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Missionary Reentry Transition and Disrupted Spiritual Friendships: An Introduction to Practical Theological Consideration of Transition and Ambiguity in Life Together in Christ

Gail Hutchinson

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

MISSIONARY REENTRY TRANSITION AND
DISRUPTED SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS:
AN INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION OF
TRANSITION AND AMBIGUITY IN LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRIST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

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To my parents, Joe and Marge Magnuson

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May Christ richly bless you all!

ABSTRACT

Scattered throughout communities in the U.S. are Christians who have returned home following a season of living and ministering overseas. Many returnees experience a lingering sense of disorientation and disconnection that has been described as feeling like “a stranger at home” or “everything sort of fits but not quite.” Relationships with family and local friends are often affected in ways that are unclear, uncanny, and unexpected. Spiritual companionship is disrupted as returnees and local Christian friends become partial strangers to one another. Reconnection is further hindered when disorientation, unsettledness, and ambiguity are not well understood, acknowledged, and supported in many Christian settings. This dissertation explores how Christians in disorienting life circumstances can reconnect in genuine spiritual companionship with other Christians who have not experienced similar circumstances.

Section One discusses common characteristics of reentry transition and implications for spiritual formation in community. Section Two identifies resources related to transitions, reentry, and spiritual formation in community and evaluates potential benefits and deficiencies regarding the ministry problem. Section Three presents a solution integrating identified missing elements: (1) a theological and Christian spirituality framework for disorienting and isolating life circumstances; (2) greater awareness of and more adequate response to the disorientation and ambiguity inherent in reentry transition and other disorienting life situations; and (3) an approach to cultivating spiritual companionship in life together in Christ that recognizes disorientation and ambiguity as integral parts of spiritual formation. The artifact is a handbook and devotional guide that incorporates these components. It is written for Christians who desire spiritual companionship but feel stuck in the process due to life complications. The

artifact's overall goal is to help Christians take steps toward engaging in spiritual companionship in ways that are individually and mutually attentive and responsive to God's loving presence and redemptive purposes in life's varied complicated circumstances.

GLOSSARY

local resident. Individuals whose primary residence and work has always been in their country of origin whether or not they have ever traveled overseas.

reentry/ reentry transition. The process of reentry into “primary home contexts after an intercultural sojourn,” that is, after immersion on a daily basis in a cross-cultural setting for an extended period of time.¹ Related terms used in the literature include re-entry, repatriation, reverse culture shock, re-acculturation, reintegration.

returnee. Individuals who have returned to live in their country of origin (home) following a time of living in another country (overseas, abroad). Other terms used in the literature include repatriate, global nomad, or intercultural sojourner.

transition. “The inner process through which people come to terms with a change, as they let go of the way things used to be and reorient themselves to the way that things are now.”²

¹ Judith N. Martin and Teresa Harrell, “Reentry Training for Intercultural Sojourners,” in *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, 2nd ed., eds. Dan Landis and Rabi S. Bhagat (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 307-308.

² William Bridges, “Transition as ‘the Way Through,’” William Bridges & Associates, accessed December 31, 2016, http://www.wmbridges.com/articles/article-way_through.html.

SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM

None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.

—Andrew Walls

A Spiritual Friendship Disrupted

Anna and her husband Bill have been part of a Bible translation project in Asia for eight years.¹ A year ago, they returned to their home area in the United States from Asia for a nine-month furlough. A visa renewal snafu has delayed their return to Asia. As the delay continues into a fourth month, they face growing concern about their finances and need for longer-term housing. Bill is grateful to be able to continue with translation checking, working via email and Skype with several mother-tongue translators in Asia. However, Anna is waiting to hear who will fill in for her role as area coordinator for scripture engagement workshops.

Last month Bill traveled to Asia to meet face-to-face with the rest of the translation team. He returned encouraged about translation progress and more anxious than ever to return to the field as soon as possible. Anna is more conflicted about the delay. She struggles to make sense of all that is going on in her life. Nothing seems clear or straightforward. She is glad to be back with family and friends and yet longs for life and ministry overseas. She believes that God definitely called them to overseas missionary service but at times she inwardly hopes his plan includes allowing them to remain stateside, especially with their eldest daughter college-bound soon. At the same

¹ This “real-to-life” story illustrates some of the typical issues that can hinder the development of spiritual friendships between returnees and local residents in a local fellowship. The main characters, Anna and Sarah, are fictional. However, their circumstances and relational challenges represent a composite of real-life scenarios, drawn from my own experience, training in pastoral counseling and spiritual formation, and work as a transitions consultant with missionaries in transition.

time, she feels like a stranger in her own hometown. Home does not feel like home anymore. She feels disoriented and very alone. Oddly displaced. Neither here nor there.

Anna cannot see how God will work all things together for good. Life seems so complicated and unclear. She feels alone, confused, and ashamed of her disorientation and lack of trust. She longs to talk openly with someone and yet cannot imagine adequately describing her experiences to anyone. She cannot make sense of it herself. Confused, alone, and scared, she knows she should reach out for help, but to whom? The most likely person would be Sarah who has been a close friend and sister in the Lord for many years. Anna hesitates to share openly with her. Instead, she tries to keep hidden how unsettled, anxious, and alone she feels.

Anna and Sarah first met at a women's Bible study fellowship as two young moms overwhelmed with the challenges of juggling life with small children. The connection between them grew slowly due to differences in their backgrounds and personalities. However, they continued to be drawn together by similar desire for adult conversation and spiritual support. As their friendship developed, they found ways to help one another live with growing awareness of the presence of God in their lives. Thus, when Anna's mom was diagnosed with cancer, Sarah was the first person Anna turned to. Sarah came alongside Anna with hope-sustaining sensitivity, drawing on her own journey with the Lord through a season of grief and loss. Anna, in turn, helped Sarah find strength in the Lord when a failed business venture created a serious financial crisis for Sarah's family. Walking with one another as spiritual companions through common life experiences and crises enabled them both to grow in loving God and loving others.

A time came when Anna and her husband sensed God's leading toward full-time missionary service overseas. As Anna and her husband sought to discern God's leading, Anna's friendship with Sarah often provided a safe place for Anna to work through mixed thoughts and emotions. In turn, Sarah also worked through her own ambivalence about the loss of Anna's presence locally. By the time God's leading was confirmed and a departure date set, Anna and Sarah recognized their relationship faced major adjustments and prepared for staying connected meaningfully in light of changes ahead.

Although it was not the same as being friends in person, Anna and Sarah found they were able to connect by email and Skype. Sarah familiarized herself with some of the unique challenges of intercultural life and ministry from missionary reports and biographies. Anna appreciated having someone she trusted and who knew her well with whom to process perplexing or humbling experiences of language learning and intercultural relationship building. Over time, Sarah grew more attentive to Christ as the Good Shepherd through reflections on Anna's first-hand stories of everyday life with semi-nomadic pastoral people. The longer Anna and her husband lived abroad, however, the more Anna and Sarah struggled to connect on the deeper level they formerly enjoyed. Anna's life overseas remained quite radically unfamiliar and strange to Sarah. Anna felt more and more out of touch with Sarah's life "back home." They both looked forward with hopeful anticipation to renewing their old friendship during Anna and her husband's furlough time stateside.

Sarah was so glad when Anna arrived back home. Sarah is aware that a lot is going on in Anna's life. She enjoys it when Anna occasionally joins her small women's Bible fellowship group but wishes it happened more regularly. She loves hearing Anna's

stories about how God has blessed their ministry in Asia. But she and Anna seem to have so little in common in day-to-day life except homeschooling. Anna always seems so preoccupied with other things that she hardly seems aware of what is going on around her right here and now. Although she would be ashamed to admit it, Sarah feels frustrated and confused by the growing distance in their relationship. She longs for the kind of connection they used to have. It hurts that Anna has not asked much about what it has been like since Sarah's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Sarah knows that relationships need care in order to thrive, but hesitates to take any further initiative. Sarah still cares deeply for her friend but she is not sure what to do or say that might help Anna share more openly with her again.

Both Anna and Sarah are stuck. Their spiritual friendship has been disrupted. The disconnection between them seems to be growing. Something needs to change. But what? What needs to change so that they can again “offer each other genuine companionship” in Christ?²

Defining the Context

This section describes the larger context represented by the preceding illustrative story. The characters are fictional. However, their circumstances and relational challenges represent a composite of real-life situations, drawn from my own life experiences, extensive ministry interaction with missionary colleagues, and training in cross-cultural ministry, pastoral counseling, and spiritual formation in community.

² David Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 17. I am indebted to Benner for the concept of “offering each other genuine companionship” on the spiritual journey.

Scattered throughout local congregations in the United States are Christians who have returned home following a season of living overseas. They are returnees—a person who has returned to his or her home country. After their return to the United States, returnees commonly experience varying degrees of disorientation and isolation that can disrupt their relationship with God, others, and even themselves. This is especially common if they are also in limbo regarding their future plans due to family needs, health concerns, organizational change, or other circumstances. One of the more challenging aspects of reentry transition is identifying and finding ways to overcome hindrances to meaningful connections within a local Christian fellowship.

This complex scenario touches on many dimensions of Christian spirituality and missiology as well as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The focus of this paper is limited to the impact of missionary reentry transition on spiritual formation in community, in the particular context of spiritual friendship. Both sides of the spiritual friendship are in focus—returnee and local resident.

In terms of spiritual formation, I appreciate biblical scholar Jeffrey Greenman's succinct and theologically oriented description. He describes spiritual formation as “our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.”³ I recognize theological and practical considerations of spiritual formation need

³ Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 24. MaryKate Morse adds to Greenman's definition, “We are becoming more like Christ *for the glory of God* and the sake of the world.” MaryKate Morse, “Spiritual Formation: Conformed to the Image of Christ for What Purpose?” *MissioAlliance*, March 31, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://www.missioalliance.org/spiritual-formation-conformed-image-christ-purpose/>.

to be done with humility and respect. To borrow the words of Robert Mulholland from his introduction to *Shaped by the Word*,

I do not claim to be an expert in the experience of spiritual formation. In fact, there probably aren't any 'experts' in this field. We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.⁴

Nell Becker Sweeden, writing on Christian hospitality and migration in *Church on the Way*, contends that “ecclesial communities continue to be shaped as all members perform life together in the ordinary that does not escape or separate out the chaos and difficulty of life.”⁵ The main point is that Christians really do need each other no matter how complicated or complex it is to connect in relationship.

The primary context for this thesis is the relationship of spiritual friendship. In mind here is a fundamental nonprofessional and reciprocal companionship between two believers.⁶ In the story, I have portrayed a long-term spiritual friendship; however, the orientation is more important than the duration. In the opening line of his classic treatise *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century English monk, portrays the profoundly simple, fundamental essence of spiritual friendship. He writes, “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.”⁷ Theologian Bruce Demarest writes, “*Spiritual friendship* is the most basic ministry of spiritual guidance in which two

⁴ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1985), 17.

⁵ Nell Becker Sweeden, *Church On the Way: Hospitality and Migration* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 9.

⁶ Bruce A. Demarest, *Soul Guide: Following Jesus as Spiritual Director* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 39.

⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary Eugenia Laker (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1974), 51.

or more friends—on a relatively equal basis—support, encourage, and pray for one another on their journeys.”⁸ In a spiritual friendship, the central focus is on the reality of the presence of Christ in the whole of life.⁹

Exploring the Phenomenon of Reentry Transition

It has been said “change comes when you can see yourself in a situation accurately—then you have choices.” In this context, a clearer understanding of intercultural reentry transition is needed before looking at solutions for helping returnees and local residents reconnect as spiritual friends. The following information about intercultural reentry transition has been gathered from two types of sources. One type is research and training material associated with specific occupations and organizations involving the international career cycle.¹⁰ The other is first-hand anecdotal material shared in print, online blogs and forums, and verbal conversation. Although every experience of reentry transition is unique, I have tried to represent the most salient characteristics common in both types of sources as well as in my own experience.

There is ample evidence that reentry transition is a complicated and stressful experience, more difficult even than the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment.¹¹ Some

⁸ Demarest, *Soul Guide*, 39; italics in original.

⁹ Mark Harris, *Companions for Your Spiritual Journey: Discovering the Disciplines of the Saints* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 189. Harris is commenting on Aelred’s distinction between spiritual friendship and natural friendship.

¹⁰ Such as foreign service, military service, business, education, humanitarian aid, missionary service, research, and adventuring.

¹¹ Craig Storti, introduction to *The Art of Coming Home*, 1996, reprint ed. (Boston, MA: Intercultural Press, 2003), xiv.

have even referred to it as a “catastrophic upheaval.”¹² Common characteristics of reentry transition include feeling disoriented, disillusioned, isolated, and grief.¹³ The following first-hand reentry transition report graphically portrays the extent to which reentry transition can be an all-encompassing experience of disorientation and loss affecting nearly every dimension of life:

So there I was ... standing in the airport with 3 suitcases to represent the last 3 years of my life ... moving back to the US. With no idea who I was ... I had just lost ...

- ... my home
- ... my city
- ... my job
- ... my occupation (no longer an expat working in ministry)
- ... my friends (or at least they were very far away)
- ... my church community in my last country
- ... my coworkers

and for me ... the thing that was supposed to be my “stability” when all else fails ... my faith ... was teetering on the edge of being lost too.

Re-entry is a season of rebuilding your identity. I feel like sometimes it’s a return to Jr High (I know ... who wants to relive that part of your life). You have no idea who you are, who you want to be, or what is cool (or not cool) ...

Losing your identity is also a lonely road because if you don’t know who you are ... it’s hard to invite others to be a part of your life. And it’s often hard to explain what we’re struggling with because we don’t even fully understand it ourselves.¹⁴

¹² Peter Jordan, *Re-entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home* (Seattle, WA: Youth with a Mission, 1992), 53. See also Livingston Huff, “Avoiding the Crash-and-Burn Syndrome: Toward a Strategy of Missionary Re-Integration,” *Missiology: An International Review* 30, no. 1 (January 2002): 81-89.

¹³ Marion Knell, *Burn-Up or Splash Down: Surviving the Culture Shock of Re-Entry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24.

¹⁴ Ruthie, “Losing my Identity on My Layover: Who Am I, and Where Did My Old Self Go? {Part A},” Rocky Re-entry (blog), January 22, 2015, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://www.rockyreentry.com/loosing-identity-layover-old-self-go/>; emphasis in original.

