ground in an hour and I've been a part of so many groups, called different things, that want to cover a lot of spiritual ground, but we just don't because there's no structure. I could spend a month, two months, three months, in a group that wants to cover spiritual ground, but by the end of those three months, we probably have covered the same amount of ground that my Soul Conversations group covers an hour.

Ben Wyant:

It's the whole process, relating with God and relating with other people is swimming. Sharing your story is jumping in, from the dock or whatever, jumping into the pool. Again, I don't think it's necessary. I think for the large part of my life, I didn't do it. I didn't share my whole story until I was... I had a youth pastor and probably once or twice a year I would go to him and I'd share with him this little slice or this little nugget of my story.

Ben Wyant:

So similar back to that swimming metaphor, I was slowly getting more and more comfortable in the water and inching my way deeper to the point where I would be able to swim. Maybe for some people that's what it takes, and that's okay. You'll get there. But it happens a lot quicker if

you just jump in the deep end. A lot less painlessly, or a lot more painlessly because that inching was, I mean it was good, it was moving me towards God and other people all throughout my middle and high school years, but it was also agony because it was just taking so much time.

Hayden Peters:

If you were to look at us, at the beginning of the year, and say these four would be very close, very good friends, people might laugh at you. They're like, there's no way. Ben's a media comm major. He likes art. He likes writing. That's who Ben is. Madison's an athlete. She works in the post office. Paige is a religion major, Hayden's a psychology major. You would look at it and just be like that's just doesn't work. And what Soul Conversations has taught and brought to me is friendship that I didn't know I needed, but also friendship that's not forced. You're told so much of who you can hang out with, you're told so much of who you can be around, your like interests should define who you'd be around. And that's not true with this group.

Sawyer Price:

It brings you closer to people. Like Chandler, he mentioned the fact that the thing about this, like back in the day I probably never would have been friends with the baseball team or anything like that. It gives us chance to grow closer together. And I think that's really cool because there are people who don't play sports and there are some times where a disconnect where there's an athlete and a non-athlete, and I think that's really cool because, end all be all, God says love one another. Bringing together people who normally wouldn't be together, I think that's really cool. Chandler and Russell, I know Russell's a manager of the baseball team, but I love those two to death and I just met them two years ago, and I have grown in that friendship substantially. So, I think it's really cool.

Speaker 7:

Having friendships that go deep like that was something that was new to me. I really appreciated that; I'd been praying for those kinds of friendships for a long time. Having God being a part of those relationships is something that I really value. That's been really awesome.

Ben Wyant:

Hayden, I've known him since middle school. We've been in small groups together. That small group that I told you about, my high school small group, that one of the things I was disappointed in was that people weren't opening up and I felt that people weren't being real with each other. He was in that group. So, what did it mean for us now to be in college and to be in this small group led by the Spirit, promoting super deep vulnerability? I was like, what don't I know about him? Like or what doesn't? Yeah, I knew what he didn't know about me, but it was more like... I guess seeing the redemption there in that relationship was really cool. Not that, I mean there's nothing I have against him, even throughout my years, I didn't not like or anything, but it was just a matter of we were in a small group and we weren't growing closer to God and growing closer to each other together.

Ben Wyant:

And then for us now to be in this Spirit led small group, and for that to be happening, I think it's a pretty beautiful thing. Even to the degree of when we shared our stories with each other, it felt like, "Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Ben."

Chandler Myers :

Some of the biggest things I've learned from Soul Conversations has been that spiritual friendship is real and can happen. Like that deep relationship with other people who know you, and see you for who you really are, and love you for all of it. That's real and possible, and for a long time I didn't think friendship like that was ever going to be possible for me.

Chandler Myers :

There was a large chunk of my life where I had given up on having any kind of deep friendship, cause I'm like, Oh, they'll come in my life and then they'll just leave really quick. One of the biggest things that I've learned from Soul Conversations is that people can love me for who I am, and be there for me and they're not going to go anywhere. There's this idea that the spiritual friendships that take place that happen to grow, they are in some way a reflection of how God wants to be our friend.

Chandler Myers :

For me, what I've seen in my friends is so much grace and love and they've been able to speak to the deepest parts of myself and the parts that I hate the most. They've shined light in the spaces to where it's... It's given me a space to be okay with those things and to actually, I don't know, not embrace, but be okay with them. That's a reflection of what God wants to do and does for me. Whether I'm in a Soul Conversation group with somebody, intentionally doing this or not, I think I'm going to bring that element of asking "God, what do you want to say to this person right now?" Or even being able to ask somebody else, "What does God say about that for you? What does God want you talk about or look at in your life right now?"

Chandler Myers :

Just bringing people more awareness that God is in their present situation and wants to speak to them.

Paige Rouse:

Because we intercede for each other in such rich and deep ways so quickly, not in a shallow way quickly but in an effective way quickly, we are able to intercede for each other quicker and more effectively. I am so thankful for that because just as I do that for them, they also do that for me.

Sawyer Price:

Sometimes it's easy for people to say, "Hey man, I actually care for you." But it's a different level to actually get in that room, get in that space, and actually, to be honest with you, cry with each other. You can ask them, there's been multiple times where I've been explaining things and I've just lost it. Being able to release that emotion and actually not have them judge me, shows me what true friendship really is, and shows me that they've got my back no matter what. They're not going to judge me, no matter what I tell them. So, it's just awesome and it definitely shows me what true friendship is.

Hayden Peters:

It was difficult at first, to gauge whether or not we could do it, but after the first meeting you could tell like, this is it, like this is real. This is going to be very good.

Paige Rouse:

I'm kind of frustrated because I can't do shallow relationships anymore. I'm totally dissatisfied with shallow relationships and that's because of Soul Conversations. I have seen what deep intimacy looks like, with God, just the two of us as well as amidst, with other people. I just cannot be satisfied with anything less than that.

