

## Introduction

My earliest faith memories are of two distinct faith traditions: Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism. These two traditions, with their different spiritualities, blissfully coexisted within me until I was introduced to the Southern Baptist Church as a teenager, where one absolute "right" way of thinking, being, and believing was forced upon me. There was no longer the bliss of knowing God in diversity; instead, only uniformity was acceptable. In the Southern Baptist Church, conversion meant coming to believe the way I was *expected* to believe. Conversion in my evangelical experience was nothing like the conversion I have come to understand in the Christian Spirituality Program. There is no freedom in being brainwashed into conformity. Having a narrowminded and judgmental view of the world may make life easier in a black-and-white world of absolutes, but it is a self-imposed straight jacket. My experience with fundamentalism was focused on Jesus' return and going to heaven. I was raised to look towards a future Kingdom, which unfortunately does not resemble living the way Jesus calls us to live now in the Kingdom of God on this earth and with our neighbors.

I have come to recognize that the golden thread of my faith journey is the diversity of my faith experiences. The same diversity has been a cause for divisiveness in some of the Christian traditions I was a member of over the course of my journey. Unfortunately, division is easier to find in our society and in some Christian traditions today than unity and community. My journey through the Christian Spirituality Program at Creighton has enabled me to see how the Christian community can grow as we appreciate the faith traditions of others, participate in an exchange of spiritual gifts, and simultaneously grow in our individual understanding of faith. As we move towards unity, we form communities where Christian Spirituality and Spiritual Ecumenism enable us to connect more deeply with God, within ourselves, and across what divides us in our society.

## My Journey to CSP

My faith reached a turning point a few years prior to my beginning the CSP program after decades of a long and winding journey. I was baptized Catholic at birth. My mother's family was Catholic and my father's Methodist, though neither of my parents attended church. The first faith experience I remember was in Grand Island, Nebraska, as a five- or six-year-old getting on an old school bus in 1975/76 and riding it to a Pentecostal church. It would not be acceptable now, but the church bus came through my neighborhood on Saturday nights sharing candy and inviting us to church Sunday morning. My parents were absent, and at age five I was making my own spiritual decisions. My Pentecostal experience was in stark contrast to my Catholic church experience with my mother's family at Christmas and Easter services. To a hyperactive five- or six-year-old, the Pentecostal experience matched my energy. Worship was exuberant. I also vividly remember midnight mass with my mother's family at St. Mary's cathedral. These experiences were distinctly different from the other, yet both were spirit-filled. I could feel the presence of what I now understand to be the Holy Spirit in both places. The contrast between these experiences, along with several more which will be discussed shortly, led to lifelong questions to which I have only recently found answers. Questions and answers which will be explored more deeply in the coming pages.

My faith journey was disrupted when I moved to Omaha in 1980. At that time, I began attending an Evangelical Free Church. It was while attending Evangelical Bible Church that I went on my one and only mission trip to Costa Rica at age 15. Within a year of the mission trip my family situation had collapsed, and after spending a few months in a domestic violence shelter with my mother and two younger brothers, our family split up, and I moved in with a family who attended a Southern Baptist Church. They baptized me again to get "the catholic stank" off me – their words. It was here where I first felt God leading me to ministry. It was also here where my faith was crushed by some of the most hypocritical experiences of my life. The family who took me in threw me away after a year because they weren't getting the praise and

recognition they expected for taking in a *wretch* like me. The hypocrisy of “we love and care for you” stung as out of the other side of their mouth I heard them say, “we can prevent you from going to your grandmother’s funeral – we’re your guardians.” The hypocrisy was strong, and the hellfire and brimstone sermons meant to keep us sexually pure only served to burn me out when I learned of the extramarital affairs of the church leadership. The same went for the lectures on the dangers of alcohol when I found out that the recipient of the “Most Christ Like Spirit” award at the senior banquet was late because her parents had to bail her out of jail—she had been arrested for minor in possession on senior skip day. But the most damaging and longest lingering impact was the absolutes. The Southern Baptists believed their way was the only way, and they were *absolutely certain* of this fact. Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and anyone else who didn’t adhere to their strict fundamentalism had it all wrong and were *absolutely* going to hell. These experiences had a negative impact on my relationship with the people of the church for decades. God had put a call to ministry in my heart throughout my high school years, but my heart was then crushed by these experiences in a Southern Baptist Church at the end of my senior year. God may have still been calling, but I was no longer answering. I would avoid serving God in a vocational capacity for the next 30 years.

I continued attending a Southern Baptist Church until my early 20’s but only as a consumer of faith. I was going to meet God, but I had no interest in the community or people of God. In my 20’s I returned to a different Pentecostal church with a Catholic friend where I found others from diverse faith backgrounds like me. I then decided to try the Catholic tradition; however, this was short lived. In the early 2000’s I briefly returned to the Southern Baptist Church long enough to again experience the hypocrisy, condemnation, and judgement that reminded me why I originally left. For the next 16 years I attended a non-denominational church where I passively practiced my faith. God called again in 2010 as I was nearing 40, when I was trying to decide what to do for the second half of my career. I took the first step of following God’s lead at that time, and I was accepted into the Clinical Counseling Master’s program at Grace University. It was an opportunity to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in my life, but instead I chose not to pursue the degree. I was broken and hurting and I was not ready to be a part of healing others. By 2018, I was done with the oppression of *religion* and living the hateful, critical, and judgement faith of fundamentalism. I wasn’t journaling at that point, but I do remember writing “I still love you, God, and I want a relationship with you, but I’m **DONE** with organized religion and its people.” I was completely broken and done pretending as the pivotal year of 2018 began.

Reflecting on the turning point year of 2018, I’ve been able to apply what I’ve learned in CSP to my experiences; I’ve been able to find the saving graces of them. This quote from *The Discerning Heart* by the Au’s began to help me put my life experiences into perspective: “How we perceive God dramatically influences how we see ourselves and how we think about life.”<sup>1</sup> I had come to see God and the people of God based on my experiences in the Southern Baptist Church: judgmental, critical, condemning, hateful, and hypocritical. Sadly, this deeply affected how I saw myself as well as others. The church was not the only influence on my image of God, however. I have an annotation of “mother and self” in the margin of *The Discerning Heart* next to this highlighted passage: “[If] our subjective experience of our mother was one of indifference, rejection, or disregard, the result is a negative image of self and a sense of reality as unresponsive, uncaring, and untrustworthy.”<sup>2</sup> My mother did her best to raise three boys as a single parent but the uncomfortable truth is she was (and still is) broken by decades of generational trauma that shaped her life and indirectly mine as well. I am not only grateful for the new understanding of how my images of God were shaped and affected my life, but I also

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<sup>1</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (Paulist Press, 2006), 104.

<sup>2</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 111.

have a deeper desire to understand how another person's image of God has affected their faith journey.