Many returnees express that they do not feel quite “at home” anymore in their home culture. Some describe it as feeling like “strangers in their own land.”¹⁵

Intercultural training specialist and consultant Craig Storti refers to this common feeling as “the loss of home” and maintains it is “probably the psychological and emotional centerpiece” of reentry transition.¹⁶

The loss of home is inexplicable and disturbing. Storti writes,

You can accept that you are not going to fit in abroad in what is after all a foreign country, but the idea that you don’t fit in back home, where you are in all likelihood going to spend much, if not the rest, of your life, is deeply disturbing. If you don’t belong at home, then where do you belong?¹⁷

The loss of home is also not clear-cut. Sydney Werkman, one of the earliest researchers on intercultural reentry transition, describes a lingering indistinct, ambiguous sense of rootlessness for many returnees, even for those who appear to have adjusted well back home.¹⁸ The lingering feeling of rootlessness is itself ambiguous and uncanny.¹⁹

The loss of home is also often unexpected. As one returnee exclaimed, “Who would ever expect to feel like a stranger in her own country?”²⁰ Hélène Rybol, returnee and author of *Reverse Culture Shock*, summed up the reentry transition experience in a way that expresses this uncanny loss of home a little differently but still seems to capture

¹⁵ Joan Cost Lester, “Strangers in Their Own Land: Culture Loss, Disenfranchised Grief, and Reentry Adjustment,” (PsyD diss., New Hampshire: Antioch University, 2000), 11, accessed December 31, 2016, PsycINFO, EBSCOhost.

¹⁶ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Sydney Werkman, “Coming Home: Adjustment of Americans to the United States after Living Abroad” in *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings*, ed. Clyde N. Austin (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1986), 12.

¹⁹ See Austin, Ng, Nida, Alder, Lester, Werkman, and Pirolo.

²⁰ Nancy Koehler, “Re-Entry Shock,” in *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings*, ed. Clyde N. Austin (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1986), 91.

the essence of it well. She writes, “Here’s the thing ... everything feels familiar and completely different at the same time. And no matter how hard you try to reconcile everything, it makes you feel like a puzzle put together wrong. Everything *sort of* fits but doesn’t.”²¹

Reengaging in meaningful connections with others back home is hindered by several factors. It is hard to communicate with friends and loved ones when “everything sort of fits but doesn’t.” Many returnees are still in the process of making sense of their overseas experiences.²² Returnees also struggle to find words to meaningfully express their reentry transition experiences. As one returnee said,

Reverse culture shock has been severe for myself and my family and certainly many others out there. And yet, especially if you go back to your old neighbourhood, it is not spoken about. Why would one be miserable after such a glorious time away, anyway? And what’s so bad about being back in this lovely neighbourhood, after all? We lack words for it, I’ve lacked words for it.²³

As Storti notes, “even if people could understand, the problem is how to put some of these things into words.”²⁴ Storti highlights the impact of these communications hindrances on close relationships. “When you can’t tell your stories, you are in effect obliged to remain a stranger to the people you love. The keen sense of loneliness many

²¹ Hélène Rybol, “Reverse Cultural Shock Toolbox: Expats, What Kinds of tools Do You Need If You Decide to Repatriate?” *The Displaced Nation* (blog), February 25, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, <https://thedisplacednation.com/2016/02/25/reverse-culture-shock-toolbox-expats-what-kinds-of-tools-do-you-need-if-you-decide-to-repatriate/>; italics in original.

²² Carolyn D. Smith, introduction to *Strangers at Home: Essays On the Effects of Living Overseas and Coming “Home” to a Strange Land* (Bayside, NY: Aletheia Publications, 1996). ix.

²³ Martina1310, comment, March 17, 2016 (2:58am), on Rybol, “Reverse Culture Shock Toolbox.”

²⁴ Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, 24. Regarding finding words that communicate, Storti refers to an excerpt from *Out of the Silent Planet* by C.S. Lewis.

returnees experience upon reentry comes from this feeling that close friends and relations no longer know who they are.”²⁵

Many returnees are reluctant to talk openly with close family and friends about their experience of reentry transition adjustment even when adequate understanding and words are available. Psychologist Clyde Austin refers to this characteristic as a “conspiracy of silence.”²⁶ In contrast, many returnees seek out other returnees in order to talk openly with someone who has shared experiences. Returnees often form close bonds with other returnees with little or no common connection other than their shared identity as intercultural returnees, or as one author describes, “with other transcultural people who understand the outside-inside nature of their identity.”²⁷ The growing proliferation of formal and informal on-line forums, chat groups, and peer-support associations affiliated with reentry transition is indicative of the incredible strong draw that returnees feel toward connecting with other returnees. Research confirms that peer relationships and reference group type support for many returnees provide “a forum for exchange of information, expression of feeling, and support from those who have had a similar experience.”²⁸ Researcher Wade Weber cites a first-hand report from a returnee about “the valuable contributions that people who had similar experiences made to his

²⁵ Ibid., 21-22.

²⁶ Clyde Austin, “Cross-Cultural Reentry,” in *Intercultural Skills for Multicultural Societies*, eds. Carley Dodd and Frank Montalvo (Washington, DC: SIETAR International, 1987), 72. Other researchers describe this reluctance as a “shoebox effect” which includes not talking about reentry transition experiences or overseas experiences. For Christian workers, the “conspiracy of silence” may also be related to issues such as dual relationships, the “pedestal effect” and/or religious training that discourages speaking negatively or openly about personal life experiences.

²⁷ Paul Hiebert, “The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 305.

²⁸ Diane P. Jansson, “Return to Society: Problematic Features of the Re-Entry Process,” in Austin, *Cross-cultural Reentry*, 56.

reentry.”²⁹ However, over-identification with other returnees and over-focus on reentry transition phenomena may further inhibit progress toward reengaging in meaningful mutual relationships between returnees and local residents.³⁰ For example, communication between returnees that tends heavily toward commiserating about missing life overseas or being misunderstood is likely to increase the sense of distance and disconnect with friends and family at home who have not experienced overseas living.³¹ Relationships between returnees and local residents who share an identity as members of the body of Christ are not immune to these disruptive effects of reentry transition. In fact, there is evidence that many returnees find church one of the places where they feel least at home.³²

For many returnees, the sense of relational ambiguity, disorientation, and loneliness never quite seems to go away. Some reentry care specialists correlate a greater degree of disorientation and alienation with a longer absence from home.³³ However, others note that the sense of being a stranger at home can linger indefinitely, even for some whose sojourn abroad was brief.³⁴ I am inclined to agree with the latter view,

²⁹ Wade Michael Weber, “A Literature Review of the Reentry and Adjustment Experience of College Students Returning from Short-Term International Christian Mission Experiences and Implications for Student Affairs Professionals,” (master’s thesis, Kansas State University, 2009), 44, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2097/1436>.

³⁰ Jansson, “Return to Society,” 56.

³¹ Cate Brubaker, “How Commiserating in Re-entry Keeps You Stuck (and What to Do about It),” Small Planet Studio (blog), April 12, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://smallplanetstudio.com/how-commiserating-in-reentry-keeps-you-stuck/>.

³² Helen Watts, “Re-entry Challenges: Results of a Survey into the Challenges Faced by Expats Going Home,” *Watts Your Pathway*, August 2013, accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.wattsyourpathway.co.uk/reentrysurveyresults.html>. See also Kimber.

³³ Peter Jordan, *Re-entry*, 19.

³⁴ See Lester, David Wilson, Jacobsen, Storti.

recalling an email from a former missionary colleague who had returned from overseas 30 years earlier. She wrote, “Although my time on the field was relatively short, I was quite impacted and have ever since been living without feeling the U.S. was my home anymore.”³⁵

Reentry transition affects not just the individual returnee but, to a greater or lesser degree, everyone with whom the returnee has shared a sense of belonging.³⁶ The high degree of ambiguity associated with where the returnee now fits in life has ramifications in terms of the “interplay between self and significant others.”³⁷ To have someone in the community who “sort of fits but doesn’t” has a disorienting impact on the whole community. The loss of being known and trusted is experienced on both sides, further hindering meaningful communication. Though not often recognized, not only the returnee but also members of the returnee’s home community experience disorientation and disconnection.³⁸

Clarifying the Problem

Returnees from overseas living, like Anna, face a seemingly irreducible complex challenge when trying to engage in meaningful communication with friends and loved

³⁵ E. Sulzmann, email message to author, March 27, 2013.

³⁶ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, xv.

³⁷ Robert R. Faulkner and Douglas B. McGaw, “Uneasy Homecoming: Stages in the Reentry Transition of Vietnam Veterans,” in *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings*, ed. Clyde N. Austin (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1986), 103.

³⁸ Jansson notes in most cases of re-entry, “there is a shift in values, a portion of ‘history’ that is not mutually shared, and behaviors which differ from those expected within the social system. The re-entrant is in the minority and is, in a sense, defined by those who remained in the group. . . . Thus, the re-entrant to a social system is confronted not only with a different world from the one he knows, but also with a different identity, in his own eyes and others.’ All these changes, whether for commendable or unacceptable reasons, compounded by the loosening of social bonds caused by absence, can produce anxiety in the re-entrant and in members of the social system.” Jansson, “Return to Society,” 50.

ones like Sarah, not only about their experiences abroad, but also about their present experience with reentry transition adjustments and challenges. Even in situations where returnees are informed and prepared ahead of time for the challenges of reentry transition, they struggle to find words to meaningfully express their experience. The ambiguity inherent in the situation itself compounds the difficulty of connecting meaningfully with others in community. The relational challenge is multi-faceted. Reentry transition involves a lingering, unexpected, uncanny, and ambiguous loss of home. Further, reentry transition is a phenomenon that often leaves people at a loss for words.³⁹ Close relationships that would typically be most supportive in times of stress tend to be the relationships most likely to be disrupted by reentry transition.

Missionary reentry transition is, in sense, an “elephant in the room” in life together in Christ in local faith communities. It is often overlooked, not well understood, disorienting, and relationally disruptive. Relationships of spiritual companionship within the body of Christ are not exempt from its disorienting and isolating effects.

To have Christians living with a chronic sense of “everything sort of fits but doesn’t” has serious implications for life together in the body of Christ. The benefit in terms of bridging the relational gaps associated with reentry transition and cultivating spiritual companionship between returnees and local residents is two-fold. On one hand, mutual support and care with members of the body of Christ will be restored.⁴⁰

Furthermore, in the process of restoration, fresh light will be cast on the redemptive,

³⁹ From here on in the paper I am using *reentry transition* more comprehensively with reference to its characteristics effects on both the returnee and their social network as summarized in this section.

⁴⁰ In mind here are the many “one another” scriptures in the New Testament that describe how Christians belong to one another in Christ and how they are to care and support one another belong to one another as members of the body of Christ. For example, Mark 9:50; John 13:34; Rom. 12:10; 15:17; Gal. 6:2; Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13, 10:24.

reconciling work of Christ. Fuller knowledge of the person and ministry of Christ then fosters greater worship and devotion to God as members of the body of Christ, both individually and corporately.⁴¹

Under consideration is the question: What needs to change so that friends like Anna and Sarah, returnee and local resident, can again offer each other genuine companionship on the spiritual journey as spiritual friends? The purpose of Section Two is to identify, analyze, and evaluate other proposed solutions to this ministry problem. Reliable, practical, and broadly accessible sources related to transitions, intercultural reentry, and Christian spirituality in community will be evaluated with emphasis on missionary reentry transition resources.

⁴¹ See an expanded treatment of practical theology in real-life contexts in Andrew Root, “The Concurring of the Divine with the Human,” in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 147-185.

SECTION TWO: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Section One identified the disruption of spiritual friendship occurring in the context of the relational disorientation and disconnection that commonly accompanies missionary reentry transition. The question was posed: What needs to change so that friends like Anna and Sarah, returnee and local resident, can again offer each other genuine companionship in Christ as spiritual friends? The purpose of Section Two is to look at relevant, reliable resources and discuss how the perspectives and recommendations proposed by these resources are beneficial, but not adequate, in addressing the problem described in Section One.

In light of this ministry problem context, three categories of resources seem to be most relevant—life transition, reentry transition, and Christian spirituality in community. Life transition resources provide guidance regarding successfully navigating changes in life. Two types of reentry transition resources will be considered. Intercultural reentry transition resources offer solutions from a broad psychological and socio-cultural perspective.¹ Missionary member care resources address reentry transition more specifically from Christian missionary life and ministry perspectives. Christian spirituality in community resources address issues related to life together in the body of Christ. Life transition and reentry transition resources will be reviewed first. The illustrative story will be updated to show how Anna and Sarah might have benefited from these resources and what problems still remain unresolved in their relationship. An evaluation of life transition and reentry transition resources will follow the story update. Next, I will explore the potential benefits and limitations of Christian spirituality in

¹ Reentry transition is an issue for people in vocations such as international business, foreign service, military, humanitarian aid, and education as well as cross-cultural ministry.

community resources. The section will conclude with a more comprehensive evaluation of all three types of resources in light of the ministry problem.

Life Transition Resources

All changes require going through a personal process of transition from the way things were to new, unfamiliar ways of being and doing. Reentry transition can be a tremendously disorienting and stressful transition. Nevertheless, as Storti reminds returnees in *The Art of Coming Home*, reentry shares similarities with other transitions experienced in life.² Therefore, looking at insights and suggestions proposed by transition management specialist William Bridges and leadership expert Henry Cloud is a helpful place to start.

William Bridges' book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* is one of the most accessible and frequently cited resources on navigating changes in life. In this classic work, Bridges offers "strategies for coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life."³ Noting the way changes break the continuity of life, Bridges observes, "The outer forms of our lives can change in an instant, but the inner reorientation that brings us back in to a vital relationship with people and activity takes

² Storti writes, "Everyone is experienced in the disruptions and anxiety caused by life changes, and reentry is just the latest one. In other words, you already have most of the skills and instincts you need to see you through the experience. It may be true, incidentally, that you have never been through a transition of quite this magnitude before, though the move abroad must have been close, but don't let that throw you. This is not an experience of an entirely different kind than you've had before: it's just on a different scale." Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 39-40.