Alicia Brosco:

In later weeks, something would come up in my spiritual walk and I would be like, "Oh, do I really want to talk about this? Do I really want to go there?" But I'm like, they already know anyway. If there was like history to that piece or anything that I was afraid of sharing for whatever reason. Having that already out there I think really helped me to not be like, "Oh, I want to talk about this, but I don't" cause they already knew. We've grown really close and my relationship with God has gotten so much better. Just being able to hear more clearly where He's directing me to, that kind of stuff. I definitely want to keep those connections open, keep my heart open of course.

Ben Wyant:

If I'm not sure that God loves me on a particular week, but I show up to the group and the people love me really, really well, then I'm like, okay, yeah. Yeah, you love me God.

Chandler Myers :

There was a weekend where I went home to preach at my church, and I brought Russell and Kennedy with me, like I brought my friends home, which is a huge thing in itself because I've never brought anyone home really. We stayed at my dad's house. It was just crazy to have them there. It's like my worlds colliding for me, that house represents a lot of loneliness. Yeah, I think He was healing this fear that I've had for most of my life that the people that care about the most are just going to leave, just one day up and gone, not going to say anything just, bye, deuces. I think He was healing that and saying it is possible for people to be committed to you, and to love you for who you are.

Chandler Myers :

I wouldn't have those friendships. I wouldn't have that openness and friendship without Soul Conversations.

Paige Rouse:

I feel closer to Him than I ever have. But at the same time, Soul Conversations has opened my eyes to God's multifaceted-ness. I have more questions, and more wonder and awe of His bigness after doing Soul Conversations for a year now. I feel deeper with people, not just my spiritual friends, but it's taught me how to go deep effectively, and not in a manipulative way, because I

have done that in the past. I just have to say that personally being a part of a Soul Conversations group with both genders has been exactly what I needed.

Paige Rouse:

My past, without sharing too much detail, I just, I really desperately needed reconciliation in my heart with males. The way that my spiritual guy friends intercede for me has done nothing but reconcile a lot of pain and healing in my life. I think it is risky because there's a lot of uncertainty. But I've found that one of my favorite parts of Soul Conversations is that the greater the risk spiritually, the higher the reward.

Paige Rouse:

Because it's easy when you do life beside each other, sometimes you forget to actually turn and face each other and "Oh yeah, this is what you've been through. This is what you've done. I still love you anyways." And that's been the best part of this. I told my story and I got really vulnerable, and they still said yes to loving me. And they do that every week. And that's huge.

Paige Rouse:

That's the manifestation of God's love in my life. I get to be that for them too and that is the most precious experience.

Paige Rouse:

Soul Conversations has taught me how to do vulnerability correctly and in the most healthy way. I just think that everybody needs it, whether they're willing to admit it or not because, again, vulnerability is the birthplace of healing. That's how it's been in my life, but vulnerability is really scary, as it should. If I had the ability to, I'd force everybody to do Soul Conversations. I think it's important.

Paige Rouse:

And not only that, but I know God better. And why would you not want to know God better? I know myself better. I know others better. And that's just, yeah, that's totally worth it.

Paige Rouse:

People are uncertain, life is uncertain, and when you are vulnerable with people, there is this huge risk. But ultimately, if we think about it, vulnerability with God is the safest thing ever. Yet why have we created it to be this super risky, terrifying thing that where you're like, "God really saw me." Even though my spiritual friends are still humans and they still hurt me, like in the midst of doing vulnerability with them, I found safety in God's heart with them.

Sawyer Price:

I think it was first or second week, there was something that God, or something that always kept reoccurring in my mind saying like... When you center yourself and you picture the leaves falling, you pick one or two topics to talk about that day. Well there was this one reoccurring thought and I just needed to get it off my chest and I ask for help, for what to do. At the beginning I was like why is this thought reoccurring, what's going on with this? I'm confused,

why does it keep popping up in my head? And then finally I said, you know what? I got to get it off my chest, I got to talk about it. Realistically, that was probably way too soon for me to do it, but I was like, you know what, I'm going to trust it. This is what this is about. And Chandler, one thing he's always taught me is that God honored obedience and truthfulness and just like being open, like you say.

Sawyer Price:

So, I just, I came out and I told them, and they helped me a lot. Honestly within those eight minutes of what that came from, my chest and my heart felt substantially better. I was automatically lifted. I came out of that room, I knew what I had to do, and since that day I've literally just been going up. I think that was pretty cool. Thinking back on it, 100% I know that was God, in His own way, speaking to me and I think that's really cool to think about.

Sawyer Price:

You could actually ask them, I was tense, I was crying. When I was done, I literally was, I wouldn't say a different person, but I was definitely like okay, that helped. I know what I need to do. I ended up doing it. It was tough at first, but then everything kind of paved its way out. I thought that was really cool. Just being able to be open and honest definitely almost kind of heals you because I dealt with depression in high school, and there are some days too where I'll just wake up and it's not really me, it's just it's my depression that makes me just groggy and I just, it's like, "Ah, I'm kind of over the day already." And I know it'll be that I have two friends, or I have... nope, I got something to look forward to, I got group.

Sawyer Price:

Not only have I enjoyed it, my relationship with God has grown beyond compare [inaudible] and that's what I've wanted for so long, I just have not known how to do it. And honestly, I think that's what a lot of people struggle with is because I know a few people on the baseball team who I definitely see more in them about religion and about God and things like that. They just either are scared to dive in or don't know how to take that first step.