In 2018, I began reconnecting with my authentic self. My faith moved from being superficial to personal. Everything I had believed to be *true for others* finally became true for me, and my faith moved from the confined spaces of my intellect to an indwelling spiritual presence. This experience was the first catalyst, the first movement of God, towards the journey that brought me to the CSP program at Creighton University. It came with a realization that I was not the only person who was spiritually broken and in need of restoration and redemption. In retrospect this was probably the first step on a new journey. I had lost everything: family, health, relationships, career (and associated income and identity). At age 48, I had been living a legalistic, performance-based existence most of my life. It was during my first retreat to the Cloisters on the Platte in August 2018 that my faith finally became personal. On Saturday, the third day, I had prepared to continue beating myself up spiritually by contrasting a list of virtues I intended to meditate on in contrast to my own vices which was about as penitential as a non-Catholic could get. Instead, after lunch, I returned to my room and collapsed in exhaustion. The next few hours were an encounter with the Divine. I don't remember much, but I do recall pondering two questions: *Why do I feel unworthy? Why do I feel the need to be perfect?* I wrote this in my journal:

Then I experienced a Divine revelation: I felt unloved, unwanted, uncared for, and neglected as a child. I realized it was hard to accept being (believing I am) a child of God. For me being a child, remembering my childhood, was nothing but negative feelings and experiences. *I tried SO HARD to be perfect because I thought, I hoped, if I was good enough maybe someone, maybe God, would love me.* I need to stop believing the LIE that I am unworthy and the LIE that I need to be perfect.

It wasn't until I began my coursework at Creighton that I was able to recognize how I was affected by a story from the previous day of a Jesuit who, for his 50<sup>th</sup> year as a priest, went on a 30-day retreat and finally realized he was personally loved by God. And so, finally, I realized the same for myself as well. I began to move from feeling worthless—a perfectionist who was never going to be good enough—to feeling loved by God as I was. I also later found some solace in the writings of Sandra Cronk, who says, "The sense of inferiority or worthlessness is one of the most pervasive experiences of the contemporary people."<sup>3</sup> During the summer of 2024 while I was reading *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, I came across this quote that summed up the change in my perspective back in 2018: "The question is not 'How am I to love God?' But 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?'"<sup>4</sup> It was on my 2018 Cloisters on the Platte Silent Retreat that I realized my relationship with God was not found in my efforts to love God or to be a certain way but rather in my openness to being loved by God. In Nouwen's work I found the language to understand how I had viewed myself in contrast to how God viewed me. He writes, "Here lies the core of my spiritual struggle: the struggle against self-rejection, self-contempt, and self-loathing. It is a very fierce battle because the world and its demons conspire to make me think about myself as worthless, useless, and negligible."<sup>5</sup> It was through reading Nouwen's work that I came to recognize how my view of my relationship with God had been shaped by society and the warped influences of fundamentalist teachings. It was through this process that I found and understood how the divine relationship with God is not of my works or initiation, but of his coming into my life. I was beginning to empty the baggage of my life - but a lifetime of fear, rejection, and condemnation would slow the process of finding openness to God, trusting God, and allowing him to see me as I truly am or

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey* (Pendle Hill Publications, 1991), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday publishing, 1992), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 107.

maybe more accurately allowing myself to be seen. Quoting Cronk again: “We can be transformed and healed by God’s love. This can happen because we no longer must prove our essential worth to ourselves, hiding that which does not meet our approved image. Now we know ourselves as God knows us, as ones who are loved by God.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conversion & Surrendering

When I tell the story of my faith journey, the life-redefining year, the turning point, was 2018. The Conversion course in the Spring of 2025 gave me the language to articulate my developing understanding of my 2018 retreat and conversion experience. To cite Bernard Tyrrell’s work, “Psychological conversion in its various forms always involves a healing in the area of feelings. The healing in the feeling area can be accompanied by healing in the areas of self-image and self-concept, attitudes and beliefs, memories, decisions and behavior.”<sup>7</sup> This experience began the very long process of breaking down the emotional barriers, which had to occur before I could mature spiritually, intellectually, and morally. I was just beginning the process of recognizing who I was authentically by facing who *I was afraid to admit* I was. There were some deep dark closets that I would need to enter and skeletons I would have to face over time, but authenticity became more important than pretense. The journey, however, was just beginning.

My 2018 Cloisters on the Platte Silent Retreat laid the groundwork for the next breakthrough in 2020 when, as a result of doing a team building exercise called *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* at work, I sought further counseling. My value and identity, and much of my self-worth, was still wrapped up in the opinions of others. During the summer of 2020, I set out to read Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman but as only the Holy Spirit can intervene I ended up reading *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*<sup>8</sup> and made a connection between emotional and spiritual health. If any of these three things (retreat, counseling, EHS) had occurred in a different order, I don’t believe they would have made a difference. The movement to feeling lovable and worthwhile in 2018 set the groundwork for these psychological conversions in 2020. Citing Tyrrell again, this period of my life was marked by a “letting go of certain false attitudes, negative images, and concepts of the self; the embracing of authentic, life-giving attitudes; the development of a positive self-image and self-concept; and appropriate changes in behavior.”<sup>9</sup> I was finally willing to own my mistakes, faults, and failings and in doing so recognize where my true value and identity came from.

Leading up to my 2022 Cloisters on the Platte Silent Retreat, I had been challenged to define my ‘personal value proposition.’ A colleague recommended *The Path* by Laurie Beth Jones, and I completed the workbook exercise on my retreat. By the end of my 2022 Cloisters retreat I had written my mission and vision statement, and I was not surprised by the outcome because it was what God had been calling me to my entire life.

### Personal Mission Statement

My mission is to share the experiences of my complex spiritual journey and guide others on their own journeys.

### Vision Statement

My vision is to utilize my gifts, skills, abilities, and life experiences within a ministry dedicated to faith formation and spiritual growth, serving as a guide to others on their spiritual journeys.

### Purpose

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<sup>6</sup> Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey*, P53.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Tyrrell, *Psychological Conversion, Methods of Healing and Communication in Lonergan Workshop* (Paulist Press, 1988), 240.

<sup>8</sup> Pete Scazzerro, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. (Zondervan, 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Tyrrell, *Psychological Conversion, Methods of Healing and Communication in Lonergan Workshop*, 244.

My purpose is to assist individuals in experiencing emotional and spiritual growth as they deepen their faith.

Retreat journal entry August 18, 2022:

I need to acknowledge this thought. It has become unavoidable. 'I have worked hard to avoid God's calling my entire life.' There can be no more avoidance. I still don't want to pursue a vocation in ministry. I don't want to go to seminary. I'm too old. But I can no longer avoid the fact that God has some plan. I am not seeking that answer but quietly listening and no longer avoiding. There. I said it.