³ William Bridges, front cover of *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 2004). Bridges clarifies that *Transitions* is "not simply a manual on how to cope; rather it is based on a theory of personal development that views transition as the natural process of disorientation and reorientation marking the turning points in the path of growth." *Ibid.*, 4.

time.”⁴ He notes, “To feel as though everything is ‘up in the air,’ as one so often does during times of personal transition, is endurable if it *means something*—if it is part of a movement toward a desired end. But if it is not related to some larger and beneficial pattern, it simply becomes distressing.”⁵

Bridges proposes that all transitions involve the following three-phase process: (1) an ending, followed by (2) a period of confusion and distress, leading to (3) a new beginning. He notes that second phase, the “neutral zone” or “in-between place,” is the most confusing and distressful for most people.⁶ Bridges seeks to normalize the disorientation, disengagement, disillusionment, and disenchantment commonly experienced in the midst of transition. He suggests that many distressing attitudes and behaviors exhibited during transition are natural results of transitions rather than problems to be fixed, and are not symptoms of personal dysfunction or pathology as they are often viewed. At the same time, he warns against getting stuck in unresolved grief and loss, stressing the need for making a “real ending” in order to make a “successful beginning.”⁷

Bridges’ book could be helpful for anyone navigating the undercurrents of change, whether as major as an international relocation or as common as a new job. Someone like Anna would benefit from Bridges’ conceptual framework and vocabulary for clarifying and talking about the distressing attitudes and behaviors people commonly

⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁵ Ibid., 3; italics in original.

⁶ Ibid., 4, 8.

⁷ William Bridges, “Getting Them Through the Wilderness,” *William Bridges & Associates*, 1987, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://www.wmbridges.com/pdf/getting-thru-wilderness-2006-v2.pdf>.

experience in the midst of change. However, this conceptual model applies best in situations where the change is clear-cut. It is not complex enough to deal with situations with overlapping, interwoven changes or situations where what has changed lacks clarity, such as with reentry transition.

In *Necessary Endings*, Christian leadership expert Henry Cloud offers perspectives and recommendations for moving forward in turbulent or stuck seasons of life. Utilizing the metaphor of pruning, Cloud emphasizes the need for “necessary endings,” that is, the removal of “whatever it is in our business or life whose reach is unwanted or superfluous.”⁸ According to Cloud, lasting success happens only through first clarifying what one is trying to achieve.⁹ He stresses that in order for people to maturely discern “when to remain invested in a relationship or situation and when to let go of the same” they need to keep the whole picture of what is going on in view.¹⁰

Both returnees and local residents would benefit from Cloud’s strong reminder of how crucial it is to keep the bigger picture clearly in mind when facing decisions and that growth necessarily involves letting go. However, this book is primarily business-management and personal-achievement focused, therefore its perspectives and recommendations are applicable more toward pragmatic, utilitarian, or functional relationships. Consequently, Cloud’s recommendations could be dangerously misleading if applied in more fundamental relationship contexts such as spiritual companionship in life together in Christ. Neither Bridges nor Cloud consider transitions explicitly from the

⁸ Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings: The Employees, Businesses, and Relationships That All of Us Have to Give up in Order to Move Forward* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2011), 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

perspective of spiritual formation in community, the primary context of this ministry problem.

Intercultural Reentry Transition Resources

The vocations and roles leading individuals and families to live abroad vary greatly—foreign service, military service, business, education, humanitarian aid, missionary service, research, and adventuring. In contrast with immigrants or refugees, from the outset these global sojourners will likely return to live temporarily, indefinitely, or permanently in their homeland. Early formal research and practical resources addressing intercultural reentry transition experiences became available in the mid-1900s.¹¹

Most intercultural reentry transition resources have been produced in conjunction with organizational, vocational, and educational support services for global workers and/or international students. One of the most highly recommended general resources on reentry transition is *The Art of Coming Home* by cross-cultural specialist Craig Storti. Storti's book is one of few available that focuses on issues common to most returnees "regardless of how they spent their time as expatriates or of the situation they are returning to."¹² Storti aims at recommendations applicable to a broad range of reentry circumstances. He also offers specific recommendations for special populations including

¹¹ Many later resources refer to early research on reentry transition by psychologist Sydney Werkman who emphasized the need for grieving losses, integrating past with the present, recognizing the lasting influence of overseas experience on personality, having an adequate support system, processing the emotional costs of adjustment, and having informed, structured support during the reentry transition process. Werkman, "Coming Home," 14-16.

¹² Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 137.

missionaries, making his material of double value in consideration of this ministry problem.¹³

In *The Art of Coming Home*, Storti addresses his perspectives and recommendations primarily toward returnees individually. He advises returnees to recognize that most likely they must take the initiative for getting help they might need personally or career-wise.¹⁴ Storti describes a four-stage reentry transition model of leave-taking, honeymoon stage, reverse culture shock, and eventual readjustment and offers practical strategies for each stage.¹⁵ At the same time, he notes reentry experiences vary greatly from individual to individual and suggests “in a large sense, reentry never truly ends.”¹⁶ He encourages returnees to accept that “those who have not had an overseas experience can never understand things in quite the same way as those who have.”¹⁷ Storti reassures returnees that “feeling lonely and homesick, not fitting in—and not wanting to fit in—and not being understood are perfectly normal reactions to the experience of reentry.”¹⁸

Many of Storti’s recommendations focus on adjusting one’s attitude and expectations related to one’s perspective of home.¹⁹ He claims the loss of a sense of feeling at home is so significant because *home* refers to more than the place where we were born and raised. He explains,

¹³ Storti, “Special Populations,” in *The Art of Coming Home*, 137-180.

¹⁴ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 79.

¹⁵ Storti, “The Stages of Reentry,” in *The Art of Coming Home*, 46.

¹⁶ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

Most people use home in a more profound sense, ... home is where you are known and trusted and where you know and trust others; where you are accepted, understood, indulged, and forgiven; ... [Home is] the place where you belong and feel safe and secure and where you can accordingly trust your instincts, relax, and be yourself. It is, in short, the place where you feel 'at home.'²⁰

From Storti's perspective, the real meaning of home must be understood to truly understand reentry transition and why it is so difficult.²¹

Storti describes many difficulties returnees have in communicating with family and friends and offers tips such as: quell over-eagerness to share experiences; show intentional interest in what has happened in the lives of loved ones; seek opportunities to connect with other returnees who understand and can validate the experience.²² With reference to missionaries, Storti observes, "tremendous pressure is put on returning missionaries to travel and tell their stories back home. ... Donors want to hear success stories, to feel that their donation, however meager, made all the difference."²³ Storti also observes that missionaries tend to engage more fully (than the typical expatriate) in local life overseas, intensifying the sense of loss experienced during reentry transition. The intensity of grief is often misunderstood and threatening to family and friends, intensifying the missionary's feelings of alienation and loss.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 3-4.

²¹ Ibid., 3. Like Storti, reentry specialist Linda Fraser Jacobsen also emphasizes redefining *home*, and recommends debriefing and personal reassessment to sort out "who you are now and what matters most to you." Linda Fraser Jacobsen, *Avoiding Burn-Up on Re-Entry: Mission Critical Essays for Expats and Employers* (N.p.: BookSurge Publishing, 2010), 84.

²² Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 40-42.

²³ Ibid., 172. For example, in *Mind the Gaps*, ministry partners are advised, "Encourage your missionary to limit what they share. ... Churches want to hear how their investment in a missionary is impacting the lives of people." Bill Born, Betty Born, and David Wilson, "Re-Entry, Retirement and Other Transitions," in *Mind the Gaps: Engaging the Church in Missionary Care*, ed. David Wilson (N.p.: Believers Press, 2015), 170-172.

²⁴ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 175.

Storti encourages returnees to engage in an ongoing process of reflection on their whole overseas experience in order to determine the meaningful outcome of reentry transition in their life journey.²⁵ He writes,

So it is that you will continue to hark back to and integrate aspects of your overseas experience into your post expatriate life, applying insights you may have had, using knowledge or skills you acquired overseas, seeing life and the world through the filter of all that happened to you on foreign shores.²⁶

In this way, Storti portrays how profound experiences of overseas living become incorporated into a richer, fuller understanding of life.²⁷

The Art of Coming Home could be a relevant source of help for returnees like Anna and local residents like Sarah because it provides such a broad overview of reentry transition in layman's terms. Without minimizing or catastrophizing, Storti draws attention to a wide range of issues and concerns that could be easily overlooked or misattributed. His points are amply illustrated from real-life examples. Local residents who are unfamiliar with reentry transition would find this material very insightful and understandable. For returnees, Storti discusses common experiences and concerns in a way that normalizes and clarifies deeper roots of the disorienting and relationally distancing effects of reentry transition. He also offers returnees advice on how to communicate more clearly with local residents with whom they share close relational bonds.

Storti's book presents a broad view of reentry transition helpful for locating oneself in the bigger picture of the international career life cycle, but is limited in several

²⁵ Ibid., 187.

²⁶ Ibid., 65.

²⁷ Ibid., 187.

ways. First, it offers little assistance when it comes to knowing how to effectively apply recommendations in a particular situation.²⁸ More importantly, it does not consider reentry transition from the perspective of spiritual formation in community, the primary context of this ministry problem.²⁹

Missionary Reentry Transition Resources

Over the past 40 years, denominational and parachurch mission agencies have devoted increased attention to caring for their members.³⁰ Missionary member care is now a globally expanding interdisciplinary field.³¹ According to the Global Member Care Network website, missionary member care is “the ongoing preparation, equipping and empowering of missionaries for effective and sustainable life, ministry and work. Member Care addresses all aspects of well-being of missionaries and their dependents. It includes spiritual, emotional, relational, physical and economic matters.”³²

²⁸ Applying Storti’s recommendations to specific complex reentry issues could be likened to trying to navigate a city transit system with a regional road atlas.

²⁹ For example, Storti strongly emphasizes the importance of understanding the “real meaning of home” with no reference to a biblical understanding of belonging and home.

³⁰ The general Christian public and some sectors of the mission community have limited familiarity with missionary member care resources. Therefore, a brief overview of Member Care and its prevailing perspective of reentry transition are included.

³¹ Postgraduate study programs in Member Care are now available through Columbia International University in Columbia, SC and Redcliffe College in England.

³² “Member Care Definition,” *Global Member Care Network* (Connecting and Developing Member Care Worldwide), accessed December 31, 2016, <http://www.globalmembercare.com/index.php?id=34&L>. The member care definition also states, “The responsibility for member care rests with the sending agency, the sending church, the receiving church, leadership (home/field), the team, families, individual supporters, competent member care providers and the individual missionaries themselves. Those providing member care will seek to develop competence in all relevant areas through ongoing learning, networking and resourcing. They will serve the mission community with humility, integrity and compassion, recognizing their own weaknesses and dependence on God’s grace and gifting.”

The following two descriptions provide an overview of the perspective on reentry transition prevalent in most contemporary member care resources.

Re-entry is the term used to describe a space rocket returning into the earth's atmosphere—it describes a very bumpy, turbulent, dangerous time, which could result in the rocket disintegrating spectacularly, yet tragically, into flames. As Peter Jordan points out in his book “Re-entry”, this word applies aptly to the experience of returning mission partners as they adjust to life back home after time overseas. The dangers may seem different, but there is a great risk of disintegration through emotional, spiritual, relational, and even physical damage. A returning mission partner must have the correct care and support if they are to survive their own re-entry and remain both physically and psychologically well.³³

Reentry is a process, is complicated by stress, a sense of loss and grief, feelings of impotence, and ethnocentrism. Other complications include maladaptive behavior patterns, temperament, the availability of social support, expectations of others around them, emotional and spiritual security (or lack thereof), and the availability of resources. Individuals, even members of the same family, may have very different experiences.³⁴

Research and development of resources related to reentry have increased exponentially over the past 20 years and now include a wide range of programs, services, and resources such as field training programs, reentry retreats, debriefing, specialized counseling, coaching, on-line discussion groups, blogs, seminars, and handbooks and study guides.³⁵ Two basic resources on reentry transition commonly recommended by other member care resources will be reviewed: *Re-Entry: Making the Transition from*

³³ Sarah Hay, “Home Office—Debrief and Re-entry,” in *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practices in Missionary Retention*, ed. Robert Hay (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007), 383.

³⁴ Dorris M. Schulz, “Re-entry: An Introduction,” in *Enhancing Missionary Vitality*, ed. John R. Powell and Joyce M. Bowers (Palmer Lake, CO: Mission Training International, 1999), 160-161.

³⁵ See websites such as Global Member Care Network, Rocky Reentry, and Watts Your Pathway for information on the availability of a wide variety of reentry resources.

Missions to Life at Home by Peter Jordan and *The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries* by Neal Pirolo.³⁶

Re-Entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home by former missionary Peter Jordan, written in 1992, is one of the most frequently cited resources on reentry by member care sources. Jordan writes directly to fellow missionaries in an informal, conversational, and motivational style. He uses an ample assortment of anecdotes, scriptural references, and analogies to illustrate his points.

Jordan offers reentry transition perspectives and recommendations based heavily on reentry from outer space imagery. He describes potential challenges and dangers faced by missionaries returning to their home country from overseas in light of challenges and dangers astronauts face during reentry.³⁷ Consequently, Jordan strongly emphasizes the need for thorough preparation in advance and for appropriate expectations and support throughout the international life cycle. The first half of his book covers advance preparation for reentry transition. According to Jordan, readiness for successful reentry depends on good closure and he strongly advocates debriefing as a vital part of the closure process.³⁸ About closure, Jordan explains, “Closure is simply closing out your leg of the race. It is bringing your time on the mission field to an end emotionally, spiritually, socially, and physically.”³⁹ After encouraging missionaries to be prepared in advance for

³⁶ Peter Jordan, *Re-entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home* (Seattle, WA: Youth with a Mission, 1992); Neal Pirolo, *The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries* (San Diego, CA: Emmaus Road International, 2000). Recommended in *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention* (2007) and *Mind the Gaps: Engaging the Church in Missionary Care* (2015).

³⁷ Jordan, *Re-entry*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

the wide range of changes they are likely to face upon reentry, Jordan provides an overview of the likely changes and a detailed checklist for assessing personal readiness for reentry.⁴⁰

In the second half of the book, Jordan highlights disorienting effects reentry can have on a missionary's identity. He reminds returnees not to derive their identity from their missionary role, or geographic location, or ethnic group, but to see themselves as children of God.⁴¹ "Your identity is in the city that is to come, and that is where you must place your focus," he exhorts.⁴² With respect to reentry adjustment challenges, Jordan urges returnees to follow the example of the apostle Paul who knew "how to adapt to the circumstances in which he found himself."⁴³

Jordan urges returnees "to make every effort to ensure that they are a source of great blessing to their pastor and [local] church."⁴⁴ Successful reentry results in reintegration in meaningful ministry back home in the local church.⁴⁵ Strategies he recommends include serving diligently and humbly, demonstrating vital interest in the church's welfare and praying for the church.⁴⁶ Throughout the book, Jordan counsels returnees to be on guard against negative, critical attitudes. "Above all," Jordan cautions, "don't sit around and bemoan how misunderstood you feel, and how uncaring people are toward you. This may be true, but your positive reaction to them is far more important to

⁴⁰ Jordan, "Checklist" in *Re-entry*, 41-55.