Hayden Peters:

I think, for myself, I've learned specifically that it's okay to not be okay. I've always been taught that you have to have all your stuff together, you have to put on a front, even on bad days. They teach us as RAs some days are going to suck, you have to power through and you have to be okay with it, you have to still be there for people to rely on. What Soul Conversations has taught to me is yes, that is true, but also sometimes it's okay to not be okay. Sometimes it's okay to have bad days and to be frustrated, to be angry and to just literally walk in and say, "I can't do it." And knowing that there's three people around you saying yes you can, or even if you can't, we're going to walk beside you until you can't make the step out of it.

Hayden Peters:

That's something big that God has shown me. You learn to love people for who they are, and you learn to love people for what they need, and you're not just loving them because you're called to do, you love them because you want to and now you can love them in the ways that they need you to love them.

Ben Wyant:

There were times where I didn't want that. I didn't want to grow closer to them and I didn't want to grow closer to God, especially at 9:30 on a Tuesday night. So many times, I just wished that the group text didn't go off and I could just go to sleep early, or sit in my room and do something else. But that's what the regularity of it, each week we do this. Each week we meet with God. Throughout this semester, I can't go a week hiding from the face of God. That's something that I have done in my life, many times.

Ben Wyant:

I think one of the most important things, impacts that it's had on my life, is it has just kept me accountable to... Deep down inside, I do want to grow closer to God, and I do want to grow closer to these people, not just these people, but to all people. I can trick myself out of that sometimes, but you can't trick yourself out of it when there's three people sitting there telling you that you need to do this because we know you.

Paige Rouse:

I think that's Soul Conversations is the birthplace of revival. In my own life, I've experienced breakthrough through Soul Conversations and my heart is really burdened for my campus and my country and just the world. I will continue to do Soul Conversations for the rest of my life. Period.

Hayden Peters:

Walking away, whatever that looks like in the future, I know that I've got three friends that love me for who I am. I look at people differently because of them. And I can be vulnerable with people and know that it's okay to hurt sometimes. I'm just super thankful for you, and for reaching out to Paige, and for her reaching out to me, because I went two years without doing this and I was good, and I was fine. And then two years with doing this, a year and a half, whatever it's been, it shows you more of what you need than what you thought you needed. Or it gives you something you desired, but you didn't think you could ever get, not in this capacity. So, thank you for that. Honestly. It's been a huge blessing.

Appendix G: Gender and Soul Conversations

One of the Soul Conversations groups was comprised of men and women meeting together. This particular aspect was not a part of the project's scope of research, but it was an unusual piece of the experiment that I observed with great interest.

Aelred's spiritual friends were all men, if not intentionally, then simply because his ministry centered in the communal life of a monastery. And while Wesley's class meetings were gender inclusive and sometimes led by women, he gave strict instructions that bands were to be comprised of all women or all men, but never both together.

But if soul conversations are about listening to God and if spiritual friendship is about helping one another listen to God, then it seems that the defining criteria should be centered squarely on a desire for more of God, rather than gender. This is not to say gender is not a factor, it simply cannot be a defining factor or a prescriptive rule, in my opinion.

Therefore, not knowing how it would go, but with an imagination for friendship defined by a mutual love of God, a group of four students experimented with a gender inclusive Soul Conversations group. The group consisted of two women and two men. After nine months of meeting weekly, each group member was interviewed and asked the same two questions.

- How did it go having both guys and girls in your group?
- Would you recommend this to other people interested in a gender inclusive group?

Without exception, each student responded with deep appreciation for the experience.

The following are two excerpts from those conversations.

- My past, without sharing too much detail, I just, I really desperately needed reconciliation in my heart with males. The way that my spiritual guy friends intercede for me has done nothing but reconcile a lot of pain and healing in my life. I think it is risky because there's

a lot of uncertainty. But I've found that one of my favorite parts of Soul Conversations is that the greater the risk spiritually, the higher the reward.

- I feel closer to [God] than I ever have. I feel deeper with people, not just my spiritual friends, but it's taught me how to go deep effectively, and not in a manipulative way, because I have done that in the past. I just have to say that personally being a part of a Soul Conversations group with both genders has been exactly what I needed.

It is my hunch that most students interested in Soul Conversations will still gravitate toward groups made up of the same gender. However, my observation is that this generation of college students do not have the same taboos around friendships with the opposite sex that their parents and grandparents may have. The reality is that gender is a boundary marker in culture and in the church. And while some of those boundaries are healthy, others only serve to distance spiritual brothers and sisters from each other and keep the body of Christ from unity.

But gender is one of many boundary markers, such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational level, and the list goes on. In a church that tends to put Christians in groups defined by affinity, my hope is that soul conversations could be a boundary crossing exercise in Christian community. That by coming together around a shared desire for God as the defining factor, the church could push past the unhelpful distance and polite barriers we so often use to limit ourselves.

It is an unresearched dream. But I caught a glimpse of boundary-crossing Christian community in this gender inclusive Soul Conversations group and it was beautiful. Enough so, that I am having trouble moving past the dream that there could be more of that out there for the rest of us.

Appendix H: Aelred of Rievaulx: The Patron Saint of Same Sex Attraction

Was Aelred Gay? Certainly, a movement of contemporary theologians, practitioners and laypeople believe this. And it is easy to understand why. If I were looking for a patron saint of same-sex-attraction Aelred's over-the-top declarations of deep devotion to his friends would make him a strong candidate. But the following are some reasons why I think this insistence is unfounded.

A Different Culture

Marriage was a practical arrangement in Aelred's day. As a result, it was not uncommon to find the deepest intimacy with same sex friendships. The monastic lifestyle was not seen as saying no to intimacy, but saying yes to celibacy and also saying yes to an even greater intimacy in these faith communities.