After my 2022 retreat, I met with a pastor and told him of my mission and vision. He suggested I check out the Christian Spirituality program at Creighton. I wanted to run again. I tried to run by looking at every other program I could find: SMU, Boston College, Loyola, Grafted Life, Soul Shepherding, Seeking the Spirit Within (NE ELCA). They all had programs in Spiritual Direction. I did *everything* I could to avoid Creighton, and yet there was no escaping *this* journey. I argued and tried bargaining with God. I had no certainty, no clue, where God was leading me or how this degree fit into God's plan for my life. I just knew I was ready to trust God for the future. This led to a recognition of how my values were coming into alignment with my spiritual and psychological conversions. The resulting intellectual conversion led to a series of conversations and actions that resulted in my enrolling in the CSP program in October 2023. To cite Vernon Gregson from *The Desire to Know*, my actions followed the path of "Be attentive. Be understanding. Be reasonable. Be responsible."<sup>10</sup> I experienced an awareness of how my mission and vision were meant to be lived out. In short order I came up with several very specific courses of action and through follow-up conversations began to embrace the possibilities. I judged (not yet discerning) some options to be more suitable than others. There were the previously mentioned non-accredited programs for Spiritual Direction, but academic accreditation is a high priority in my value system, so my values limited my options (in a good way.) Finally, I decided on the SDDR & CSP MA program at Creighton. I must add that I decided on Creighton over my own personal biases against the university. I wanted to go *anywhere else* other than that *snooty* university of those *rich kids*. To quote Gregson again "Finally we are and choose to be deciding consciousness, which is not content to have discovered the truth, or even the value of the truth we have uncovered, but chooses to act upon it or to work to achieve it."<sup>11</sup> This was a first and, I expected at the time, limited step of obedience to follow God. Little did I know at the beginning of the 2023 summer term that it would be the most spiritually brutal, in the best possible way, period of my life. I would describe these conversion experiences during late 2023 as being melted down like iron in a crucible and being completely reformed. In 2023 I had begun experiencing the silence, stillness, solitude, slowness, and sabbath that God needed me to grow in. I have not yet arrived, but my spiritual life much more closely matches the walking pace of Jesus than the interstate speeds of society around us at which I had been living.

I came into the summer term of CSP 2023 prepared for an academic experience. The Divine intervened through Janice Bachman. Many of my deeply held beliefs were challenged by her and in the Spiritual Exercises course. I came to realize just how deeply held (more like embedded) many of my complexes were and how they shaped my black-and-white, absolute view of myself and the world around me. This realization allowed me to move from a position of closed-off resistance to an openness to new insights. It also allowed me to begin to experience spiritual conversion. At that time, I wanted to walk away from the SDDR program because the psychological conversion had only just begun, and I was only beginning to integrate psychologically. It took someone literally saying to the group of us at the beginning of the third week, "In case you haven't figured it out yet, this whole program is about your personal faith

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Gregson, *The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion* (Paulist Press, 1988), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Vernon Gregson, *The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion*, 20.

formation.” I had not. I had been fighting the process and viewed the changes I was resisting as an assault on my core beliefs. But those beliefs needed to change.

My understanding of salvation was challenged by passages such as:

Salvation is planetary and global as well as personal. A shift from other-worldly to this-worldly redemptive hope flows from this new paradigm. Persons no longer seek simply their own redemption but that of all creation, including the earth itself. The life and death of Jesus must be lived out salvifically by all Christians. The universe, the sacred body of God, also needs salvation (Rom 8:18-23).<sup>12</sup>

All that my binary thinking could see was – heresy! My view until then was of salvation being individual and exclusively personal. My American capitalist values were challenged as well, and my discomfort revealed my resistance. This passage from *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed* felt like an assault on my core identity: “The increasing gap between the rich and the poor around the world, combined with a growing realization that humans are fast approaching the limits that human behavior can exert on planetary resources, means that the more fortunate among us are being called with increasing urgency to simplify and to use less that all may have a sustainable future.”<sup>13</sup> In retrospect, I am embarrassed to admit how deeply held and deeply flawed my beliefs were. As the struggle ensued, I began to experience what Denise Carmody describes: “Religious conversion is the turning-around that resets our consciousnesses in terms of unrestricted love. When we are religiously converted, our hearts, the centers of ourselves, open to embrace whatever is good, noble, true, humanizing. If so, religious conversion is a yes to the mystery of God, an acceptance of the Creator’s ground-rules or conditions.”<sup>14</sup> The God I knew up to this point was narrow-minded, or, maybe more accurately, the way I knew God was narrow-minded. What I found, among many other things, was the freedom for God to be God and to find God in all things. Freedom was scary at times because my narrow little mind began to realize just how incomprehensible God was and how prevalent the same narrow-mindedness, I was raised with was found in others. This process of being broken and reformed began to transform my heart.

There were other struggles challenging my authenticity as well such as how I had chosen to align my public values as politically conservative. These values had been shaped by my fundamentalist upbringing. I’m not sure how much I ever really believed them, but they were the path of least resistance socially. During the summer and fall of 2023, I had to reconcile my personal beliefs with my public persona. It was time to start living and professing my authentic identity. The dissonance occurred during a period of similar disruptions in my work environment, and it wasn’t until at least six months later, during the discernment course with Damian in early 2024, that I was able to separate all of the events and recognize them for what they were each individually, and for how they intersected within me. My bifurcated identity was finally becoming integrated. As Conn describes it, I “transition[ed] from a moral consciousness defined by socially imposed rules and dominated by the fear of punishment attached to disobeying them, to a moral orientation defined by concern for value and liberated by a loving care that reaches out to others.”<sup>15</sup> I was no longer willing to straddle the line or play it safe by professing a half-hearted agreement with the political powers while quietly dying inside at the injustice others were experiencing.

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Liebert and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed* (Paulist Press, 2022), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Liebert and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody and Vernon Gregson, *The Desire for Transcendence, Religious Conversion in Desires of the Human Heart* (Paulist Press, 1988), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Conn and Vernon Gregson, *The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion* (Paulist Press, 1988), 46.

There were four distinct movements of God in my life during the fall of 2023, which I now understand to be periods of conversion. The first was of purpose. Up to that point, I was still finding my identity and value—my purpose—in my profession. In August 2023, the question I was deeply considering was, “What is my purpose?” I chose not to take a class at Creighton in the fall. I chose to pursue a certification for work. My spiritual director pointed out that I was making a lot of “I” statements. As I wrestled with my purpose, I recognized I was clinging to what I had known within my comfort zone. On August 24, 2023, I wrote the following in my journal:

Deep contemplation on my purpose and realizing my job is not my purpose. Realizing I need to realign my long-term future with my purpose, mission and vision. But I’m not exactly sure how that would work.

I was trying to live my purpose in my current context of work, but that was about to change. I realized, or maybe accepted, my purpose was to be used by God to reach others. I came to recognize how my messy life experiences served a purpose now, and my identity shifted further from a performance-based mindset of “What can I do?” to a spiritual mindset of “How can I allow God to work through me and make a difference in the lives of others?”

In September 2023 the next movement of God came in the form of a question: “What does freedom to serve God look like, and what am I willing to give up for God?” I was a 53-year-old husband, father, and grandfather with a mortgage. Deep in my heart I felt a genuine desire to give up all the trappings of our society and serve God, but life as a monastic was no longer even a distant possibility. The next step was recognizing what freedom to serve God looked like and what I needed freedom from. The wealth-obsessed values of our society were at the top of the list. As a result, I moved from counting the budgetary impact of following God’s call to where I no longer saw the balance sheet as a financial sacrifice but rather as an opportunity to trust God for His providence. Thus, this second shift was in my financial values. I had already downsized my life, was aggressively paying off debt (though I didn’t realize why at the time), and made a hypothetical budget guided by the question, “What’s the bare minimum I need to live on?” My already modest lifestyle was on the block. What more was I really prepared to give up?