⁴¹ Jordan, *Re-entry*, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

God. His desire is that you have a positive re-entry experience, and avoid dropping into the pit of despair.”⁴⁷ Instead, Jordan urges returnees to reinvest the experiences they had overseas to further God’s kingdom work through participating in activities such as advocacy, intercession, recruitment, and staying informed about the field situation where they formerly served.⁴⁸

A resource like *Re-entry* in the hands of someone like Anna could be a valuable source of help because of the graphic, detailed way Jordan describes the emotional, relational, and spiritual turmoil many returning missionaries experience. On the other hand, the focus of this material tends to be on advance preparation and crisis-prevention. Consequently, it could unintentionally contribute to increased distress and frustration for returnees, like Anna, who are well into reentry transition and may have lacked adequate preparation and well-informed support.⁴⁹

The Reentry Team: Caring for Your Returning Missionaries was written in 2000 by educator and former missionary Neal Pirolo.⁵⁰ Pirolo writes primarily to sending churches. He emphasizes that churches need to share responsibilities with mission agencies in caring for missionaries.⁵¹ He urges sending churches to adopt a team approach to reentry care.⁵² Successful reentry care, in his perspective, is intrinsically

⁴⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁸ Jordan, “A Return on God’s Investment,” in *Re-entry*, 125, 138.

⁴⁹ Local resident friends could become frustrated, critical, or feel thwarted upon learning about ways that their returnee friends could have, should have, been more prepared ahead a time but weren’t.

⁵⁰ Pirolo, *The Reentry Team*.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Ibid., 16.

linked to providing a continuum of care throughout the entire missionary career cycle.⁵³

He insists both sending churches and missionaries need to better understand the “complex issues of reentry.”⁵⁴ According to Pirolo, the ultimate consequence for not providing adequate care to returnees is the danger of suicide.⁵⁵

Pirolo proposes a five-step model for sending churches to assist returnees to “fully integrate” back home based on the story of the return of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch after the first missionary journey.⁵⁶ The five steps are: (1) knowing it is time to go; (2) going to one’s home church; (3) abiding; (4) rehearsing all; (5) fully integrating—becoming active in ministry again.⁵⁷ Pirolo claims that following this five-step model will result in successful integration. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges “culture and society, the temperament of missionaries, and interpersonal relationships have a tendency to complicate the issues.”⁵⁸ In this light, Pirolo undertakes to provide a master grid of issues—a tool for identifying stress factors, dangerous reentry behavior patterns, mitigating circumstances, and care needs. The remainder of the book contains a collection of reentry stories and reflection questions designed to equip reentry care providers to recognize the issues and better care for their returning missionaries. Throughout Pirolo’s book is a consistent, impassioned focus on the need for intentional, informed, supportive reentry care.

⁵³ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31-32. See Acts 14:26-28; 15:35.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

Pirolò's book contains a wealth of information and insight regarding the care of returning missionaries. This book raises awareness of the wide range of issues and challenges associated with reentry transition in the context of a functional relationship of partnership between a sending church and supported missionary. However, it seems to offer little direct advice regarding friends struggling to reconnect in a more fundamental relationship of spiritual companionship. Pirolò's advice could be helpful, but it also could prompt either or both sides of a disrupted returnee-and-local-resident friendship to experience greater helplessness and frustration in terms of the distance and disconnection in their relationship.

Both Jordan and Pirolò consider the challenges and opportunities of reentry transition in the broader perspective of Christian life and ministry. However, neither resource addresses the phenomenon of reentry transition from the explicit perspective of mutual spiritual transformation in community, the primary context of this ministry problem. Also, their strong emphasis on disaster-prevention and positive expectations could unintentionally serve to perpetuate the "conspiracy of silence" of returnees regarding sharing with those who have no direct experience with reentry transition. Reluctance to talk openly will undermine efforts to cultivate mutual spiritual companionship between returnees and local residents in a sending/supporting church context.

Anna and Sarah Story Updated

The following continuation of the story of Anna and Sarah portrays ways in which perspectives and recommendations drawn from these various resources could be beneficially implemented in a real-to-life spiritual friendship reentry transition scenario.

At the same time, the story shows where gaps and deficiencies remain in terms of effectively promoting changes that help returnees and local residents like Anna and Sarah again offer each other genuine companionship in Christ as spiritual friends.

As months continue to pass by, it appears that Anna and her husband will not be returning to the field any time soon. With advice gleaned from reentry transition resources and conversations with fellow returnees, Anna has taken initiative in a variety of ways. She has participated in a reentry retreat with a personal debriefing. She has tried to catch up on processing goodbyes in order to reenter well. She has sought therapeutic care for depression and she exercises regularly. She has stayed in touch with overseas friends. She no longer starts every story with “when I was in Asia ...” She is re-investing her intercultural skills through helping refugee families learn English. She attends a small group at church. She tries to maintain a positive outlook and grateful heart. She practices daily disciplines of prayer and Bible reading.

At this point, it appears that Anna has made it through the stages of reentry successfully to reintegration. As she would describe it, most of the dust seems to have settled in terms of the transition back into everyday life in the United States. She finally has some personal and family routines established again, and a sense of normalcy is returning to everyday life. Nevertheless, internally she feels far from settled. She is trying to put the past behind her while at the same time integrating what she has learned and how she has changed into her present life. But it does not seem to be working very well. She is living between worlds, with no place that feels quite like home anymore. The realization that she has become something of a stranger to friends and loved ones and

they to her is painful. She tells herself that this is okay, that her identity is in Christ and this world is not her home anyway. She is just passing through.

She has talked through some of these feelings with a few other returnees. It helps to know she is not alone because it appears they are experiencing many of the same issues. However, she still feels a lingering ache of loneliness most of the time in daily life. The few times she has tried to talk more in-depth with friends and family about what she is going through, it seems to come out all wrong, partly because she still cannot quite make sense of it all and partly because of their reactions. She knows they care deeply but they just do not understand and it hurts her and it seems to hurt and perplex them too.

Sarah also took initiative to read up on reentry transition to understand more clearly how she could support Anna better. As a result, Sarah has made herself more available to Anna for advice regarding the many practical and logistical details of getting further resettled. When Sarah found out that finances were a limiting factor, she financially helped so that Anna and her family could attend a member care reentry retreat. She regularly invites Anna for coffee and shows interest in hearing Anna's stories, even when she does not quite understand what Anna is sharing. Sarah is also careful not to express defensiveness when Anna seemed unduly judgmental or critical. She encourages Anna's connection with other returnees, sensing that those connections are very encouraging to Anna. Overall, Sarah is more aware that Anna views the world from a mixed perspective now. She is committed to understanding and accepting the fact her friend Anna has become a kind of "cultural hybrid."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 54.

Although she has worked hard on welcoming Anna home and supporting Anna's reentry transition, Sarah harbors an increasing sense of personal discouragement and disappointment with their relationship. Whenever Sarah thinks back to the spiritual friendship she and Anna used to share, there is a deep ache of loss and undercurrent of helplessness. She still misses the old Anna and the close companionship they had. Although Anna has frequently expressed appreciation for Sarah's help and support, Sarah feels shut out of Anna's life in many ways. It seems by now, after two years, Anna should be more settled back into life at home. Instead it is as if Anna is only half present most of the time; the other half of her is preoccupied somewhere else. Sarah knows this transition has not been easy for Anna. But Anna is not the only one facing challenges in terms of adjusting to changes. Sarah has faced some complicated transitions as well. Sarah's attempts to talk with Anna about the status of their relationship only seem to increase the distance between them.

Summary Evaluation of Life Transition and Reentry Transition Resources

The continuing Anna/Sarah story portrays ways in which perspectives and recommendations drawn from these life transition and reentry transition resources could be practically implemented in spiritual friendships between returnees and local residents. A great deal of help can be gained from these representative resources as well as from the wide variety of other resources currently available regarding reentry transition challenges. The story update also portrays ways in which these resources have left deficiencies regarding restoring a connection of spiritual companionship.

Life transition resources raise awareness of transition as a process; normalize temporary disorientation and disengagement; identify grief and loss as significant factors

even with positive change; and encourage acceptance, adaptation, and patience while navigating the “neutral zone” between an ending and a new beginning. However, these resources do not adequately address the lingering unsettledness and relational ambiguity associated with the phenomenon of reentry transition.

General reentry transition resources assist individuals in normalizing the disorientation and relational ambiguity of the phenomenon of reentry transition. They also provide practical advice and strategies for navigating adjustment challenges, promoting connection with other returnees, and relating with local residents. Explicitly or implicitly, they acknowledge ambiguity inherent in the lingering “in-between” state experienced by returnees. At the same time, almost all resources emphasize the need to identify and grieve the losses in order to successfully readjust.

Missionary member care resources provide much of the same in-depth insights and practical support and care for individuals dealing with the complex challenges and issues of reentry transition as general reentry transition literature. Additionally, they incorporate perspectives and best practices based on biblical principles and narratives. They also strongly advocate for sending agencies, sending churches, professional therapists, and other ministry partners to share responsibility in the support and care of returning missionaries. The main focus of these resources tends to be issues related to sustaining longevity, vitality, and effectiveness of individuals in a ministry role.⁶⁰ Ministry partnerships have shared expectations and accountability related to a vocational identity and ministry goals. The returnee is cared for and supported, but the relationship in focus is a functional one of ministry partnership between sending churches, mission

⁶⁰ See Global Member Care Network description in Section Two page 25.

agencies, and missionaries. These resources are important from a vocational and ministry point of view, but they do not adequately address the concerns that reentry transition raises for the more fundamental relationship of spiritual friend.

There are two areas where all of these resources appear to be lacking or inadequate. First, most reentry transition resources stress the need for closure and grieving well in order to adjust well but they do not seem to offer much practical advice for dealing with the lingering disorientation and ambiguous losses that returnees experience.⁶¹ Second, these resources lack a Christian spirituality framework broad enough to address the issues of reentry transition in terms of an individual's overall spiritual journey and fundamental relationships in the body of Christ such as spiritual friendship. Secular resources do not refer to a larger biblical narrative; instead, they encourage individuals to reach an inner peace about "belonging" from an individual point of reference. Christian resources primarily address reentry transition from an organizational and vocational ministry role perspective. Meanwhile, Anna and Sarah are doing their best to find ways to overcome the hindrances keeping them from reconnecting as spiritual friends.

Christian Spirituality in Community Resources

Anna and Sarah are still stuck in terms of overcoming the disruption of their spiritual friendship. The disconnection between them seems to be growing. Something needs to change. The question is what needs to change so they can again offer each other genuine companionship in Christ? What perspectives and recommendations do reliable

⁶¹ For example – making sure to keep a positive attitude (Jordan) or getting comfortable being uncomfortable (Rybol).

and relevant Christian life resources offer that could effectively help Anna and Sarah bridge the widening chasm in their spiritual friendship?

Among the wide range of Christian life resources that could be of benefit to this ministry problem, I have chosen to look more closely at *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* by spiritual formation writer and teacher Ruth Haley Barton.⁶² *Life Together in Christ* is designed as an “interactive guide for small groups of people who are ready to get personal and practical about experiencing transformation together.”⁶³ In this book, Barton addresses the crucial question of how the biblical vision of spiritual transformation in community becomes a lived reality in the everyday contexts of life.⁶⁴ According to Barton,

Spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us—for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives and for the sake of others; it results in an increasing capacity to discern and do the will of God. . . . It is an act of worship in which our very lives testify or ascribe worth to the One who made us, who calls us by name and redeems us for his purposes.⁶⁵

A basic premise underlying Barton’s work is that lack of spiritual transformation within individuals and systems causes disintegration in communities; conversely, lack of community limits the work of transformation within individual lives.⁶⁶

A predominant theme in *Life Together in Christ* is the importance of “learning to recognize the presence of Christ in all of life.”⁶⁷ Barton calls this process “discernment”

⁶² Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

and refers to St. Ignatius's emphasis on "finding God in all things so that we might love and serve God in all."⁶⁸ According to Barton, "the context for *all* aspects of discernment is growing friendship with God cultivated through solitude and silence, prayer and reflection on Scripture, self-knowledge and self-examination, sane rhythms of work and rest, honoring our body's wisdom, spiritual friendships and community."⁶⁹ An important function of close companions on the journey, Barton notes, is "assisting one another in establishing a way of life that includes these practices "*so we can become more discerning.*"⁷⁰ Another primary function of spiritual friendships and community is "to be a community for discernment in which we assist one another in noticing and eliminating obstacles" to seeing our individual stories through the lens of the larger story of God because we all have blind spots that obstruct our ability to discern Christ's presence in our lives.⁷¹

Throughout the book, Barton uses the biblical narrative of the two disciples' reorienting, life-transforming encounter with Jesus on the Emmaus Road to orient the perspectives and recommendations she offers.⁷² As Barton notes, "something about the nature and quality of their conversation opened space for Jesus to draw near."⁷³ Jesus stepped into the middle of the conversation the disciples were having with one another about the baffling circumstances in which they found themselves. Jesus engaged in

⁶⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 140; italics in original.

⁷⁰ Ibid.; italics in original.

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Luke 24:13-36.