And while his language of affection for his friends would make anyone blush, that may say more about our current culture than his sexual orientation. We do not have a category for this kind of affection between two people without it being erotic. It is an indictment of our homophobia, as if the only explanation for two men who openly profess love and desire for each other is that they must be gay.

A Different Telos for Friendship

But, even bigger than that, it is an indictment of our unhealthy sexuality. We have trouble imagining intimacy of the level that Aelred describes without it indicating sexual intimacy. And this is the whole point of Aelred's writing. We miss everything Aelred has to say about

friendship when we refuse to imagine that the purpose of deep intimacy in friendship is ultimately union with God, not sexual intercourse.

A Deep Desire for Christ

His language for his friends mirrors his language for Christ. We wouldn't dream that he is insinuating, in his affection for and longing for Christ, some erotic end. So let us not superimpose this into his language for his friends. Is it possible he was gay? Perhaps. But I find that question irrelevant as it misses the point. Instead, I read in Aelred's summative work on spiritual friendship an imagination for the means of grace that friendship can be for the soul.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aelred of Rievaulx, Saint, Lawrence C. Braceland, and Marsha L. Dutton. *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications. 2010.

Spiritual Friendship the most influential work from 12th century Cistercian abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx. The work is composed of three books, where he unpacks a theology of spiritual friendship with friends in a back and forth dialogue. Aelred puts three primary theological ideas forward; he describes friendship as sacramental. He understands spiritual friendship as integral to creation itself, and an expression of God's own love in humankind to be lived out as an expression of God's own divine image. And Aelred believes that spiritual friendship links us to Christ allowing for an intimacy with Christ available in no other context in quite the same way. These ideas culminate in the reality of what Aelred refers to as beatitude, that love is lived out and expressed in inner dispositions. This work is one of the central pieces of literature for my project. Aelred proposes a robust picture of friendship that has remained as a standard across the centuries and is a constant source for scholars and the devoted who long for holy love. What stood out to me in this reading of Aelred's work was (1) the sacramentality of friendship. Within the Wesleyan tradition, the idea of 'means of grace' is an important one and while he does not use this terminology, Aelred's suggestion that spiritual friendship is meant to work as a means of grace is very Wesleyan indeed. (2) Aelred's idea of friendship manifesting in beatitude connects to Wesley's theology around affections/dispositions/tempers of the heart.

Aelred of Rievaulx, Saint, Jane Patricia Freeland, Marsha L. Dutton. *The Historical Works*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications. 2005.

Dutton is, undoubtedly, one of the world's leading scholars on Cistercian monasticism and specifically Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx. This book contains all Aelred's works and an introduction and conclusion written by Dutton. Dutton's introduction shares what we know about Aelred's life and ministry. It also offers a cliff-notes version of his writings. It was helpful to put Aelred's writing on spiritual friendship within the context of his larger library of work. It turns out he was quite the historian and perhaps even politician, some of his writing paying homage to King Edward, King Henry and Scottish King David. His work on friendship was his magnum opus and very different from his more historical and political writings.

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press. 2005.

Sacred Rhythms is neither a how to book or a theological treatise. Instead, it is written to introduce the reader to ancient practices of spiritual formation. Each chapter describes a different "soul-care" practice and includes an exercise that helps one develop a 'rule of life'. Barton tackles practical and abstract ideas like the role of desire and longing in relationship with God, praying with scripture, the need for solitude, self-examination, discernment and Sabbath. Of interest to my research was her overarching insistence on a commitment to a 'structure and space for our growing'. She borrowed from ancient rhythms to suggest that there is a correlation between regular and intentional reflection and spiritual vitality. Barton does well to tell personal

stories that illustrate these practices, but at times, Barton may generalize from her own experiences a bit too much, leaving readers with different experiences or temperaments adrift.

Benner, David G. *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press. 2002.

Benner treats this as an introductory work to spiritual direction. He considers spiritual direction to be the ‘dynamic core’ of the church. He defines spiritual friendship, spiritual direction and group spiritual direction. He addresses critiques, challenges and possibilities of each. He begins with the familiar language of spiritual disciplines and prayer and then broadens the meanings of these, leaning heavily on influences like Ignatius of Loyola, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen and even ancient practices like centering prayer to lay the groundwork and spark the imagination. An extensive, annotated bibliography is included.

Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint, Abbot of Saint-Thierry William of Saint-Thierry, and Saint Aelred of Rievaulx. *The Love of God, and Spiritual Friendship*. Multnomah, OR: Classics of Faith and Devotion. 1983.

This is a Christian classic from a man who was, not only a contemporary of Aelred and influenced him deeply, but also a friend. Aelred of Rievaulx and Bernard of Clairvaux shared similar language around the idea of spiritual friendship. Therefore, it makes sense that, in a book that is meant to be a compilation of much of Bernard’s work, there is included a chapter devoted to excerpts from Aelred’s writings on spiritual friendship mentioned elsewhere in this bibliography. Bernard of Clairvaux outlines a progression of Christian love reflecting different seasons of spiritual maturity (loving self, selfish love, loving God as God, and loving one’s self in God). Of note, in this classic, is Bernard’s writing (chapter eight) on spiritual friendship. It was Bernard that solicited Aelred to write his most famous works, *The Mirror of Charity*, and *On Spiritual Friendship*. It stood out to me that, having read both Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx in this compilation, I was reminded that these contemplatives were also impressive theologians. They were reformers, working to reintroduce the ancient truths and practices of scripture to a church that had largely left them behind. Their mantra of experiential love came from a beautiful spirituality rooted in a solid theology.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. New York: Harper and Row. 1954.