The third movement was unexpected. I had anticipated retiring from the bank in 15 years. I *wasn’t even considering* anything else. I knew my role at the bank might change, but I had planned to be in the comfortable world of banking until I retired. If you had asked me in December 2022, as I was disembarking from one of the monthly chartered flights, I would have told you I planned to retire from the bank. In October 2023, my employer began laying off 20% of our workforce. The shattered façade of my banking career was as critical as any of the earlier movements of God in my life. It was a period of uncertainty and discontent when I could either turn to myself again or turn to God. I chose the latter. In November 2023 I reflected on a journal entry from my August 20, 2021, retreat: “*Death to self ... Sense a distant calling to serve long term [at the Cloisters on the Platte]. But I’m not catholic so probably not. 4-5 more years of banking and then? A different calling?*”

During this period of conversion in the fall of 2023, I was able to reflect on the lone undergraduate course I took at Creighton: *Exploring the Great Questions*. I drew on this material as I identified and let go of my attachments. I had overcome poverty to enjoy relative wealth and prosperity. Over time I went from having a used car to a new car and from a modest apartment to a suburban home. This is a natural progression in American society most people can relate to. I had drunk the consumerism Kool-Aid of our society and had accumulated possessions and began to pursue the accumulation of wealth. Author Anthony DeMello says, “First comes the contact with something that gives you pleasure: a car, an attractively advertised modern appliance, a word of praise, a person’s company. Then comes the desire to hold on to

it, to repeat the gratifying sensation that this thing or person caused you.”<sup>16</sup> I was coming to understand and experience the freedom that would allow my life to be reoriented and how all I had accumulated was inhibiting my relationship with God. I was beginning to experience a new way of *being* no longer bound by an old way of *thinking*. Quoting DeMello again:

This is a consideration for spiritual giants who have come to realize that in order to find truth they need, not doctrinal formulations, but a heart that divests itself of its programming and its self-interest each time that thinking is in progress; a heart that has nothing to protect and owes nothing to ambition and therefore leaves the mind to roam unfettered, fearless and free, in search of truth; a heart that is ever ready to accept new evidence and to change its views.<sup>17</sup>

My performance-based understanding of faith, one where I’d never be good enough, was being replaced by a way of being in relationship with God. To quote de Mello one final time, “Holiness is not an achievement, it is a Grace.”<sup>18</sup> I was finally able to embrace the freedom of grace as I let go of the attachments that were preventing me from being loved by God.

The final movement in the fall of 2023 was an openness to a vocation change. My values had shifted. I recognized my purpose was greater than my career. My passion to serve God was greater than my lifestyle needs. I was finally ready to go all in on my “Yes” to God, and I began taking a step towards a vocation change. I was initially open to something in my current career field within a ministry organization, church, university, or non-profit—I was open to the options. Over lunch in November 2023, I shared with my friend Donna the movements of God in my life. She rather snarkily said, “What are you going to do, Joe, go work at Creighton Prep?” After lunch I found a job on Creighton Prep’s website and applied. I didn’t get the job, but in taking the step I found affirmation of my reoriented life. The ministry was where I was headed, but what that looked like was still unclear. I had surrendered to God’s leading in my life and found deeper peace and contentment than I had ever imagined. While I would not characterize the period of summer and fall 2023 as a Dark Night of the Soul experience, it was definitely a shift in desires as I became open to the transcendent changes in my life. This quote from author Constance Fitzgerald seems most appropriate for my experience: “The price for this new insight and compassionate love, however, seems to be darkness, suffering and even death. Our gods have to die before we reach for the God who is beyond all our human images and projections and who waits over the brink of the known in the darkness.”<sup>19</sup> As I reflect on my 19<sup>th</sup> annotation retreat journal, there is a timely entry from December as the year 2023 was ending and awareness and new insights laid the groundwork for wisdom. Week 14 of the 19<sup>th</sup> annotation retreat begins Week Two of the Spiritual Exercises. To draw a general parallel to the Spiritual Exercises, if 2023 was Week One then 2024 was going to be Week Two, full of further movements of God with the wisdom I was beginning to gain. From the Spiritual Exercises:

“Growing in wisdom often requires exposing ourselves to viewpoints that will challenge our presuppositions and stereotypes, and not just stay with whatever position feels most comfortable... Such illumination gives us the ability to discern truth from lies, life from death, God’s will from the will of the world.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love* (Crown Publishing Group, 1991), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*, 154.

<sup>19</sup> Constance Fitzgerald, *The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation in Desire, Darkness and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse* (Liturgical Press, 2021), 168.

<sup>20</sup> Karen R. Keen, *The Jesus Way: Practicing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (Contemplatio Publishing, 2020), 91.

I would still face the confidence-shaking lies of the enemy that *I'm not good enough* or am *irredeemable*, but I had come to know the voice of God better as my values, understanding, and viewpoints we're being redefined and coming into alignment with God's emerging will in my life.

By the end of 2023 I had experience a year of surrender to the new direction for my life as I came to embrace my authentic desires, which, to quote Sheldrake, "... spring ultimately from the deep inner wells where the longing for God runs freely."<sup>21</sup> It wasn't until a few months later in the spring of 2024, while in the discernment course, that I recognized the importance of befriending my desires. It was through the discernment course that I came to recognize, "Authentic desires come from our essential selves rather than from the surface of our personalities or from our immediate reaction to situations and experiences."<sup>22</sup> One phrase in Sandra Cronk's book, *Dark Night Journey*, resonates with what I experienced during that time. She speaks of uncovering ourselves: "Those places inside ourselves which we have hidden from the world, and even from our own consciousness, are now opened for God to reorder."<sup>23</sup>

The process of becoming open was just the beginning. Years earlier, my wife had asked me about the changes we were going through. I had fought the process of sanctification my entire life, but my advice to her then was to not resist it. Beginning in the summer of 2023, the subtle reshaping of my desires was like being melted down in a crucible. I was being reshaped and reformed at my core. Au writes, "Desires reflect the longings of our heart and point to an incompleteness yearning for fulfilment,"<sup>24</sup> and yet I had been taught that I should suppress or not trust my desires. As Au states, "Often a legalistic notion of the will of God may lead us hypocritically to falsify our true aspirations. Discernment is drastically undermined when we think that God is a harsh law giver, uninterested in our thoughts and desires, concerned only with imposing upon us, a rigid, predetermined plan."<sup>25</sup> I have experienced the influences of the legalistic distrust of desires, as well as the obstacle of introjects and how the "shoulds" that other people impose on us have the effect of personality disintegration.<sup>26</sup> These are among the many influences that may have negatively shaped how I had viewed and suppressed my desires. The firm foundation on which we can anchor our desires is found "When the love of God becomes once more our highest and only absolute good."<sup>27</sup> It is through the process of discerning my authentic desires that I can experience what Kinerk described: "The distinction between 'what I desire' and 'what desire God gives me' begins to blur. The deeper I reached into myself, the more I experiences desires which are uniquely my own but also God-given."<sup>28</sup> This ongoing process of discerning our desires makes "our life dynamic, keeping us keenly on the lookout for new possibilities."<sup>29</sup> I've found that it is in the healthy pursuit of our desires that God continually reveals the purpose of our existence and our unique opportunities to participate in the kingdom of God.