⁷³ Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 26.

listening attentively as the disciples told him about all what they had personally experienced. Jesus helped them locate themselves in the larger story of God’s redemptive work in the world.⁷⁴ Barton notes how the narrative concludes with the two disciples returning to Jerusalem in order to tell the other disciples all about their perspective-altering encounter with Jesus.⁷⁵

Barton affirms God is the one who does the transforming work in us so “our vision of the present moment is transformed, and we ourselves are deeply changed.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, there are things we can do “to create the conditions in which spiritual transformation takes place.”⁷⁷ Barton stresses the importance of “real guidance in the attitudes, practices and behaviors that open us to the transforming presence of Christ in our midst.”⁷⁸

Barton takes care throughout the book to correlate recommended guidelines and practices with understanding of the dynamics and desired outcome of spiritual transformation in community. According to Barton, becoming open to the transforming presence of Christ in community involves “establishing *shared understanding* about what spiritual transformation is, developing *shared language* for talking about and encouraging one another in the process, and embracing a *shared commitment* for arranging our lives for spiritual transformation.”⁷⁹ This is a different kind of community

⁷⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14; italics in original.

than an affinity group, a ministry team, an accountability group, or a therapeutic support network. Barton is careful to represent spiritual transformation as both an end in itself – to bring glory to God – and as a means to other ends, including “to discern God-guided action in the world.”⁸⁰

Barton encourages envisioning “the spiritual life as unfolding within concentric circles of relationship.”⁸¹ The innermost circle is where we experience Christ’s transforming presence personally. The next circle is the community of close relationships (family, close friends, and spiritual companions) where mutual support and encouragement for the spiritual transformation journey takes place as we participate in a local church as part of a larger “particular faith tradition and the communion of the saints.”⁸² The outermost circle is the world where we minister and witness in Christ’s name. Barton notes that engaging actively in ministry raises awareness of our desperate need for “more of Christ’s transforming presence and power, which draws us back to the center again. Moving among all these circles in a balanced way over time is the fundamental rhythm of a deeply spiritual life.”⁸³

Christians in the midst of complicated life circumstances and experiencing disrupted friendships like Anna and Sarah’s could benefit from reading *Life Together in Christ*. Primarily, Barton provides a specific focus lacking in the transition and reentry resources; that is, the place and function of spiritual companionship within the larger framework of life together in Christ in everyday life. It also supplies a more holistic view

⁸⁰ Ibid., 16, 163. Barton cites Isa. 58:6-14; Mic. 6:8; Matt. 28:20; Mark 12:30-31.

⁸¹ Ibid., 156.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

of Christian life and ministry than the predominate focus in most member care resources on vocational ministry equipping and effectiveness. It offers both biblical rationale and practical guidance for sharing openly and honestly about fundamental issues of life so people are able to gain perspective on what God is up to in their lives.⁸⁴ The questions provided for personal reflection with each chapter could be of particular value in guiding interpersonal conversations safely through potential minefields of assumptions and differing expectations. The small group format and process that Barton proposes encourages participants to speak freely and openly about the “stuff in their lives” that impacts them deeply.⁸⁵

One of the most valuable aspects of this resource is the emphasis of sharing our own stories in all their complexity and perplexity in a context that both “welcomes each other in all our strangeness” and is intentionally receptive to Christ in one another.⁸⁶ This seems like an ideal setting for helping returnees and local residents reconnect with each other. However, people like Anna must be able to tell to their own story with clarity so that others can understand and relate. Barton does not adequately address the struggle many people have in terms of sharing meaningfully with other people about life experiences that are uncommon, disorienting, ambiguous and complicated. She also offers limited attention and guidance regarding overcoming other factors that could hinder people from participating in this level of open and honest personal sharing, such as dual-relationships and cultural or religious conditioning.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 26-27. Note contrast with member care material recommendations about taking care not to be lengthy, negative, or overly detailed when sharing your story with others.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 49.

Barton asserts that making a two-year commitment to a specific small group is essential in order to experience transformation in community. This is another reason Anna or Sarah could likely find it unfeasible to actually participate in the kind of transformational community described in *Life Together in Christ* in their present life circumstances. This model for spiritual companionship requires a degree of stability and control over life circumstances that does not take into account how complicated, disrupted, and ambiguous real life is for many highly committed, transformation-desiring Christians. According to Barton, the rationale supporting this requirement is “that the richest fruits of community life do not grow in a garden of uncertainty.”⁸⁷ I find Barton’s use of the superlative “richest fruits” with regard to the practice of stability one of the most critical deficiencies of this resource. Barton acknowledges that God is free to lead people as he wills.⁸⁸ At the same time, her view of the necessity of stability in experiencing spiritual transformation in community conveys the conviction that those whom God leads into stable circumstances are more able to be conformed to the likeness of Christ than those he leads into disorienting, unstable circumstances. Is it true that Christians who face unavoidable, complicated circumstances in life that render them temporarily or permanently unable to practice the degree of stability advocated by Barton and others are excluded from the “richest fruits” of spiritual transformation in community?

⁸⁷ Ibid., 165. I might be reading more into Barton’s use of the words “garden of uncertainty” than her intended meaning warrants. I am more comfortable with Barton’s statement that there are “unique spiritual benefits that come to us in the context of long-term commitment.” My point is there are also unique benefits that come in contexts where factors of uncertainty, ambiguity, unsettledness, and disorientation prohibit the long-term commitment advocated by Barton.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 166.

One of the great strengths of this book is the strong emphasis on practical guidelines for discerning the presence of God in all of life circumstances in the context of spiritual companionship. Two Christian friends, like Anna and Sarah, may have earnest desire to mutually encourage and build one another up in the Lord. Desire alone, however, is seldom sufficient for the development of genuine spiritual companionship, even in the most settled circumstances. Barton's small group fellowship approach for promoting spiritual formation in community provides a sort of scaffolding for supporting the intentional development of spiritual companionship between Christian friends. This book's greatest deficit is the failure to adequately account for the reality of seasons of instability, disorientation, and relational ambiguity in terms of the small group guidelines Barton presents concerning "attitudes, practices and behaviors that open us to the transforming presence of Christ in our midst."⁸⁹

Conclusion

The process of connecting meaningfully with one another as spiritual companions is challenging when life experiences are unsettling, disorienting, and ambiguous. It is also difficult when the primary focus is on functional relationship contexts rather than a fundamental relationship context. Contemporary approaches for responding to complicated, disorienting life situations such as reentry transition generally offer valuable insights and recommendations focused on providing therapeutic care, dealing with issues related to trauma and resilience, and processing grief and loss. They also focus on life management perspectives and practices geared toward dealing with issues related to those

⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

specific life circumstances in ways that promote well-being.⁹⁰ Consequently, throughout these approaches, disorientation and ambiguity tend to be viewed primarily as problems or obstacles to be overcome or resolved rather than as an integral part of spiritual formation in community.

A growing number of contemporary spiritual formation resources affirm that significant spiritual formation takes place in community and incorporates all aspects of everyday life. These resources provide a biblical framework and practical guidance for coming alongside one another so that the way is opened for fresh encounters with the sufficiency of Christ individually and corporately. However, many recommended practices presume or even mandate a level of stability and capacity of shared communication that is not viable for many people due to complicated life circumstances, such as reentry transition. Consequently, complicated life experiences characterized by disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness have been overlooked or marginalized or viewed primarily as problems rather than being seen as an integral part of spiritual formation in community.⁹¹ People in complicated transitions are much less likely to benefit from spiritual formation fellowship opportunities where they are explicitly or implicitly viewed as a project or a problem.

I am convinced that God is as fully present with those in disorienting, unstable circumstances as he is with those who are in stable circumstances. God is as fully present with someone who is at a loss in terms of how to make sense of their own story, no less

⁹⁰ Issues related to life circumstances such as aging, career change, chronic illness, dementia, caregiving, military deployment, addictions, adoption, divorce, bereavement.

⁹¹ Viewing disorientation and unsettledness as integral parts of spiritual formation does not automatically minimize or erase the challenges, but it provides a broader biblical frame of reference essential for an accurate reading of reality.

find words for adequately describing their present circumstances as he is fully present with someone who is able to share their own story clearly and meaningfully with others. Reentry transition as well as other disorienting, complicated life circumstances needs to be understood more fully in the context of the larger narrative of God's redemptive love. In turn, the church as a whole will gain new insights into the gospel and Christian spirituality from a fuller theological understanding of reentry transition.⁹²

The critical evaluation of other proposed solutions in this section highlights three key areas that need to be addressed in order to provide a more adequate solution to the problem of missionary reentry transition and disrupted spiritual friendship. First, the Christian community crucially needs a shared understanding of spiritual transformation in community that incorporates seasons of disorientation and ambiguity, unsettledness and partial presence, as an integral part of the context within which God is present and working out his purposes both individually and corporately in the body of Christ. Second, in order to share their stories meaningfully in the context of spiritual companionship, people in the midst of complicated, disorienting life circumstances such as reentry need more meaningful, articulate ways of expressing ambiguous, complicated, contradictory, and paradoxical thoughts and feelings. Third, current approaches to experiencing transformation in community need to be adjusted and new approaches developed that creatively and positively respect the challenges that accompany complicated, disorienting, and unsettling life circumstances so that all Christians have meaningful opportunities of spiritual companionship in community. We need each other's stories to grow together in Christ.

⁹² As a spiritual friend expressed to the author, "Returnees have lived a metaphor that points to Christ in ways we all need to learn from."

SECTION THREE: THE THESIS

Ecclesial communities continue to be shaped as *all members* perform life together in the ordinary that does not escape or separate out the chaos and difficulty of life.

—Nell Becker Sweden, *Church on the Way*

Section One identified the phenomenon of reentry transition as a disorienting and alienating life transition that often disrupts close relationships, including spiritual friendships. The focus of the problem is the disruption of spiritual friendship that hinders mutual spiritual formation in life together in Christ. The phenomenon of reentry transition is also overlooked, unexpected, and uncanny, which increases disorientation and isolation, exacerbating the problem.

The following questions were posed: How can Christians who are experiencing disorientation and isolation associated with reentry transition and local Christians who have not experienced life and ministry overseas connect together in ways that foster mutual spiritual formation? More specifically, what needs to change so friends in the body of Christ, whose relational connection has been disrupted due to the disorienting and isolating effects of reentry transition, are again able to offer each other genuine companionship on the spiritual journey?

Section Two presented a critical evaluation of a representative sampling of available and reliable resources offering perspectives and recommendations related to transition and intercultural reentry. Included were secular and Christian resources on managing life transitions in general and secular and missionary member care resources on intercultural reentry transitions. The resources considered offer many beneficial perspectives and recommendations regarding disorientation, isolation, and disruption in close relationships. However, life and reentry transitions resources do not offer content

sufficient for resolving the problem. Section Two also looked at a primary resource on Christian spirituality in terms of cultivating genuine spiritual companionship in community. Likewise, this resource offers an overall perspective and many beneficial recommendations regarding spiritual companionship applicable to the problem. However, it also fails to adequately address the problem's core issues of disorientation and disconnection.

This section presents an enhanced solution that integrates key areas missing or deficient in Section Two resources: the need for a theological and spirituality framework that recognizes ambiguity and disorientation as an integral part of spiritual formation in the context of fundamental relationships of spiritual companionship in community; the need to more adequately understand and address the disorientation and ambiguity inherent in reentry transition; the need for a spiritual discernment process in disorienting life circumstances; and more realistic approaches to cultivating spiritual companionship in the midst of complicated transitions and ambiguity. The artifact is a handbook and devotional guide that incorporates these missing components. Its multifaceted approach has been developed for (1) personal use, (2) one-on-one use, or (3) group use by Christians who genuinely want more clarity personally and more connection in spiritual companionship but who feel stuck in the process due to complications relationally or situationally. The envisioned outcome is Christians taking steps to engage in genuine spiritual companionship in a way that fully incorporates all of life, including all life circumstances that are complicated, disorienting, and ambiguous.

The Problem Reviewed

Members of the body of Christ belong together in Christ. Everyone has a place where they fit. However, when Christians like Anna return home following a sojourn of living overseas, they typically experience a lingering, disorienting sense of “everything sort of fits but doesn’t.” Home no longer feels quite like home anymore. Lingering disorientation and ambiguity regarding home stymies the process of making sense of what has changed, which complicates the process of reengaging in meaningful communication and relational connection with those who have not experienced reentry transition after a season of living overseas.

The disruption and disorientation tend to be experienced more intensely in relationships closely tied to a sense of home, such as family and close friends. This phenomenon disrupts meaningful spiritual companionship in life together in Christ as Christian friends become partial strangers to one another in ways that are unclear, uncanny, and unexpected.¹ Available resources on transition and reentry transition are missing the larger biblical perspective of spiritual companionship. Available resources on Christian spirituality in community inadequately address disorientation, transition, and ambiguity as an integral part of spiritual formation individually and corporately in life together in Christ. They also offer limited guidance regarding overcoming constraints against talking openly about personal experiences due to past incidents, cultural or religious conditioning, or dual relationships.

¹ Other factors affecting communication issues and relational distancing were noted briefly in Section One, such as reluctance to share openly about personal experiences related to living overseas and/or reentry transition. Reasons for the reluctance are varied and deserve a more thorough discussion than possible in this paper.

In order to reconnect as spiritual friends, first and foremost, Christians who have come back from living and ministering overseas (like Anna), and Christians who have never lived overseas (like Sarah) need to see themselves and be seen by the other as fellow members of the body of Christ. Whatever else has changed for each of them in terms of their life circumstances and perspectives, they still belong together in Christ. No matter how much distance has come between them or how disconnected they feel, they still are called into fellowship with one another in Christ.²

Overview of a Broader Perspective of Life Together in Christ

What is the larger biblical perspective that makes sense of each individual's current life circumstances and how they fit together in the body of Christ?

Each of these women is in the midst of a lifelong journey of spiritual formation.³ Biblical scholar Jeffrey Greenman describes spiritual formation as “our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.”⁴ Spiritual formation is the “good work” of God’s Spirit, conforming us to the likeness of Christ,⁵ beginning with reconciliation in relationship to God through conversion, “being born from above” by God’s Spirit.⁶ This “new life in Christ” opens the way for ongoing

² 1 Cor. 1:4-12.

³ *Christian formation, spiritual development or maturity, and spiritual formation* are terms used by different authors to refer to the same or similar process. I have chosen to use *spiritual formation* in this paper.

⁴ Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective,” in *Life in the Spirit*, 24.

⁵ Phil. 1:6.

⁶ John 3.

“conversion of the whole of one’s life to God,”⁷ encompassing all of human experience, not just our spirituality or eternal destiny. This means being open and receptive to God’s redemptive, restorative work in every aspect of our lives.