This spiritual classic underscores both the blessing and the need for faith within the boundaries of community. Bonhoeffer addresses practices that keep communal faith thriving and addresses the damaging ways we interact with one another. Bonhoeffer asserts that the physical presence of other Christians, what he calls communal life, is a gift of grace. Of note is his key theme that community is not an unachievable ideal but a present, messy reality that can be experienced despite our imperfections because of Christ’s central role. In this way, Christians are the ‘bringers of salvation’ for one another. He lists practices that shape individuals into a people of God committed to the ministry of listening, helpfulness and bearing with one another. I appreciated his emphasis on the immediate and messy reality that Christian community is. His

work pushes back on the church's tendency to paint a shiny picture of Christian community that feels inauthentic and unattainable.

Carmichael, Liz. *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love*. London: T&T Clark. 2007.

Carmichael offers a comprehensive overview of the history of friendship as it pertains to spiritual formation and the church. She devotes chapters to the usual suspects like Aelred of Rievaulx, Augustine, and Ambrose. But she also gives a thorough treatment of Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Katherine Philips, J.H. Newman, the Taizé Community in France, John Burnaby, and Simone Weil and more. Carmichael establishes the deep and long tradition of Friendship in Christian thought and its source of and window to Christian love. Her work spans classical literature all the way to more recent history. I paid attention to her study of Aelred of Rievaulx and Jeremy Taylor (as an Anglican influence on Wesley).

Clapper, Gregory S. "Finding a Place for Emotions in Christian Theology." *The Christian Century* 104, no. 14 (April 29, 1987): 409–411.

Clapper suggests that the emotional life is essential for Christianity. He pushes back on criticisms that suggest emotionalism is a dispensable relic of revivalism or an unfortunate reality of an individualistic generation. He also pushes back on the tendency to relegate emotions to the discipline of psychology, suggesting that Christianity has had much to say about the necessary role of emotions long before this discipline gained momentum. Clapper relies heavily on Don Saliers' book *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections*. Clapper maintains, along with Saliers, that emotions have a grammar logic that links emotions to deep beliefs, Gospel stories and dispositions. He does not distinguish between reason and emotion, as many are apt to do, but instead that the two are inextricably connected. The belief is not possible apart from religious affection or emotion. Clapper recaps Saliers' four basic Christian affections; gratitude, holy fear, repentance, and love. Clapper does not treat emotions as a problem to be overcome, but as having positive implications for the role of doctrine in the emotional life. The Christian story should have implications for our affectual life and be treated as an essential part of Christian formation.

Clapper, Gregory S. *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology*. Pietist and Wesleyan Studies 1. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press. 1989.

Clapper takes an in-depth approach to illuminate Wesley's view of the interrelatedness of doctrine and experience. He addresses the tension in Wesley's body of work between reason and emotion. Combing through Wesley's sermons, notes, edited treatises, journals, diaries and letters, Clapper works to pull together Wesley's understanding of religious affections. Clapper puts forth the often-quoted term, orthokardia, which encapsulates Wesley's understanding of the role of the heart in true religion. Clapper defends Wesley against critics that would suggest he does not value reason or logic, and against less robust understandings of affections like those of Schleiermacher. Clapper presents Wesley as a practical theologian who embraces the necessary tensions between inner and outer holiness.

Clapper, Greg. “John Wesley’s Language of the Heart.” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. 44, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 94–102.

Clapper takes issue with articles (cited here in this bibliography) by Clapper and Maddox that suggest Wesley’s use of ‘affections’ and ‘tempers’, while perhaps interchangeable, are not synonymous terms. While these scholars believe that Wesley’s use of affections points to a more temporal entity and his use of tempers point to a more foundational entity, Clapper disagrees. While the heart was where true religion took root with heart being the home for affections/tempers, Clapper sees no evidence in the body of Wesley’s writings that the two terms can be so easily separated. Instead, Clapper suggests that Wesley is guilty of the same loose terminology that everyone employs when we struggle to articulate what we have experienced. As helpful as it might be to believe that Wesley meant something different in his use of the terms, it is not distinguishable from the writings we have. Of help to this research, was Clapper’s assertion that Wesley’s use of ‘affection’ was a more important piece of vocabulary than his use of ‘tempers’ in trying to understand ‘true religion’. Even though he used ‘affection’ less frequently (but still quite a lot), he uses this term in foundational sermons and writings. Clapper also points out that Wesley borrows the term from Jonathan Edwards, who used it almost exclusively to describe true religion. And based on the influence that Edwards had on Wesley (Clapper quotes Outler here), we can see how Edward’s theology on this set the frame for Wesley’s thoughts on heart religion. This is one reason why I prefer the term ‘affections’ in my work over ‘tempers’.

Clapper, Greg. “Orthokardia: the practical theology of John Wesley’s heart religion.” *Quarterly Review* 10, no. 1(Spring 1990): 49-66.

Clapper emphasizes the role of emotions in Wesley’s theology. To characterize a spirituality without the affective or emotive violates the very fabric of his thought. Clapper suggests that this emphasis on, not only orthodoxy and orthopraxy... but also orthokardia and its centrality of the heart is desperately needed in today’s theology that holds emotions at arm’s length. Clapper suggests that a religion that does not intersect with the lived experience or that is defined by outward action is no true religion of Wesley’s at all. Clapper points out the ways that Wesley very much emphasized right thinking and right living, but that those very things were the outcomes of a heart rightly ordered. Clapper defends Wesley’s theology that, according to a systematic theologian, would not be considered theology at all. But Clapper puts forth that a theology being sorted out in the real-life tensions of living, that does not dismiss the affective but channels emotions for the good of mind and action, is a theology worth paying attention to. In fact, Clapper goes so far as to say that a theology that is practiced is the true legacy of Wesley’s heart religion.