## Awakening & Reorienting

I began breaking free from my former understanding of faith as way of *thinking* or *doing* as I was beginning Wendy Wright's Prayer class in the spring of 2024. The following quote sums up the impact of fundamentalism on my faith journey: "Biblical fundamentalists, for example, narrowly confine God's voice and handicap their search for divine guidance. They straitjacket

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<sup>21</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* (Orbis Books, 2016), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 131.

<sup>25</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 151.

<sup>27</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 131.

the truth by making 'their literalist and simplistic interpretation [of scripture] the only legitimate one,' states Episcopal Bishop J. Jon Bruno.<sup>30</sup> A factual understanding had defined my faith journey until CSP. Sheldrake points out in his chapter on the divorce of theology and spirituality, "However, its intellectual origins lie in the theological developments in the High Middle Ages where 'thinking' began to be understood as a mastery of facts and details rather than attention to the truth expressed in symbols. To put it more simply, reason began to triumph over imagination and the ability to define truth over experiences of the sacred."<sup>31</sup> As a result of the prayer and discernment courses, my thinking and my understanding of spirituality went from being black and white to shades of gray and eventually brilliant color. I learned as much about the various faith traditions as I did about prayer in Wendy Wright's prayer class. I regained the freedom to accept diversity. The same diversity I had enjoyed early in my faith journey when I was a child. Doctrine and theology shape our understanding and our thinking, but spirituality transcends our human experience. This is part of why I see spirituality as a means by which we can achieve unity. One of the most important points made during the Prayer Course, for me, is a quote in Wendy Wright's book from the author of *Tree of Life*, Steven Chase: "think of prayer as involving the stuff of life: 'a way of being, feeling, sensing, understanding, doing, dwelling, caring, seeing, knowing, imagining, reasoning, falling, failing, suffering, relating and transforming.'"<sup>32</sup> (Emphasis added.) Not to discount the importance of theology, doctrine, and orthodoxy, but they prevented me from **experiencing** a way of being. I have come to see how this way of being, of practicing the way of Christ, is more beneficial in building relationships and finding unity as we experience our faith in community with others. Around this time, I had a conversation with Pastor Ashley Hall about my interest in spirituality and ecumenism. It was during this conversation that I first learned the term spiritual ecumenism. I later found this quote in *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* by Cardinal Walter Conn who was quoting: *Unitatis redintegratio* "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name 'spiritual ecumenism.'"<sup>33</sup>

A pair of podcasts from the prayer course were particularly important in helping me recognize how my view of other Christian traditions had been negatively shaped during my formative teen years and also how my heart and soul were being transformed. The first was a Catholic Comments podcast hosted by John J. O'Keefe and Wendy M. Wright, titled "Baptist and Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue," featuring Dr. Stephen Harmon, a Professor of Historical Theology at Gardner – Webb University. He described how the Baptists have their origins in the quest for the true church and were suspicious of Catholicism, which the Baptists did not see as the true church. They eventually entered the ecumenical dialogue because there was an openness to finding the true church. I will admit when I first listened to this in spring 2024, I had a negative, anti-Baptist bias in my mind. I had not yet read the passage in *The Discerning Heart* and had not yet come to understand the influence the Baptist church had on my image of God. Listening with fresh ears as I was writing this paper, I found a few positive ecumenical elements. The first was a pair of agreements regarding Mary. One was on how Mary needs to be recovered as a model for discipleship, and the other was on how Baptists are not praying *to* Mary but how they could pray *with* Mary. The other impactful take away was when Harmon

<sup>30</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology* (Orbis Books, 1998), 40.

<sup>32</sup> Wendy M. Wright, *The Essential Spirituality Handbook* (Liguori Publications, 2009), 118.

<sup>33</sup> "Unitatis redintegratio," Second Vatican Council November 21, 1964.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed August 28, 2025).

said, “There are all these rich gifts that are preserved uniquely in other traditions that my own tradition can accept as a gift into our own pattern of faith and practice without giving up who we are.”<sup>34</sup> He went on to speak of the rich liturgical and prayer practices like *Lectio Divina*. It was the first time I heard a Baptist acknowledge how he “Belong[s] to the whole church and the whole church belongs to him.”<sup>35</sup> This was the first time I came to recognize how an exchange of gifts is part of spiritual ecumenism.

Another podcast we listened to for the prayer course was *Catholic Comments* hosted by John J. O’Keefe and Wendy M. Wright, titled “Lutheran Catholic Accord,” featuring Dr. Ashely Hall. Dr. Hall reflected on themes that were familiar to me. The context for this podcast was the upcoming trip by Pope Francis to Sweden to meet with the archbishop of the National Lutheran Church, a visit with religious significance as the archbishop was a woman. Dr. Hall spoke of how Luther is recognized as a common teacher, and how justification was the primary theological divide of the Reformation. O’Keefe referred to the meeting as “a celebration,” but Dr. Hall corrects him, saying it is “a commemoration.” Dr. Hall goes on to say the commemoration is one of a “mutual repentance and reconciliation, recognizing that whatever motivated us in the first place, that nonetheless fractured the church and we both bear responsibility for repenting of that and moving forward in a way to find unity.”<sup>36</sup> Dr. Hall also presented many of the ecumenical themes that I found familiar in my ecumenical journey, such as the importance of beginning from a perspective of unity and not division, to strengthen what we have in common, and to continuously be transformed by the encounter and mutual witness of faith. The podcast included an important acknowledgement of how our differences are not over what is believed, but rather, in the example of the upcoming meeting, who has the right to preside at the altar, particularly in light of the Lutheran Church’s ordination of women.

My developing understanding of ecumenism was not limited to the classroom. My wife and I were participating in the previously mentioned 19<sup>th</sup> annotation retreat, which began in September of 2023 and lasted until May of 2024. The three other people on this retreat were Creighton employees. One had recently completed the SDDR graduate program; another one was finishing up her certificate in the Ignatian Tradition; and the third was Dr. Eileen Burke Sullivan. We met with this group approximately every other Sunday morning at St. John’s church on Creighton’s campus. I was deeply moved by my experiences interacting with Eileen. I came into this program with a narrow-minded view of religion. One of the most impactful stories that Eileen shared was of her early work as a liturgist. She had been the choir director at the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches in a small town. She described going from church to church every Sunday morning to lead the choirs and how one of the pastors even wrote the Pope asking for his permission for Eileen to receive communion in their church. For the next several months reflecting on her story would bring me to tears. She knew that my wife and I were looking for a new church. She recommended Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church, where ultimately my wife and I would become members. I also remember her pointing out that Ashley Hall was there. I didn’t have a clue at the time who Ashley Hall was or why she would mention him. Once I met him, I understood why. He shared the same interest in ecumenism she did. It was an interest that I see as a part of my call to ministry as well. As the summer 2024 term began, a fellow student gave me some of the course material for the CSP 717 Jungian Psychology class. From the initial material shared with me, I was able to spend some time understanding my shadow. From Janice Bachman’s “Glossary of Jungian Terms” the context of Jungian psychology our shadow is an unconscious part of the personality characterized by traits and attitudes, whether negative or positive, which the conscious ego tends to reject or ignore.

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<sup>34</sup> John J O’Keefe, Wendy M Wright, and Stephen Harmon, “Catholic Comments: Baptist and Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue,” 2015.