Spiritual formation takes place in the context of our personal everyday life experiences. As author Frederick Buechner has noted, “[we] cannot talk about God or sin or grace, for example, without at the same time talking about those parts of [our] own experience where these ideas become compelling and real.”⁸ Therefore, it is crucial that as we seek to grow in intimacy with God, we also seek greater self-awareness, which requires paying attention to the inner and outer details of our lives. John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote: “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. . . . Without knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self.”⁹ Honest reflection on life experiences promotes greater self-awareness that allows us to engage more fully with the transforming work of God’s Spirit in our lives.¹⁰

Spiritual formation takes place in community. In Ephesians, the apostle Paul describes the mutual spiritual formation that happens in the context of life together in Christ. In Christ, “we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”¹¹ These gifts are given

⁷ Gerald Lawson Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 232.

⁸ Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1970), 4.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.1.1, I.1.2.

¹⁰ Knowledge of God is rooted in objective reality and understood in subjective experience. Undergirding this entire discussion is foundational belief that God makes Himself known in general revelation through nature, by special revelation through the written Word of God, and fully through the living Word, Jesus Christ.

¹¹ Rom. 12:5-6.

that the body of Christ may be built together in love “to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”¹² “From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”¹³ Paul portrays an intimate, organic interrelationship between Christians, motivated by love and guided and empowered by God.

God has provided an infinite variety of human diversity and life experiences through which we come to know and worship him. We experience the transforming work of God in the distinctive context of our personal lives. Then, in our life together in Christ, we are called to share “glimpses of God we have been allowed to catch.”¹⁴ As we share with one another, more of the richness of God’s revelation of himself in Christ Jesus becomes alive and confirmed in and through us mutually. C.S. Lewis expresses it this way,

Each of the Redeemed shall forever know and praise some aspect of the divine beauty better than any other creature can. Why else were individuals created, but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently? And this difference, so far from impairing, floods with meaning the love of all blessed creatures for one another, the communion of the saints. . . . Each has something to tell all others — fresh and ever-fresh news of the ‘My God’ whom each finds in Him whom all praise as ‘Our God.’ For doubtless the continually successful, yet never completed, attempt by each soul to communicate its unique vision to all others . . . is also among the ends for which the individual was created.¹⁵

¹² Eph. 2:21-22; 7-16.

¹³ Eph. 4:16.

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 12. In the prologue to *Beyond the Mirror*, Nouwen describes interruptions in his life that led him to new experiences of God. He then explains, “Each time life required me to take a new step into unknown spiritual territory, I felt a deep, inner urge to tell my story to others—perhaps as a need for companionship but maybe, too, out of an awareness that my deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.”

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 1962, reprint ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 150.

Spiritual Friendships in Life Together in Christ

We need one another, not only to come to know God more fully, but to see our life experiences more truly as well. In the words of missiologist Andrew Walls, “None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.”¹⁶ Biblical narratives and the history of Christian spirituality record numerous ways in which members of the body of Christ are catalysts for spiritual formation in one another’s lives. Of primary interest for this study is the place of spiritual friendship in life together in Christ such as portrayed in the story of Anna and Sarah.

The central focus in a spiritual friendship is on the reality of the presence of Christ and participation in the love of God in the existential realities of everyday life. Aelred of Rievaulx, the twelfth century English monk, begins his classic treatise on spiritual friendship with the profoundly simple words, “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.”¹⁷ Aelred invites his readers to re-envision friendship as participation in the love of God. He writes, “God is friendship, ... [and] he that abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in him.”¹⁸ Christian spirituality writer Adele Calhoun describes spiritual friendship as a friendship that “encourages and challenges me to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind.”¹⁹ Contemporary Christian writer David Benner asserts that “significant progress on the transformational journey of

¹⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 79.

¹⁷ Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65-66. Aelred bases his understanding on Prov. 17:17 and John 4:16.

¹⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 151.

Christian spirituality” is not possible without having “one or more spiritual friends that support that journey.”²⁰ Benner explains that spiritual friends “help us remember that this is our Father’s world. They help us hear his voice, be aware of his presence and see his footprints as we walk through life. They accompany us on a journey that is made sacred not by their presence but by the presence of God.”²¹ Spiritual friendship is not primarily a functional relationship of support, collaboration, or partnership but rather a fundamental relationship of communion, of seeking God together as equals.²² Two or more members of the body of Christ meet with no other purpose but to be faithfully present with one another in order to encourage and build one another up in the faith.²³

In his treatise *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes one of the most significant ministries members of the body of Christ offer one another as spiritual friends. He writes, “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”²⁴ As spiritual friends listen to one another, they participate in a discernment process of recognizing and responding to the presence and activity of God in all things. The discernment process together as spiritual friends is not based on human wisdom and processing; nevertheless, it does not dismiss them

²⁰ Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²² Collegial, collaboration, support, mentoring, care-giving, networking, or affinity relationships are types of functional relationships.

²³ 1 Sam. 23:16; 1 Thess. 5:11. See James Davison Hunter’s call for “faithful presence,” which he says “begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us.” James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 260, 241.

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 97.

either. As Ruth Haley Barton points out in her book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, “Our ability to think things through and apply reason to our decision making is a gift from God; however, the Scriptures are clear that human wisdom and the wisdom of God are not the same thing.”²⁵ Christian writer Leonard Sweet exhorts Christians to remember that in the process of helping one another discern the presence of God in all life circumstances, “we must never forget that we ultimately do not offer others our skills, our wisdom, or our expertise. We offer others Christ and the Holy Spirit, ...”²⁶

Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the vital relationship between spiritual companionship and God's Word in life together in the body of Christ. He writes,

God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.²⁷

Spiritual friends need to be able to share their own stories openly and honestly with one another in a way that does not filter out life experiences that seem inexplicable, critical, or too complicated and confusing. However, believing that reflecting on and sharing from our personal spiritual journey is good and necessary does not automatically make it easy or accurate. Without the help of a relevant biblical frame of reference, it is common to be clueless, confused, or mistaken in our understanding of what is going on in

²⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 11. See 1 Cor. 2:6-31.

²⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 40.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

our lives spiritually. Spiritual friends also need to have their minds “marinated in the Word of God, and everything that happens to [them] put through the matrix of Scripture so that [their] being can recognize the living Christ when he appears,” to use Leonard Sweet’s description.²⁸

At the heart of spiritual friendship is the process of practical theology—sharing personal experiences in ways that cause our awareness and understanding of God’s person and presence to grow. According to Andrew Root in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*, the goal of practical theology is the ministry of mutual edification in the body of Christ. Root notes this ministry of spiritual companionship will more likely be experienced in the context of crisis, loss, distress, and other places where we come face-to-face with our human frailties and limitations and at times, the ultimate realness of our “nothingness.”²⁹

Spiritual friends often require a supportive environment in order to offer one another genuine spiritual companionship in Christ. In his book *Scripture and Discernment*, Timothy Luke Johnson places the locus of practical theology in “a local community gathered on the basis of the word of God and committed to Jesus as Lord.”³⁰ Johnson offers some practical guidance in terms of how to cultivate this dialogical process between spiritual companions in a small group fellowship setting. He depicts a small gathering of spiritual companions “placing itself in silence, reading a narrative passage together, then allowing its member, one by one, to narrate their diverse

²⁸ Sweet, *Nudge*, 77.

²⁹ Root, *Christopraxis*, 148.

³⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 51. Johnson’s portrayal of discerning fellowship seems similar to Barton’s in *Life Together in Christ*.

appropriations of that passage in their lives.”³¹ Johnson explains when spiritual companions representing a diversity of life perspectives meet together in this way, they all “learn to speak of God and God’s activity in the world in a way that respects the Mystery, and that also recognizes the complexity of real human life.”³²

In summary, all Christians need opportunities to talk openly with spiritual companions about all that is going on in their lives, both internally and externally.³³ Spiritual companions serve to empower one another “to ask theological questions about their own life experiences as well as those of the broader community of faith.”³⁴ This involves a process of “lifting out of our experience the latent theology that is present in them and then to refine it in prayerful, intentional ways” for mutual benefit in the body of Christ.³⁵

Nevertheless, the process of connecting with others in fellowship and sharing meaningfully as spiritual friends can be complicated when life is unsettled due to changing circumstances that are ambiguous and disorienting.³⁶ The process of connecting and sharing in spiritual companionship is often further hindered by ways that

³¹ Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 164.

³² *Ibid.*, 161.

³³ In functional relationships, people relate to one another with additional agendas and purposes based on established roles, goals, and expectations. Spiritual companionship relationships focus on communion—particularly important during times of transition because in the midst of disorientation and ambiguity there is a lack of clarity about where one fits and what to expect. Spiritual friends, like Anna and Sarah, need to be intentionally aware of the way past or present dual relationships such as ministry partnership/spiritual friendship; support team/ spiritual friendship; professional care/ spiritual friendship can influence how and what they share with each other.

³⁴ Elizabeth Dreyer, *Accidental Theologians: Four Women Who Shaped Christianity* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014), 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁶ In order to talk meaningfully with others about life experiences, people must have some sense themselves of what they are going through.

disorientation, unsettledness, and ambiguity are commonly perceived and responded to in both many secular and Christian settings, as noted in Section Two.

Life in Christ in Times of Disorientation and Ambiguity

Changes break the continuity of life. They alter the status quo. Changes do that to all of us to a greater or lesser degree, even the changes considered a normal, natural part of life. Things are not the way they used to be, nor the way they are supposed to be. Changes call our expectations and assumptions into question. They often touch core needs of security, significance, and belonging. Changes disrupt meaningful connections within our own self and with others. We lose our bearings and become disoriented and unsettled.

All changes require going through a personal process of transition from the way things used to be to new, unfamiliar ways of being and doing. While in the midst of transition, contradictory thoughts and feelings emerge and customary ways of interpreting life experiences fail to adequately make sense of our present circumstances. We often lose a clear sense of who we are or how we fit. Disorientation thrusts us into a position of vulnerability. We come face to face with our lack of control and helplessness.³⁷

In many circumstances, we are powerless to change what is happening. What can change are our perceptions of our experiences. “What we need,” writes pastor Craig Barnes in *Searching for Home*, “is a peace that goes beyond understanding since understanding is exactly what we do not have and may not get for a long time. We can

³⁷ The basic ideas on the dynamics of change and transition presented in these two opening paragraphs are drawn primarily from *Transitions* by William Bridges.

live with that confusion, but only if our souls stop churning.”³⁸ What matters most during times of disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness is our core perception of these types of experiences from a biblical point of view.

Although seasons of transition and disorientation are more commonly associated with character building and other types of developmental benefits, more is going on spiritually in the midst of disorientation and ambiguity than lessons to be learned, problems to be resolved, or disobedience. Christian contemplative writer Thomas Merton highlights that on a deeper level, “the ever-changing reality in the midst of which we live should awaken us to the possibility of an uninterrupted dialogue with God. . . . We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good.”³⁹ Throughout our life journey, the disorientation we experience serves as God-orchestrated means of transforming grace. Disorientation prepares the ground for new encounters with the living God in the context of ever-changing circumstances. As Barnes notes, “It is precisely when we are not where we want to be, where we feel unknown, uncomfortable, and not at home, that our souls are opened to receiving the blessed gift of being home with God.”⁴⁰ Even though we may feel lost or abandoned at times, nevertheless, we can be assured of not only God’s faithfulness and presence, but also the fulfillment of his good work in our lives.⁴¹

³⁸ M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 127.

³⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961, reissued, New York: New Directions, 2007), 14-15.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Searching for Home*, 31.

⁴¹ The theme of simultaneous presence of trust and doubt are found throughout the scriptures, in the Psalms especially. For example, Psalms 34, 138, and 139.

Theologian and spiritual formation teacher Bruce Demarest observes that “many reliable and trusted Christian authorities have taught that at times God orchestrates seasons of ambiguity and distress in the lives of his people for their eternal welfare.”⁴² Demarest cites Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann as a key authority. Brueggemann proposes a three-fold repetitive pattern in the life-long process of spiritual formation that places disorientation as a common and vital aspect in this process of a deepening love relationship with God. “Each of God’s children is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation,” writes Brueggemann.⁴³ He depicts disorientation as a “churning, disruptive experience of dislocation.”⁴⁴ Brueggemann also highlights “how urgent the descent into disorientation is for the practice of faith.”⁴⁵ Brueggemann asserts human life is “a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, ... One move we make is out of *a settled orientation into a season of disorientation*. ... The other move we make is a move *from a context of disorientation to a new orientation*, surprised by a new gift of God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost.”⁴⁶ Brueggemann’s insightful contribution to understanding the process of spiritual formation is that the loss of clarity

⁴² Bruce A. Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul: Stages of Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 7.

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 3.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 18.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), xv.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 11; italics in original.

and control in our lives (disorientation) is a necessary precondition for new life/transformation (new orientation).⁴⁷

The ability to see what God is doing in our lives in the present moment requires both God-awareness and self-awareness. In addition to having a biblical understanding of seasons of disorientation and ambiguous circumstances as an integral part of spiritual formation in community, it is also important to recognize and understand experiences of disorientation and ambiguity in the diverse circumstances of human life.

Making Sense of Ambiguity Together

The core issue with disorientation is loss of knowing what sense to make of the situation. We do not know what sense to make of an experience because something in the situation is ambiguous. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, *ambiguous* means to be “susceptible of multiple interpretations,” coming from Latin *ambi-*, around + *agere*, to drive, lead – that is, “going about” or “to wander about.”⁴⁸ In ambiguous circumstances more than one interpretation or meaning is possible without a clear single way forward. Ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity of meaning because a matter can be seen from multiple perspectives, but not one.⁴⁹ It carries the meaning of “being driven in both ways” so that we cannot chart a single way forward, even of being simultaneously pulled in contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable directions. With ambiguity there is a sense of loss of control. Ambiguity leaves us unable to think about a matter with clarity and accuracy. This is the experience of disorientation.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁸ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “ambiguous.”

⁴⁹ *Ambiguity* and *uncertainty* are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. With ambiguity, the meaning of a situation is not clear. With uncertainty, the outcome of a situation is not sure.

When we do not know what sense to make of an experience because of inherent ambiguity, we have no way of thinking about it ourselves or talking about it with others with clarity and meaningfulness. We are therefore hindered in being able to process it in terms of spiritual discernment in the context of spiritual friendship. Better understanding of the concept and experience of ambiguity itself is one way people in ambiguous situations can be helped to see their circumstances more clearly.⁵⁰ By identifying the ambiguity in the situation and understanding its disorienting effects, the whole situation becomes more meaningful. A way is then opened for sharing more meaningfully with others, even when the ambiguity in the situation itself remains.