Clapper, Gregory S. “‘True Religion’ and the Affections: A Study of John Wesley’s Abridgement of Jonathan Edward’s Treatise on Religious Affections.” In *Wesleyan Theology Today a Bicentennial Theological Consultation*, edited by Theodore Runyon, 416-423. Nashville: Kingswood Books. 1985.

Clapper works to clarify what Wesley meant by his frequently used term ‘holy’ or ‘religious affections’. Wesley borrowed this term and its definition from his contemporary, Jonathan Edwards. Clapper identifies the similarities and differences in the two revivalists’ understanding of affections and suggests inferences for theological practice in the Wesleyan tradition. Of note is Clapper’s observations around Wesley’s abridgement of Edward’s treatise on Religious Affections, paying special attention not only to what he included, but also what Wesley deleted. This articulation of Wesley’s contention that we only truly know God if we truly love God and take joy in God, stands at the center of Wesley’s theology and is a driver for soul conversations. According to Clapper, both Edwards and Wesley agreed that the “rough contours of felt experience are where the gospel either grows or dies.”⁵⁴

Collins, Kenneth J. “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart: Dispositions, Tempers, and Affections.” *Methodist History* 36, no. 3 (April 1998): 162–75.

Collins suggests that the very substance of holiness for Wesley consists of the affections (tempers/dispositions) of the heart. Wesley used these terms interchangeably and prolifically in his sermons, letters, journal entries and other writings. Collins compares the use of these terms, attempts to define them, and the role these affections play in the ongoing process of sanctification. While interchangeable, Collins suggests that there is a distinction in Wesley’s understanding of tempers and affections in that affections are more temporary and tempers are more foundational. Collins addresses the tensions that exist in Wesley’s understanding of affections as they relate to human freedom and also process vs. instantaneous heart change. Collins does a very thorough job of taking all of Wesley’s works into account, comparing his earlier writings with his later works, looking for consistencies and evolution of theology throughout.

Conner, Edwin L. “Goostly Freend in God: Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De sirituali amicitia* as a source of *The Cloud of Unknowing*” in *Vox Mystica Essays on Medieval Mysticism* ed. by Anne Clark Bartlett. Cambridge: DS Brewer. 1995.

Conner shows how the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was likely influenced greatly by the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx, particularly in the warmth with which he presented the Negative Way and his emphasis on the intimacy of friendship. That Aelred was a source for this unknown author contributed to the success of this piece as opposed to the more austere renditions of the Negative Way previously written. This was an interesting read, but had little direct application to the project at hand, as it was, in the end, more about *The Cloud* than it was about Aelred or spiritual friendship.

Dutton, Marsha L. "Friendship and the Love of God: Augustine's Teaching in the Confessions and Aelred of Rievaulx's Response in Spiritual Friendship." *The American Benedictine Review* 56, no. 1 (March 2005): 3-40.

The two sources Aelred relies on in his work, *Spiritual Friendship*, are Cicero and Augustine. The first he labels plainly, citing Cicero’s understanding of friendship as helpful to him and

⁵⁴ Clapper, “‘True Religion’ and the Affections,” p. 422.

referring to it throughout. What is less immediately obvious, but Dutton suggest equally formative in his writing is the influence that Augustine's Confessions had on Aelred. Augustine writes, "And what was it that delighted me but to love and be loved?" And this same phrase, 'to love and be loved' echoes its way throughout Aelred's work. Aelred begins his work on Spiritual Friendship with confessions of his own that mirror that of Augustine. And so even as Aelred is indebted to Augustine's writings, he pushes Augustine's ideas around friendship further. Augustine makes a distinction between love of man (friend) and love of God. But Aelred suggests that friendship is implanted in humankind embedded with the very image of God and a pathway for knowing God and experiencing God's love. This distinction was helpful to me. Augustine's writings have so heavily influenced the way we understand sin, forgiveness, faith and friendship, that understanding the ways that our current compartmentalizations of friendship have limited our communion with God and each other was enlightening.

Dutton, Marsha L. "A Model for Friendship: Ambrose's Contribution to Aelred of Rievaulx's Spiritual Friendship." *The American Benedictine Review* 64:1 (March 2013): 39-66.

Aelred borrowed from Cicero and Augustine. But he also borrowed from Ambrose as well. In fact, it is likely that some of his Cicero quotes are indirect, having quoted Ambrose who was quoting Cicero. Ambrose's work on friendship primarily adapted Cicero's concepts of friendship to a Christian context, but Aelred uses this and pushes his theology around spiritual friendship further. For example, Ambrose points to God's gift of good will to Adam and Eve in paradise and connects good will, or charity, to friendship. Aelred takes this and suggests that the first humans were the first friends and that friendship was an integral part of the design of human beings at creation. Also, Ambrose suggests that friendship is a matter of total openness between friends and Aelred agrees, also suggesting that this openness between friends fosters an openness with God and vice versa.

**Dutton, Marsha L. "The Sacramentality of Community in Aelred." In *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)*, 2017, 246–67.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004337978_012.**

Dutton, a leading expert on Cistercian monasticism and Aelred of Rievaulx, examines Aelred's understanding of community and friendship. She maintains that throughout his life and writings, Aelred defined community as a sacramental channel of God's grace where God is present and active. She shows the way that this understanding of community is core to Aelred's eschatology, a foretaste and anticipation of God's divine love to be enjoyed throughout eternity. Authentic Christian community for Aelred finds its origin in creation (with the first humans as the first friends), finds Christ inside of human friendship, finds participation in God's own unity, and finds its expression in the love of God and neighbor. It is sacramental and eschatological. He holds, in beautiful tension, community and the contemplative life. He uses biblical models for spiritual friendship and even points to the way that the early church was made up of pairs of spiritual friends that reached beyond themselves to include many others. He expressed the belief that, in the context of spiritual friendship, Christ was present here and now in a supernatural, sacramental way. And that spiritual friendship is even more fully an expression of the image of God than that image visible in only one person at a time.