<sup>35</sup> O’Keefe, Wright, Harmon, “Catholic Comments: Baptist and Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue”

<sup>36</sup> John J O’Keefe, Wendy M Wright, and H Ashley Hall, “Catholic Comments: Lutheran Catholic Accord,” 2016.

During this time, I came to understand why every time I thought about Eileen and Ashley I was moved to tears. One aspect of my shadow has been an inferiority complex. This passage from *Urgings of the Heart: A Spirituality of Integration* helped me understand why I was so moved by their vocation and life experiences. I could identify with what Au and Cannon wrote:

Passive and dependent on others, they see themselves as having little to offer and generally feel sorry for themselves... Although they participate in life, they do so from the sidelines because they think they are not 'good enough' to make an individual and creative contribution... Those who feel inferior do so because they have not found their own niche in life... They tend to overvalue the gifts of others, admiring them and wishing to be like them.<sup>37</sup>

I had identified my shadow and in doing so could take the next steps to integrate this new information into my life.

My early faith experiences were blended— Pentecostal and Catholic— but this harmony was disrupted by the fundamentalist Southern Baptist influences during my teenage years. I was led to believe my faith identity was inherently flawed and not good enough. Not only were both traditions flawed, according to the Southern Baptists, but they couldn't co-exist. For decades my heart, which found grace and the presence of God in both places, was continually feeling judged as inadequate. As I learned more about Christian spirituality I was once again able to reconnect with my diverse faith experiences. In Ashley and Eileen, I saw two people who had a strong personal faith and a scholarly depth of knowledge, individuals who were capable of creating space for and even inviting a different perspective, which contributed to their mutual respect and understandings. I saw two people who had not just been living the life buried within me but were thriving personally and professionally. As educators, they were influencing the lives of others. I saw in them the person that I knew God had been calling me to be.

On my eight-day retreat at the Creighton retreat center in 2024, I spent time reflecting on my recent faith experiences. On May 22, 2024, I wrote the following in my journal: "We gather ecumenically, as the people of God divided by tradition, history, and practice but united by our baptism into Christ." These were the words printed in a program for the 3-hour service at my church on Good Friday. It was an ecumenical service where seven speakers from Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church gave homilies. A month later on May 3, I attended Ablaze, a charismatic worship service in a Catholic Church at Saint Gerald in Ralston. The following day, May 4, I enjoyed a bonus Easter experience when I attended a young friend's chrismation into the Orthodox Church. On Sunday, May 5, I was at St. John's Church on Creighton's campus for a 19th annotation retreat and finally, at 11 o'clock, I was at my own Lutheran Church serving for the first time as a communion assistant. It was an invigorating weekend for me because the blending of our Christian faith traditions fills my soul. At the end of the first day of my May 2024 retreat Marie Thompson stopped me after mass and invited me to receive communion. She explained it was an exceptional circumstance, and I was welcome to receive the sacrament. Uncertain about how to proceed, I turned to Google. A resource on the ELCA's website reassured me it was ok to receive communion at a Catholic mass, and so for the next seven days I did.

A significant turning point in my journey came during the Doctrinal Foundations course during the summer term of CSP in 2024. My changing perspective was evident in my weekly essays. Each essay was written on a specific topic related to the coursework, but the approach I took, or at least tried to take, was from the perspective of what we can agree upon and why we can't agree upon everything. The first essay was on Baptism. Even at the time of the Patristic

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<sup>37</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon, *Urgings of the Heart: A Spirituality of Integration* (Paulist, 1995), 37.

Fathers, there were several different perspectives on how baptism was to occur. An essay from the second week was on the Eucharist. These two sacraments were not agreed upon during Christianity's infancy, and they are no more agreed upon now. What had changed, at least in me, was my willingness to understand new perspectives and recognize how differing perspectives have existed since the earliest days of the Christian tradition. One of the most helpful examples shared by Dr. Hall in the course was of a Saturday Night Live skit wherein Mike Myers' character says, "You're putting the wrong **emphasis** on the wrong **syllable**." It's not that the way any particular faith tradition sees things is wrong. But it is in recognizing that while we might see the same sacrament in a different way, we are still celebrating the same sacrament of baptism or the Eucharist.

On the second to last day of class, we finally made it to the Reformation. The conversation turned to the doctrine of justification. Dr. Hall had framed the Catholic versus Protestant understanding of justification and the role of works in each tradition. It was at that point that a Catholic classmate sitting next to me said, in all seriousness, "If this is what the Catholic Church believes, then I need to become Protestant." It was at that point Dr. Hall said, "Let me, as a Lutheran, help you hold on to your Catholic faith." He then explained a more detailed understanding of the Catholic tradition on justification. Then came a conversation about the *Joint Declaration on Doctrine of Justification*. Two passages from this document reinforced Dr. Hall's point about a different emphasis of understanding. The first is as follows:

The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths.<sup>38</sup>

A second quote is the statement of affirmation: "[We] re-affirm the basic truths of the doctrine of justification which are expressed in JDDJ, emphasizing that the message of God's grace is powerful and urgently needed in our time. We commit ourselves to communicate this message to people of our time in meaningful and relevant ways through our common witness and service."<sup>39</sup> The updated version of the JDDJ, from which these citations come, includes statements from the World Methodist Council, Anglican Consultative Council, and World Communion of Reformed Churches. Five Christian traditions have come to agreement, recognizing their unique perspectives and emphases on what was, arguably, the most divisive theological matter of the Protestant Reformation.

Another discovery that further sealed my commitment to ecumenism was related to the Full Communion partners of the ELCA. Suddenly ecumenism wasn't just a bridge across the Catholic – Protestant divide but also within the Protestant tradition as well. Upon reading the following, my decision to become an ELCA Lutheran was further affirmed: "A central document to Lutherans is the *Augsburg Confession*. Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession* states that 'the true unity of the church' is present where the gospel is rightly preached and sacraments rightly administered. The ELCA is committed to this model of full communion as an authentic

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<sup>38</sup> "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran World Federation. December 30, 2024. [https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint\\_declaration\\_2019\\_en.pdf](https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf), 19.

<sup>39</sup> The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification", 56.

expression of Christian unity.”<sup>40</sup> My importance of my winding faith journey through different traditions and practices came into focus as I recognized how there had been different practices going back as far as the Patristic Fathers. Our understanding continues to change and evolve over time, and yet it is through our different traditions, histories, and practices, we could come together united in our baptism into Christ.