Reentry Transition, Relational Ambiguity, and Spiritual Companionship

Anna and Sarah are members of the body of Christ together. Their spiritual friendship was able to thrive in the particular local fellowship context in which both were first introduced to new life in Christ. When Anna and her husband were called into global missions, Anna and Sarah adjusted their spiritual friendship to include a more functional shared identity as partners in ministry—local sender and global missionary. Since Anna has returned from living overseas, she and Sarah have not been able to clearly identify with each other in terms of life together in Christ. They are experiencing relational ambiguity ecclesiologically as well as socio-culturally.

Making sense of shared identity in Christ individually and corporately can become quite complicated. According to numerous contemporary Christian spirituality writers what matters most is for Christians to identify with a local faith community or

⁵⁰ See Appendix: An Introductory Discussion to Ambiguous Loss Theory for a reflective analysis of ambiguous loss theory as a potential insightful and practical tool for practical understanding of ambiguity and its effects on close relationships in contexts such as reentry transition.

parish.⁵¹ According to others, what matters most is for Christians to identify themselves with the global church, the universal body of Christ.⁵² Still others, such as missiologist David Bosch, encourage Christians to recognize the creative tension of the ambiguous nature of our identity in Christ as both local and global. Bosch draws attention to particular and universal dimensions of our identity in Christ. He writes, “We cannot do without grounding our faith and our mission in a concrete, local context.”⁵³ Bosch also notes that the church is “both a theological and a sociological entity, an inseparable union of the divine and the dusty. . . . It is *this* church, ambiguous in the extreme, . . . [that is] the pilgrim people of God.”⁵⁴

Ambiguity is inherently present in our identity as member of the body of Christ on many dimensions. We share a bond with all Christians through the ages as well as Christians in this present age. We are called to gather in fellowship with one another and we are dispersed into the world as witnesses. We are called into fellowship with one another in Christ both locally and globally. Being called into fellowship with one another

⁵¹ See Mark Votava, *The Communal Imagination: Finding a Way to Share Life Together* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014); Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010).

⁵² Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Todd M. Johnson and Cindy M. Wu, *Our Global Families: Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

⁵³ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 510. Bosch explains, “Without the intensive formation that happens in intimate communion with the risen Lord in the gathered life of the church, there can be no going out to ‘Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ (Acts 1:8)” Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 548.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 398, italics in original. Bosch also notes, “There are paradoxes, gaps, discontinuities, riddles in all of history. Thus the history of salvation is, for Christians, both revealed and hidden, both transparent and opaque.” *Ibid.*, 520.

in Christ means living in creative “dialectical tension” between the dual-orientation of each of these dimensions.⁵⁵

Coming to a shared fundamental identity in Christ can seem irresolvably complex in relationships between Christians where there is both lack of clarity and lack of shared perspective such as in the context of reentry transition. For example, missionary reentry resources urge returnee Christians like Anna to remember “this world is not my home” while at the same time emphasizing the need to successfully reintegrate back into the local church. Missiology literature encourages viewing missionary returnees as “global mediators,” “resident aliens,” or as “eagles in flight.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, local residents like Sarah are likely to hear or read a strong emphasis on being “placed people,” committed to stability, focused on building relationships in their immediate neighborhood.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Anna and Sarah need a way to re-identify with each other in the same bigger picture of life together in Christ in order to truly offer one another companionship as spiritual friends.

My consideration of this ministry problem has been influenced by an essay entitled “Toward a Spirituality of the Road” written by church historian and Catholic theologian Adrian Hastings. Hastings writes, “Home and the world are inextricably bound together in every man’s life. ... The present world is our home and yet it is not. ... Integration must come at a deeper level, in the very ordering of life between earth and

⁵⁵ Bosch refers to 1 Col. 1:9.

⁵⁶ Paul Hiebert, “The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 300-305.

⁵⁷ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 168.

heaven.”⁵⁸ “We stand in need of a theology—and also a spirituality—of journeying, an intrinsically suitable occupation in a pilgrim church,” he urges.⁵⁹ So many people, missionaries included, live uprooted lives and “necessarily suffer in their souls the effects of this external instability.”⁶⁰ Hastings asserts that both home and journey need to be understood together. “We need to recapture a theological sense of the home, but—still more—of its necessary opposite: the venturing forth from the family circle into the world beyond. They are the key symbols in human experience.”⁶¹ Hastings notes however that there has been a “tendency to shape the whole [of spirituality] on the home design,” while journeying has been “an object of suspicion.”⁶² He proposes, “The whole tendency can be seen as a failure at the level of spirituality to accept the pilgrim nature of the church.”⁶³

The “pilgrim nature of the church” referred to by Hastings is linked to the biblical image of the spiritual life as a journey homeward. According to Demarest,

the Christian life is not an aimless wandering but a challenging, circuitous, and sometimes hazardous pilgrimage of following Jesus to our heavenly home. In Scripture and Christian tradition a leading metaphor of the life of faith is that of a journey back to the Father involving spiritual formation and kingdom service.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Adrian Hastings, “Towards a Spirituality of the Road,” in *Mission and Ministry* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), 92, 93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 87

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁴ Bruce Demarest, “Reflections on Developmental Spirituality: Journey Paradigms and Stages,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 149. Demarest cites Exod. 3:18; Prov. 4:11, 18; Isa. 43:16, 19; Mark 6:8; John 14:4-6 and John Calvin, “Christ teaches that the present life is for His people as a pilgrimage on which they are hastening toward the Heavenly Kingdom.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.10.1.

In a pilgrimage view of the Christian identity, the pilgrim journey is both individual and corporate. In Ephesians, Paul portrays an intimate, organic interrelationship between Christians motivated by love and guided and empowered by God. The overall process of spiritual transformation for each pilgrim follows a “broadly definable pattern of spiritual maturation” with an infinite variety of particulars in terms of individuals.⁶⁵ Or to put it another way, as Benedict Groeschel writes in the epilogue to *The Journey Toward God*, an anthology of classic Christian writings on spiritual journey, “We all take the same journey and must pass through similar stages and ways. But like travelers across the continent, we have different experiences of the same reality.”⁶⁶ Of the many biblical metaphors, pilgrim imagery is one that specifically integrates both home and journey in life together in Christ. Pilgrim imagery, therefore, provides a potential perspective on a fundamental identity in Christ that incorporates the life experience of both returnees and local residents, like Anna and Sarah.

Pilgrim Journey Imagery and Spiritual Companionship

Pilgrim imagery offers a perspective on experiencing transformation in Christian community that recognizes transition and ambiguity as well as continuity and commitment are integral to the process. Transformation is experienced along the pilgrim journey, encountering the unknown and unfamiliar, along with the known and familiar, in a cyclical process through which God invites us into a deepening intimacy and love relationship with Him which overflows in loving service and witness to the world. Bosch

⁶⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁶ Benedict J. Groeschel and Kevin Perrotta, *The Journey Toward God* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), 247.

captures the essence of this spiritually transforming dynamic: “The involvement in this world should lead to deepening of our relationship with and dependence on God and the deepening of this relationship should lead to increasing involvement in the world.”⁶⁷

Bosch also asserts that belonging and participation in local community is the necessary locus of both spiritual formation and global missionary outreach. He observes, “It is only when we are rooted in our own origins that we can meaningfully relate to other peoples.”⁶⁸ Bosch goes on to emphasize the importance of our own origins in ongoing spiritual development of people sent out as missionaries. He writes,

How have we come where we are? ... We got where we are through intimate experiences of faith together with others, through participating with others in our search for light and growth, through discussing and praying and often agonizing with other Christians.

One asks, then, whether we will be able to transmit these intimate experiences of the love and grace of God to other people in any other way than by walking this road with them.⁶⁹

Whether connection with our earthly origins has been continuous or interrupted, our pilgrim identity reminds us that we are continually invited to fresh encounters in knowing and following Christ wherever we find ourselves.

Pilgrim journey imagery provides a shared understanding of experiencing transformation in spiritual companionship that recognizes continuity and commitment as well as transition and ambiguity are integral to the process of spiritual formation in community. Christians are able to view disruptions, inadequacies, and helplessness in life and ministry as a holy invitation, rather than as obstacles or hindrances. This view

⁶⁷ David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001, 1979), 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

encourages staying open and receptive to God’s redemptive, restorative work in and through disorienting, complicated, vulnerable, out of control times in our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

Pilgrim journey imagery prompts a re-envisioning of Ruth Haley Barton’s model with the same relational dynamic between inner, middle, and outer circles of relationship, only with much greater complexity and diversity.⁷⁰ In real life, most Christians are not placed in one single set of concentric circles but rather participate in overlapping and intersecting concentric circles of relationships.

In the context of Christian missions, spiritual formation is frequently referred to in terms of equipping for ministry and sustaining individual and family well-being in hardships, persecution, and spiritual warfare. Pilgrim journey imagery reorients the focus toward spiritual formation as an end rather than as a means. As author Thomas Ashbrook so aptly expresses, “What a wonderful realization to know that God does not have an ulterior motive in His relationship with us. Loving intimacy with God in Christ has profoundly transforming effects on every aspect of our lives. Jesus died on the cross to redeem us in God’s love, not just to save us for heaven, fix us, deploy us, or shape us up.”⁷¹

Conclusion: Toward the Restoration of Spiritual Friendships in the Context of Missionary Reentry Transition

What needs to change so that friends in the body of Christ whose relational connection has been disrupted due to the disorienting and isolating effects of reentry

⁷⁰ Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 156.

⁷¹ R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart: Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 26.

transition are again able to offer each other genuine companionship on the spiritual journey? The question from a broader perspective has two dimensions: How can Christians in disorienting, complicated, and perplexing life transitions make sense of their experiences in terms of their own overall spiritual journey and how can they engage in genuine spiritual companionship with other Christians who have never been in a similar type of life circumstance?

“We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ,” writes Mulholland. “We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.”⁷² Mulholland’s description of the dynamics of pilgrim journey companionship expresses the outcome I envision with the resolution of this ministry problem. Mulholland’s description also encapsulates my understanding of the process of discerning and implementing the essential steps toward restoring spiritual companionship between returnees and local residents.

In his introduction to *Ministry and Mission* Adrian Hasting observes, “It is easier to have a new vision than to create new structures, new ways to work.”⁷³ To propose a new perspective alone is inadequate without also considering what and how existing perspectives and practices need to be deconstructed, altered, or supplemented. Supportive steps need to be discerned and implemented in order to initiate, integrate, and sustain lasting change in reentry transition and in spiritual companionship in times of transition and ambiguity.

⁷² Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 17.

⁷³ Hastings, *Ministry and Mission*, 7.

As a case in point, in the closing chapters *Burn-up or Splash Down* missionary member care specialist Marion Knell draws attention to the problem of disconnection often occurring between returnees and local residents. Knell recommends pilgrim journey imagery as a way toward facilitating reconnection. She urges both returnees and local residents to see themselves and one another through the lens of the biblical image of pilgrims who “spend [their] lives going somewhere—to God, *by the way of Jesus Christ.*”⁷⁴ She also links the ambiguous losses associated with reentry transition meaningfully with pilgrim journey.⁷⁵ Knell insightfully introduces new imagery but orients most of the practical recommendations in her book with reference to old imagery. Both outer-space reentry and pilgrim journey include the imagery of life experience in unknown and unfamiliar territory but conceptually they point to two very different pictures in the context of life together in Christ. Pilgrimage imagery promotes a sense of companionship and shared journey whereas the reentry metaphor tends to convey a sense of isolation, extremity, exceptionality, and contingency. The reentry from outer space imagery needs to be displaced and new “structures” that integrate the pilgrim journey imagery with the lived reality of reentry transition experiences need to be created.

The reentry from outer space metaphor is one of numerous factors associated with missionary reentry transition and local faith community practices that warrant consideration in proposing an enhanced solution to the ministry problem. Other salient factors considered in this paper are also briefly reviewed here.

⁷⁴ Knell, *Burn-up or Splash Down*, 164; italics in original.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

Missionary reentry transition is a complicated, complex phenomenon with interconnected socio-cultural, missiological, and ecclesial dimensions. It is inherently ambiguous, not well understood, and not on the “radar screen” of Christian life ministries in general. Many returnees face constraints regarding sharing openly about their overseas and reentry experiences with anyone who has not shared similar experiences. They often seek out connection with other returnees where they find mutual understanding and support. However, even in open, honest conversations with other returnees, most returnees are unaccustomed to considering their reentry experiences in the light of life together in Christ or spiritual journey.

Disorientation, unsettledness, and ambiguity tend to be viewed as problems or obstacles to be overcome or resolved rather than as an integral part of spiritual formation individually and corporately in life together in Christ. Even in ecclesial contexts where the central focus is on discerning the presence of Christ in the whole of life, disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness are often viewed primarily as problems needing to be fixed, the consequences of disobedience or poor life management, or as pathology requiring intervention.

Due to the presence of disparaging or stigmatizing attitudes in many Christian community contexts, Christians may be hesitant to openly acknowledge the degree of disruption in their lives. They may also lack adequate opportunities to adequately engage in genuine spiritual companionship. Consequently, many Christians in general are relatively unaccustomed to processing disorientation and ambiguity in life transitions from a practical theological point of view. More specifically, many returnees are

unaccustomed to considering and processing their reentry transition experiences in the context of spiritual formation in community.

To summarize what needs to change so returnees and local residents can reconnect as spiritual friends is they need an understanding of identity in Christ that meaningfully integrates home and journey, abiding and sojourning, orientation and disorientation. They also need a shared understanding of disorientation and relational ambiguity as an integral part of the process of experiencing transformation in life together in Christ. Finally, they need a shared process for engaging in spiritual companionship in a way that promotes mutual spiritual formation while respecting the distinctive challenges and opportunities of complicated and ambiguous life circumstances.

The solution I propose focuses on the “one small life” level.⁷⁶ Change takes place on an individual basis and starts where people are individually.⁷⁷ At the same time, the restoration of spiritual companionship involves two people, the guidance of God’s Word, and the transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the focus of the solution is multifaceted. It is oriented toward helping individuals see disorientation, ambiguity, and transition through the broader lens of spiritual formation in community. It provides

⁷⁶ Essayist Wendell Berry has influenced me in terms of how to approach this multifaceted problem. Berry observes, “A lot of our smartest, most concerned people want to come up with a big solution to a big problem.” He says what is needed instead is “ a person willing to go down and down into the daunting, humbling, almost hopeless local presence of the problem—to face the great problem one small life at a time.” Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, 24, 25.