Fryling, Alice. *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2009.

Fryling offers thoughtful definitions, basis and direction for starting, leading and participating in spiritual direction within the context of a group. Fryling does not assume that all readers know what spiritual direction is, so spends time defining and giving a history of the role and impact of individual spiritual direction as well. Fryling points out key aspects of group spiritual direction such as listening, asking life-giving questions, exploring thoughts and feelings, meditating on scriptures and prayer, conviction and confession of sin, navigating different personalities, etc. Individual spiritual direction is much more common than direction in small groups. Different from a typical small group, Fryling reminds the reader that it is not a study group, a fellowship group or an accountability group. Likewise, the purpose is not counseling or therapy. The purpose is to listen, both to one another and to God. This book was incredibly helpful and helped me to fill out my guide in ways that may have been lacking. Particularly, I appreciated the way that Fryling emphasized the role of prayer in spiritual direction. As she put it, praying is like coming home to a loving God (p. 87). Prayer is at the heart of spiritual direction, because it is at the heart of a relationship with a loving God. Fryling emphasized centering prayer, which I incorporated into my guide as well.

Guenther, Margaret. *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd. 1993.

Guenther uses this book to define the role of the spiritual director. She suggests that the spiritual director is the person who guides you through your journey with God and uses most of her ink to outline three images that help qualify this guiding. She suggests that the spiritual director is the host, using language of hospitality when describing the role of creating a safe and welcoming space. She also suggests that the spiritual director is a teacher, but not in the sense of disseminating information, but in the sense of facilitating discernment, uncovering what God is doing, and loving truth. Guenther finally suggests that the spiritual director is a mid-wife, not responsible for bringing new things to bear, but assists in the process. The spiritual director comes alongside the soul doing the hard work of birthing new spiritual realities. Guenther is careful to offer a great deal (perhaps too much) of practical advice on how to embody these images as a spiritual director. A point that Guenther made which I found particularly relevant was that she emphasizes the reality that spiritual directors are not experts, in fact it is necessary for them to consider themselves to be amateur. This humility helps them to get out of the way so that the Holy Spirit can do the heavy lifting of spiritual direction. This underscores the particularly equitable format of my soul conversations that put the Holy Spirit at the center of the facilitation process.

De Taizé, John. *Friends in Christ: Paths to a New Understanding of Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2012.

Using the Greco-Roman ideals of friendship, but integrating these into a Biblical and Christian context (leaning heavily on Ambrose and Augustine before him), Brother John fleshes out in practical terms what it looks like to be true friends in Christ. Characteristic of his monastic lifestyle, he leans on the imagery of brothers heavily. He emphasizes the importance of

friendship for Christian community, including biblical accounts of friendship, early Christian thought, and how this plays itself out in his community at Taizé. Taizé is an international, ecumenical community focused on worship and prayer.

Michael, Chester P. *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction: A Psychological Approach for Directors and Directees*. New York: Paulist Press. 2004.

Michael, a Roman Catholic priest, connects Jungian psychological theory with spiritual direction. Michael describes the qualities and practices of a good spiritual director. He outlines six steps in the spiritual journey and how a spiritual director accompanies someone along this journey. While some of these definitions are helpful, of particular importance to this research is Michael's description what spiritual progress looks like. As I work to create measurements for progress, I found his insights to be a valuable contribution. He also includes material on spiritual direction for people with different levels of spiritual maturity, different personalities, etc.

Ortberg, John C, Jr. *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2014.

Ortberg leans heavily on the work of Dallas Willard in this book which offers ways to nurture the soul. Ortberg attempts to define the soul, outlines the things the soul needs to thrive, and unpacks ways that the soul experiences and works through pain. Of interest is Ortberg's premise, borrowed from Willard, that humans were not made to be self-sufficient. He suggests that the redeemed soul can share without thinking, see without judging and love God fully. An integrated soul has harmony between body, mind and will. On the flip side, he suggests that anxiety, depression and fear are symptoms of a soul that has lost touch with its keeper causing disintegration. I think Ortberg misses a key aspect of both Willard's theology around spiritual formation and Scripture; the role authentic human relationships play in our soul's health. Ortberg majors on spiritual disciplines, dispositions, and one's relationship with God. But he seems to miss the important place that human interaction plays in the process.

Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. San Francisco: Augsburg Fortress. 2019.

Parks takes up the importance of mentors and mentoring environments for emerging adults, a season filled with difficult questions and big dreams. Parks maintains that emerging adults are not encouraged to wrestle with the kinds of questions that develop critical thought. She is particularly interested in how this interacts with faith development as emerging adults try to discover meaning and taking ownership of beliefs and values. Her solution is developing mentoring environments that come alongside emerging adults in the meaning-making process. While Parks conclusions feel relevant, the reality is that they are mostly based in theory. Parks includes excerpts from interviews, but they are largely anecdotal and do not reflect a theme emerging from widespread research. Perhaps the most relevant contribution to this project is Parks implication that emerging adults are desperately in need of relationships with others who can come alongside them and partner with them as they discern God's will and as they develop identity.

Rice, Howard. *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*. Nashville: Upper Room Books. 1998.