The content of the Spirituality and Social Concerns course taught by Tom Kelly still weighs heavily on my mind. It has caused a holy and restless discontent as I continue to wrestle with the ways in which God is calling me to advocacy. It also opened my eyes to see how our nation is like every other empire that has fallen and how the union between church and state is anything but holy. In his book *Engaged Spirituality*, Nangle quotes Jesuit Jon Sorbino who says, “Today’s empire is the United States. It imposes its will on the whole planet, with immense power. Its mystique is its triumph over all others. This empire like the ones that came before it has its legions - transnational corporations, multinational lending agencies, and other countries that in the words of President Bush are coalitions of the willing.”<sup>41</sup> When I started CSP back in 2023, I wasn’t looking forward to the Social Concerns class because I knew it would make me uncomfortable. By the time I took it in the spring of 2025, I was already uncomfortable, and the Social Concerns class only reinforced how the force of the United States empire was working in direct opposition to the Kingdom of God. What I learned in the Social Concerns class reaffirmed much of what I had come to understand through my studies of Christian nationalism over the last few years. The following is not a quote ripped from today’s headlines, though it very well could be, but rather from one of the Medellin Colombian documents in 1968. “The traditionalists or conservatives show little or no social conscience, have a middle-class orientation and consequently do not question the social structures. In general they are primarily concerned with preserving their privileges which they identify with the ‘established order.’”<sup>42</sup> The truth is this course gave me a stomach-sinking, nauseating perspective on how *we the people* have contributed to building an empire that is in opposition to God. The February 2023 research of the Public Religious Research Institute and the Brookings Institute “... established a clear link between Christian nationalism ideology and racism, xenophobia, misogyny, authoritarian and anti-democratic sentiments, and an appetite for political violence. The most remarkable finding: Nearly 90% of white adherents to Christian nationalism agree that ‘God intended America to be a new promised land’ run by ‘European Christians.’”<sup>43</sup> I will admit that when it comes to the empire of the United States, I still remain discouraged. Where I find hope is in bridging the spiritual divide.

It is not our orthodoxy that will bring us together but orthopraxy. I believe it is still possible to reclaim our Christian tradition from the Empire of the United States and from Christian nationalism in particular. With our spirituality as common ground, we can work together, putting our faith into practice for the Kingdom of God. Referring to Matthew 25 Nangle writes, “Jesus tells us that the basis for God’s judgment on our lives won’t be religious activities and practices - the number of prayers we’ve said, how many church services we’ve attended, how much self-denial or penance we’ve practice. He says the determining factor will be what we did or did not do for the hungry, thirsty, unknown, naked, sick, and imprisoned human beings who came across our path in life.”<sup>44</sup> Christian spirituality recognizes that each individual experiences the Scriptures differently. Spirituality is not found in intellectually dissecting the

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<sup>40</sup> “Full Communion Partners,” ELCA, July 31, 2025. <https://www.elca.org/faith/ecumenical-and-inter-religious-relations/full-communion>.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Nangle, *Engaged Spirituality* (Orbis Books, 2008), xvii.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Nangle, *Engaged Spirituality*, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicalism in the Age of Extremism* (HarperCollins, 2023), 434.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Nangle, *Engaged Spirituality*, 24.

encounter on the road to Emmaus, but it is found by putting ourselves into the text. It is in our spiritual experiences where we can connect. Cardinal Walter Conn states in *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* "The work of ecumenism, therefore, is rooted in the foundations of Christian spirituality."<sup>45</sup> I have found that contemporary author and thought leader John Mark Comer's books — *Practicing the Way* and *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*— resonate across denominational and theological divides. I have found this to be true over the last two years having had conversations with people from multiple denominations and faith traditions who approached me with their experiences of embracing spirituality after reading these books. It is when we begin to *live* more like Christ that we can connect with one another. Being part of another person's faith journey is one of the things I look forward to most about being a pastor. Now that I've become free from the absolute, oppressive ideals of fundamentalism, I have found the freedom to enjoy being a companion to others who may be on a faith journey that is drastically different from mine. In the end, though, regardless of the specific path we are on, we are moving in the same direction, and it is less about how someone else is getting there or how their faith is formed on the journey, than it is about how we are living out our faith in a way that honors Christ and brings others to Him.

My final paper for the Social Concerns class could be described as red letter living, or being a follower of the teachings of Jesus, in the age of empire. The following quote cited in my final paper for the course sums up the contrast of my experience with fundamentalist orthopraxy versus a gospel orthodoxy:

The Empire elevates the rich and forgets about the poor, teaching us to seek wealth above all else. The Empire teaches us to be selfish and self-serving, to be ruthless and violent to get what we want, and to oppress the poor and vulnerable in our pursuit of our own pleasure. The Kingdom stands in stark contrast to the Empire though. The Kingdom belongs to the poor and they are called blessed (Luke 6:20). Those who live by Kingdom principles are loving, generous, and merciful, even to their enemies (Luke 6:35). Those in the Kingdom do not take advantage of the vulnerable, but love the vulnerable as they love themselves (Leviticus 19:18,33-34). The Kingdom is based on humbling yourself, rather than exalting yourself over others (Luke 14:7-14).<sup>46</sup>

Returning to the orthopraxy of our faith and living as Jesus lived and acting the way he calls us to act is how we form community across the denominational lines that may divide us. The emphasis is less on doctrine and more on how we practice our faith. The following is from the ecumenical dialogue portion of *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis:

If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.<sup>47</sup>

I could not sum up the ecumenical importance of our shared spirituality better if I tried, so I won't.

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<sup>45</sup> Cardinal Walter Conn, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (New City Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Jenifer Nalbandian, "Empire vs. the Kingdom."

<sup>47</sup> "Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis," Pope Francis, The Holy See. November 24, 2013. [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf) (accessed August 05, 2025), 183-184.

## Next Journey

My future has been defined by my past in unexpected ways, and I now recognize how Spiritual Ecumenism is the golden thread of my faith journey and future ministry work. Nearly 40 years ago when I asked my youth pastor at the Southern Baptist Church how he knew he was being called to ministry, the question he told me to ask myself was “If there’s anything else you can see yourself doing in life – do that instead of ministry.” I spent 35 years trying to do anything other than what God was calling me to do. I mean anything. I went as far as I could on my own and in 2018 reached the end of myself. I have come from trying to live my life **any way other** than whole heartedly serving God to a point in my life where I cannot envision living my life any other way than serving the people of God. My next journey is a journey I avoided most of my life. It is through avoiding this journey that I have developed the life experiences that I will use on my journey. God gives us purpose and meaning even when the choices we make aren’t in the direction he is leading, and that is the story of my faith journey and life to this point. Those life experiences have prepared me to relate to others who have gone through similar experiences. I’ve developed an understanding of various Christian traditions as I have journeyed through them, even as I have not always agreed with them. This understanding will enable me to relate to others who are living out that particular tradition and wrestling with the same divisiveness. The church has an opportunity to be part of the solution to some of the social challenges we are facing in this country today, challenges that won’t be solved with doctrines or dogmas but rather through relationships. It has been my experience that focusing our attention on doctrines and dogmas can lead to disagreement and division. Our personal and individual spiritual experiences can lead us to unity. As we share our spiritual journeys, we are brought closer together in unity. When people connect with their own spirituality, they are empowered to connect interpersonally on a spiritual level. Pete Scazzero and John Mark Comer are among the thought leaders and authors who are writing more about a lived faith or orthopraxy contrary to the cultural preoccupation with orthodoxy and a “right” way of thinking. Only God knows where the journey ahead leads, but based on my experiences and what I’ve learned during this program, here are a few possibilities of how I may use this degree as the church adapts to meeting the needs of our society while remaining true to our great commission to make disciples.