Written with pastors in mind, Rice considers all the images that shape the role as pastor and selects that of spiritual guide to be preeminent. Rice encourages those in vocational ministry roles to be vulnerable and transparent about their own spiritual journey, doubts, struggles and victories with the people they pastor. Rice suggests that allowing oneself to be put on a pedestal contributes to the high rates of discouragement, stress, depression and burnout that plague pastors and the pressures they face to meet ministry demands. He then puts forward that authentically vulnerable leadership, leading from weakness, is what brings joy to pastoral ministry. Rice maintains that it is from this place that the pastor can extend hope and insight and help people find their way to God. Rice argues that, if caring for souls is the work of ministry, then that should include intentional care for one's own soul. He offers specific ways that spiritual guidance can be integrated into the duties of pastoral ministry such as teaching, serving, worship and management. Of relevance is Rice's admonition that spiritual authority is counterintuitive, and flows from a place of vulnerability and humility rather than power.

Russell, J Stephen. "The Dialogic of Aelred's Spiritual Friendship." *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 47–69.

Russell studies the choices Aelred makes in 'Spiritual Friendship', not so much about content, but about its form. Russell looks at the way that dialogue functions to shape the structure and content of the treatise. Following Cicero's example, Aelred organizes the treatise into a series of dialogues, and in so doing develops the personalities and characters of these voices just as he develops the theological perspective of friendship each voice represents. Aelred develops the characters Ivo, Walter and Gratian along with his own voice. And even though they are never fleshed out in the full literary sense, they are still distinct and help the author to reflect and tease out the traditional perspectives on friendship. Gratian's gentle and welcoming voice reflects the heart and Aelred shows how this ideal cannot survive in friendship alone. Walter's confrontational and curious voice reflects the mind and Aelred shows how this ideal also falls short of what spiritual friendship requires. But rather than reject these voices completely, Aelred shows, over the course of the four books, how these voices are valuable companions on our journey and should be cherished for who they are and who they have the potential to become. And that who they can become may only be possible in and through spiritual friendship.

Sappington, Don, and Fred R Wilson. "Toward an Assessment of Spiritual Maturity: A Critique of Measurement Tools." *Christian Education Journal* 12, no. 3 (1992): 46–68.

Sappington and Wilson study six major assessment tools measuring spirituality and spiritual growth. This study provides a description of each instrument, a background and assumptions for each, the type of instrumentation used and an evaluation of each. Clearly, no assessment tool is perfect, and even then, would need to be paired with other assessment (psychological, etc.). However, seeing the strengths and weaknesses and the different types of tools available is helpful. While this study is dated (1992) and more work has been done in recent years to develop tools for spiritual assessment, this was a good primer for what is out there along with their strengths and weaknesses.

Smith, Christian. *Lost in Transition*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011.

Smith looks at the difficulties facing young adults in contemporary culture, specifically aged 18-23 years. The book is the result of a comprehensive study of today's emerging adults and reveals hyper-individualism, widespread moral relativism, little civic engagement, sexual choices that many EA's regret, postponement of marriage, and postponement of career. Smith shows that life for emerging adults has made seismic shifts from even one generation ago. Smith not only captures the difficulties emerging adults face as they transition into adulthood, but also the consequences for society. Smith puts the responsibility of these consequences squarely on the shoulders of older adults who have fostered these cultural priorities and practices. While Smith tends to focus on the darker side of this generation of young adults rather than the positives, he does do well to outline some of the real challenges facing young people today.

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005.

Based on his extensive study of 13-17-year olds, Smith takes a big-picture look at the faith of American teenagers. This important research on adolescents and religious attitudes and practices shows a correlation between religious commitment and positive social behavior. According to the study, teenagers are responsive to the religious conviction, particularly from their parents. The study also unveiled a theologically illiterate generation of young people who are unable to articulate an orthodox faith. Smith uses the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism to describe the kind of unconvincing and shallow faith characterized by niceness and personal happiness that many teenagers have adopted. Smith goes on to offer practical suggestions for religious communities, but mostly as an afterthought at the end. Of interest to this study is Smith's indictment that young people have lost the language and experience of holiness, sin, grace, sanctification, Eucharist, Trinity, heaven and hell. Smith suggests that what teenagers are calling Christianity is an unrecognizable form of it, at the very least.

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009.

This is a follow up volume to Smith's *Soul Searching*, this time focusing on emerging adults rather than teenagers. It recounts the findings and pulls out some applicable themes from Smith's comprehensive research on emerging adults. The research underscores the reality of this demographic including postponement of adulthood, extended financial support from parents, etc. But more than that, Smith and Snell unpack implications for faith development during this critical life period. Emerging adults, according to the research findings, are less religious than their parents and less religious than they were as teens, but not necessarily any less religious than previous generations of young adults. Smith and Snell show that parents and congregations (healthy community) are the greatest influencers as to whether emerging adults raised in faith maintain that faith into adulthood. The book outlines six religious types of emerging adults and the percentage associated with each (the largest percentage being selective adherents that pick and choose what they believe and are not as loyal as their parents to faith and community). The

research is relevant to my work with emerging adults and rings true in my experience, although some application and next steps for helping shape faith in positive ways would have been helpful.

Watson, Kevin M. *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2014.

Watson offers a robust historical study of John Wesley's 'band meetings' that played a key role in early Methodism. He unpacks formative influences on band meetings, where they fit into Wesley's larger structure and theology of discipleship, an overview of their early practice and how these bands continued to transition. Watson does well to underscore the ways in which bands were distinct from Wesley's class meetings and societies. He describes the function of bands as a means of grace for early Methodists where holiness of heart and life could be pursued. Watson shows how Wesley weaved together the experiential religion of the Moravians and the structured religion of the Anglicans along with his own passion for holiness. Of interest was Watson's treatment of the decline of band meetings. He does not attribute this to a lack of effectiveness, but to a decreasing emphasis on entire sanctification coincided with an increasing emphasis on revivals. He suggests that these more rhythmic and intimate gatherings were replaced by large altar calls. This book pushes against modern individualism in subtle ways that call the church back to the structure, practices and theology of bands that strengthened the early Methodist movement.