My experience with Gen Z and the next generation gives me hope for a renewed Christian faith. This generation is seeking a spiritual faith experience. I know of a young man who recently went from being a ‘none’ with no religious affiliation to becoming Eastern Orthodox. In the article “Is Eastern Orthodoxy the Next Big Thing for Young Men?” author Trevin Wax shares lessons for evangelicals which were validated by my young friend as at least part of his motivation to select the Eastern Orthodox Church. What is said of Eastern Orthodoxy in the article can be said for the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed and other traditions who adhere to a traditional liturgy. I share the author’s perspective that we have an opportunity to “model a faith that’s vibrant, rooted, disciplined, and, above all, centered on God.”<sup>48</sup> On my way to and from my eight-day retreat in May 2024, I drove a Dominican sister, originally from Nigeria, who was attending Ohio Dominican University. We discussed the Catholic church in Africa. She shared her concerns about how they are losing parishioners to the charismatic Pentecostal church. The young people aren’t leaving over doctrinal or theological differences but because of the worship experience. According to the article “Why is Protestantism Flourishing in the

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<sup>48</sup> “Is Eastern Orthodoxy the Next Big Thing for Young Men?” Trevin Wax, January 07, 2025.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/eastern-orthodoxy-young-men/> (accessed August 02, 2025)

Developing World?” the Pentecostal church is the denomination with the greatest growth rate.<sup>49</sup> One example of this may be “The African Praise Experience (TAPE or Experience)”<sup>50</sup> which was featured in the article *Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?*

The astute reader may notice that the experience of my young Orthodox friend and the observations of my Catholic friend in Africa appear to be in conflict. They are not. They are examples of diverse worship experience – each having their own place in the church. Based on my experience at Ablaze<sup>51</sup> in a Catholic church, I believe a more charismatic experience is possible also within my Lutheran tradition. Churches can create an atmosphere of worship that invites the Spirit of God in and allows the Spirit to move. I’ve experienced it, and it is the highlight of my month. When I first attended Ablaze in November 2023, I had no idea what to expect. Charismatic worship in a Catholic church – you can’t find two more opposite extremes of worship experiences. I attended by myself (my wife Trish wasn’t feeling well), and it was probably for the best. I was uninhibited. Within the first few minutes, I experienced the whisper of the Holy Spirit: “take off your shoes, you’re standing on Holy Ground” - and so I did. Ablaze worship on the first Friday of the month at Saint Gerald’s Catholic Church has become a regular part of my spiritual nourishment. It is an experience I share with a *couple hundred* other people who attend worship (adoration) on a Friday night. On average, about forty percent of those in attendance are not Catholic. Ablaze has also been asked to lead worship in non-Catholic churches. The demographic age groups break down in roughly thirds: 20-35, 35-50, and 50+. The attendees come from a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds. This is an example of how we can experience unity within community as we follow the Spirits lead and as we celebrate our diverse faith traditions. Saint Gerald’s has not changed their core identity— they are still a Roman Catholic Church— but they have found a way to remain true to their faith tradition while providing a diverse worship experience. Another similar experience is Taiz’e which is described in an article by Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke as a “clear example of spiritual ecumenism, a form of ecumenism that is not based on dialogue on doctrinal and ethical issues but purely on common worship that considers the deeper yearnings of the society in which we live.”<sup>52</sup>

I believe the church has an opportunity to be part of the solution for the current mental health and loneliness epidemics.<sup>53</sup> Loneliness is part of the mental health crisis Gen Z’s are experiencing. The following quote is from the book *Untangling Your Emotions* by Jennie Allen: “But something is happening with this generation that is radical and that no one saw coming: The ones who love Jesus are zealots. The ones who love Jesus really love Jesus. They throw off their sin and struggles faster than anyone I have seen so they can follow Jesus with reckless abandon. They want God. And it isn’t even complicated for them. They just want more of Him. When Christians were going to church just because they were supposed to, ambivalence grew. But this generation is saying, ‘You know what? No one is pressuring me to do this, but I’m going to follow Jesus, and I don’t care

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<sup>49</sup> “Why is Protestantism flourishing in the developing world?” R.G., November 09, 2017.

<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/09/why-is-protestantism-flourishing-in-the-developing-world> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>50</sup> Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, “Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 2020: 98.

<sup>51</sup> “Ablaze House of Prayer,” Fr. Michael Voithofer, 2024 <https://www.ablazeworship.org/about.html> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>52</sup> Okpaleke, “Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?”, 94.

<sup>53</sup> “The Loneliness Epidemic Has a Cure,” David French, September 01, 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/01/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-aei-education.html> (accessed July 31, 2025).

what it costs.' And God is moving. This younger generation wants God. And they are in a full-on mental health crisis. Both are true."<sup>54</sup>

This quote from Jennie was in the context of an exchange she was citing in her book between her and a Gen Z student. Our loneliness epidemic and mental health crisis is not limited to a single generation. In a recent article, Jillian Racoosin states, "The paradox is that at a time when technology brings us closer together, sharing information faster than ever, it's also created closer relationships with our devices rather than people."<sup>55</sup> The mental health crisis cannot be ignored. For some the first step may be integrating their spiritual and emotional health. Resources like *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Pete Scazzero and *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* by John Mark Comer speak to our contemporary society in a way that underscores the importance of silence, solitude, and sabbath rest in our current context. These practices are countercultural in our fast-paced and noisy society consumed by social media. It is through these practices that we can once again recognize our need for God and make room for his presence.<sup>56</sup> I believe the church has an opportunity to be the place where people go to develop the spiritual practices of silence, solitude, stillness, and connecting with others who are also seeking a deeper relationship with God as people participate in the Emotionally Healthy or Practicing the Way courses.

One final way I may apply what I've learned in this program is by running programs like Alpha. "Alpha helps create a space for honest conversation around some of life's biggest questions."<sup>57</sup> Within my Lutheran denomination, I've received a mostly cold reception to the idea of running an Alpha program. I've been told it is "not Lutheran enough." That's like saying spirituality is too Catholic for us. What better way to engage in ecumenical dialogue and redeem the witness of the church than to say - come on in, there is room for your way of understanding and for us to even disagree.

## Conclusion

It was during the Good Friday service at Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church on March 29, 2024, that I first encountered the following quote in the program for the three-hour service: "We gather ecumenically, as the people of God divided by tradition, history, and practice but united by our baptism into Christ." It was an ecumenical service featuring representatives from several Christian traditions. That was the moment in time when everything about my diverse faith experience came into focus. It was during that Good Friday service that I recognized how my faith journey could be used to overcome the divisiveness in our society as we work towards unity and how the divisiveness that inhibited my spiritual growth for decades could be turned around for the glory of God. The Good Friday service was one example of how unity could be experienced without an expectation of uniformity. A faith community had gathered, and each person brought their own perspective and made their own contribution, which resulted in a richer and fuller exchange of spiritual gifts. March 29, 2024, sealed the conviction of my heart and soul to accompany others on their faith journeys, acknowledging our differences and unique perspectives as we work together as a community of faith. *Though we may be divided by tradition, history, and practice, we choose to gather ecumenically united by our baptism into Christ.*

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<sup>54</sup> Jennie Allen, *Untangling Your Emotions* (WaterBrook, 2024), 168.

<sup>55</sup> "Nebraska lawmakers, organizers look to tackle America's loneliness epidemic," Brian Mastre, September 02, 2024. <https://www.wowt.com/2024/09/02/nebraska-lawmakers-organizers-look-tackle-americas-loneliness-epidemic/> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>56</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (WaterBrook, 2019), 54.

<sup>57</sup> "About Alpha," Alpha <https://alphausa.org/about/> (accessed September 15, 2025).

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