⁷⁷ I appreciate Myles Horton’s additional insight in terms of working with people on an individual level. Horton writes, “To me, it’s essential that you start where people are. . . . But then if you don’t have some vision of what ought to be or what they can become, then you have no way of contributing anything to the process. Your theory determines what you want to do in terms of helping people grow. So it’s extremely important that you have a theory about it that helps you decide.” Myles Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations On Education and Social Change*, eds. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Marshall Peters (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 99-100.

recommendations for helping individuals in transition recalibrate their personal devotional practices to include prayerful reflection of the whole picture of their real life circumstances. It is also oriented toward creating space and providing intentional support for spiritual companionships to flourish in complicated, ambiguous, and unsettled contexts.

On a “one small life” level, I believe a crucial first step toward addressing this multifaceted, complex, and ambiguous ministry problem is helping individual Christians reflect devotionally on disorientation, unsettledness, and ambiguity within the larger theological framework of spiritual formation, pilgrim journey imagery, and spiritual companionship.

On a “one small life” level, transition experiences such as reentry are commonly disorienting, complex, and ambiguous in ways that are unique to each individual. Christians in the midst of transition need ways to maintain orientation or get re-oriented to God’s perspective devotionally in the midst of ambiguity and unsettledness. With increased clarity about God’s presence in the complexity comes increased ability and motivation to share meaningfully with spiritual companions.

On a “one small life” level, people in disorienting transitions need others as spiritual companions. Experiences of personal devotional reflection and processing with people who shared similar experiences can encourage and enable reconnecting in spiritual companionship with those who have not shared similar experiences.

This is admittedly an indirect approach to addressing the ministry problem of disrupted spiritual friendships between returnees and local residents. However, I believe it is one that respects the complicated nature of the problem; recognizes deep change

begins on an individual level and moves outward; and models in its approach and processes the core message it presents.

Sections Four and Five of this dissertation describe a proposed artifact detailing how this multifaceted ministry solution might be made accessible to returnees or local residents desiring restored spiritual friendship. The artifact is a handbook and devotional guide designed for (1) personal use, (2) one-on-one use or (3) group use by Christians who genuinely want to make sense of disorienting, ambiguous life circumstances and to connect with other Christians in spiritual companionship. It presents an overview of disorientation and ambiguity as an integral part of spiritual formation in community. It provides a selection of devotional reflections on ambiguity, disorientation, and complicated circumstances as invitations to life together in Christ. It offers a life orientation guide gleaned from devotional reflections on the apostle Paul's letter from prison to his friends in Philippi. And it provides guidelines for cultivating spiritual companionship in a Bible fellowship group context that addresses overlooked life transition challenges and opportunities.

SECTION FOUR: TRACK 2 ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.

—Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*

The Artifact I propose is a handbook and devotional guide that: (1) invites the reader to view complicated life transitions such as reentry through the lens of spiritual formation in community and pilgrim journey imagery; (2) offers a collection of selected scriptures, prayers, and readings with brief comments intended to prompt further prayerful reflection and integration; (3) provides the reader with a set of devotional reflection practices designed make sense of the present moment from the perspective of God's presence, purposes, and invitation, however complicated, ambiguous and perplexing, in light of spiritual formation journey individually and corporately in life together in Christ; and (4) guides the establishment and facilitation of small group Bible fellowship meetings that embrace disorientation and ambiguity as an integral part of spiritual formation in community. The ultimate purpose is to enable and enhance individual and shared awareness and response to God's redemptive presence in the midst of disorienting, complicated life circumstances which will facilitate spiritual companionship between people who have not shared the same transition experiences.

Tentatively titled *It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... : An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Transition and Ambiguity*, this devotional resource is written specifically with Christians in mind who are experiencing disorientation and disconnection related to returning home after living overseas. However, one of the distinctive contributions of this devotional guide is that its core perspectives and practices

are applicable to Christians in the midst of all manner of ambiguous and disorienting life circumstances. This key factor enables it to be of particular value as a catalyst for spiritual companionship between people who have very different, non-shared life experiences. My intention is to provide a devotional resource Christians who may have little or no previous familiarity with spiritual formation, spiritual journey and/or ambiguous loss concepts and terminology will find accessible, substantive, and relevant.

This artifact is a composite adaptation of materials developed by the author for use in a variety of interactive seminars, devotionals, and one-on-one dialogue contexts.

SECTION FIVE: TRACK 2 ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Cover Letter to Publisher

Dear Editor,

My name is Gail Hutchinson and this is a proposal for a devotional guide and handbook for Communal Spiritual Formation. While this will be my first published ministry resource, I have prepared devotional handouts and training materials in my ministry role. I am a candidate for a Doctor of Ministry from George Fox Evangelical Seminary, and I hold degrees in Anthropology and Pastoral Counseling & Spiritual Formation. My proposal is an innovative handbook and devotional guide titled, *It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... : An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Transition and Ambiguity*.

Scattered throughout communities in the U.S. are Christians in full-time ministry who have returned home following a season of living overseas. Many of these returnees experience a lingering sense of disorientation and disconnection that is uncanny and often unexpected. Relationships with family and local friends (who have not lived overseas) are often deeply affected. "You feel like a stranger at home," explained one returnee. Another put it this way, "You feel like a puzzle put together wrong. Everything sort of fits, but doesn't." I know this experience well, both personally and from my work as a Transitions Consultant with an international mission organization. I have worked with many returnees, exploring life-giving, spiritually transforming ways to respond to this disorientation and isolation. One of the most challenging aspects of this process has been overcoming hindrances to meaningful connections on a personal level in local Christian communities. This proposed handbook and devotional guide offers both returnee and local resident Christians a practical theological framework, daily discernment process, and fellowship guide for navigating the undercurrents of disorienting life transitions in ways that are mutually spiritually transforming.

Thank you for taking the time to review this proposal. I am excited to be able to join with you in hopes of helping people cultivate spiritual companionship and find strength and hope in the Lord together in the midst of transition and ambiguity.

Sincerely,
Gail Hutchinson

Book Proposal

Title

It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... : An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Ambiguity and Transition

Author:

Gail Hutchinson
2301 Alder Lane
Newberg, OR 97132

email: ghutchinson13@georgefox.edu

Hook:

“It’s complicated ...”

Are you in the midst of changing circumstances that leave you feeling disoriented or perplexed about who you are and where you fit? A close Christian friend asks how you are doing, and you find yourself at a loss for words. The best you could come up with is “It’s complicated ...” Nevertheless, you long to be able to have the kind of genuine spiritual companionship where you can be open and honest about all that is going on in your life.

Overview:

This handbook and devotional guide is designed to help Christians regain and sustain life-giving connection with God and others in the context of ambiguous, disorienting, and disruptive circumstances. It is intended for personal devotional use as well as one-on-one and small group use. It incorporates key insights from scripture and Christian spirituality with special attention to disorientation and ambiguity as an integral part of spiritual formation in community. Through a collection of selected scriptures, readings, and reflection questions, the reader is invited to view and respond to disorienting experiences such as missionary reentry transition through the lens of spiritual formation in community. Also included are recommendations for a Bible fellowship gathering custom designed for people in transition who need a safe place to sort things out in the company of others who understand and care.

Purpose:

- To help returnees make sense of and respond to their experience of disorientation and ambiguity within the larger framework of spiritual formation, pilgrim journey, and life together in Christ.
- To help Christians stay oriented spiritually in the midst of transition and ambiguity with the aid of a processing guide.
- To promote genuine spiritual companionship between Christians in the midst of complicated, complex and ambiguous life circumstances.
- To raise awareness and invite Christians to explore God’s perspective on the ambiguous loss of a sense of “home” commonly experienced by returnees in light of biblical imagery of sojourning, abiding, and pilgrim journey.

Promotion and Marketing:

It’s Complicated, Nevertheless ... can be promoted and marketed through missionary care networks, organizations and on-line forum groups such as Global Member Care Network, Barnabas International; Godspeed Resources Connection, RockyReentry.com, and Brigada as well as through spiritual formation-affiliated contexts such as Renovaré and the Transforming Center.

Comparative Titles:

- *Burn-up or Splash Down: Surviving the Culture Shock of Re-entry* by Marion Knell, published by IVP Press, 2007 is a comprehensive, user-friendly guide offering insight and practical tips for reentry transition challenges primarily utilizing the metaphor of reentry from outer space with a brief reference to pilgrim journey.
- *Returning Well: Your Guide to Thriving Back “Home” After Serving Cross-culturally* by Melissa Chaplin, Newton Publishers, 2015. *Returning Well* is an extensive debriefing manual for assisting returnees in integrating, instead of compartmentalizing, their cross-cultural experiences, written in a workbook style for use alone, with a companion, or in a group.
- *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* by Ruth Haley Barton, IVP Press, 2014. Barton’s guide to journeying as spiritual companions in community emphasizes the importance of developing a shared understanding of spiritual formation, a shared language for dialogue, and a shared commitment to journeying together.

Uniqueness:

This devotional resource is written specifically with Christians in mind who are experiencing disorientation and disconnection related to returning home after living overseas. However, one of its distinctive contributions is that the core perspectives and practices are applicable to Christians in the midst of all manner of disruptive and disorienting life circumstances. This will serve to promote vital spiritual companionship even in the absence of shared clarity, continuity, and commitment.

Additionally, this resource is neither a full-length book nor a comprehensive self-help workbook that could easily overwhelm someone already feeling lost in the complexity of life circumstances. It offers bite-size portions of substantial devotional content, a devotional reflection process for staying spiritually orientated, and guidelines for cultivating genuine spiritual companionship in a small group context in the midst of transition and disorientation.

Endorsements:

I am confident that the following authors would read and endorse the book:

- Laura Mae Gardner, author of *Healthy, Resilient, and Effective: A Comprehensive Member Care Plan* and co-author of the 3-volume series *Global Servants: Cross-cultural Humanitarian Heroes*.
- Kenneth Boa, author of *Conformed to His Image, Living What You Believe*, and others.
- MaryKate Morse, author of *A Guidebook to Prayer*, and *Making Room for Leadership*.
- Gordon T. Smith, author of *Courage and Calling, The Voice of Jesus*, and others.

Book Format and Outline:

It’s Complicated, Nevertheless ... can be published online and/or as a 20,000-word booklet with or without a spiral binding. Each of the component parts can be used

independently but they are designed to be supportive of one another. Borrowing from the words of Robert Mulholland in *Shaped by the Word*, the following perspective sums up foundational beliefs and objectives of this resource:

We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.

The Preface includes a first-hand story from the author about the faithful presence of a spiritual friend during a complicated and disorienting life circumstance.

Part 1 – An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Ambiguity and Transition introduces readers to a practical theological framework for making sense of life in Christ in seasons of transition and ambiguity. Part 1 is an introductory overview that specifically addresses disorientation, ambiguity, and complicated life circumstances from the perspective of mutual spiritual formation in life together in Christ.

Part 2 – A Collection of Devotional Reflection Readings offers the reader a selection of biblical narratives, scripture passages, prayers, and quotes for devotional reflection and consideration of disorientation, ambiguity, and complicated life circumstances from the perspective of mutual spiritual formation.

Part 3 – Life Orientation Practices offers a set of life orientation practices based on the apostle Paul’s letter from prison to his friends in Philippi.

Part 4 – A Guide for Small Group Bible Fellowship for People in Transition provides guidelines for starting and facilitating a small group Bible fellowship designed to provide people in transition a Christ-centered, safe place to sort things out with Christians who have had similar experiences.

Intended Readers:

- The *primary* audience is Christians living in a disorienting season of transition and ambiguity who desire to experience spiritual companionship but find themselves stuck in the process.
- The *secondary* audience is Christian friends of people in complicated transitions, Christian life and ministry facilitators, leaders, and educators. This resource could also be an insightful and practical reference for ministry training or practice in areas related to spiritual formation, small group ministries, and missionary care.

Manuscript:

The manuscript will be complete by April 2017. The estimated word count is 23,000 words.

Author Bio:

Gail Hutchinson is a candidate for Doctor of Ministry at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. She holds B.A. in Anthropology and an M.A. in Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Formation. During forty years of ministry with Wycliffe Bible Translators she has served overseas and stateside in logistical and service roles, including language work and cross-cultural training. Her life, ministry, and training experiences have led to a focus on spiritual formation in community with particular attention to transitions, ambiguity, grief and loss, transiency, and diversity. Since 2009 she has provided focused support for colleagues in transition, established several transition support groups, and developed devotional workshop resources on the topic of *Living Well in the Midst of Change*.

Publishing Credits:

In-house resources for JAARS Transitions Ministries workshops and seminars.

Future Projects:

A Practical Theological Analysis of Pauline Boss's Theory of Ambiguous Loss. A critical analysis of ambiguous loss theory from the point of view of biblical narratives and Christian spiritual formation in community.

Exploring the Theology and Spirituality of Relational Ambiguity: A Conversation Guide for Sojourners and Abiders. To raise awareness and invite Christian thinkers and practitioners to explore God's perspective on disorientation and ambiguity in life together in Christ.

It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... : An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Transition. A customizable version for specific contexts such as retirement, bereavement, caregiving, military deployment, chronic illness, relocation, unemployment.

SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

As I sit down to write this postscript, I have just returned home to Oregon after a two-month stay with our daughter and her family in Johannesburg, South Africa. During my time there, I completed final revisions of the Written Statement and drafted the Artifact while helping care for a newborn grandson with two lively older brothers. As I found myself away from home in the midst of a most blessed and engaging time in terms of family life and a most crucial phase in dissertation writing, I thought—What a fitting context for wrapping up five years of doctoral work with the overarching goal of understanding complicated, disorienting, and ambiguous life circumstances through the lens of spiritual formation in community.

I began doctoral studies in 2012 in a similar doctoral program at a different seminary. My desire was to develop spiritual formation resources more suitable for the complex life and ministry contexts experienced by missionaries in transition. The motivation to pursue this particular topic was deeply rooted in my own personal experiences and several years of developing a transition care ministry for fellow missionaries. The initial doctoral coursework focused on seasons of distress and spiritual journey paradigms and quickly proved to be profoundly relevant in our lives. Mid-semester, our son-in-law died tragically leaving our youngest daughter widowed with three young children. Overnight our lives were thrust into an unexpected, complex transition involving a cross-country relocation, suspended doctoral studies, and other major work and life changes.

A year later, in 2013, I felt resettled enough and chose to reengage in doctoral work through George Fox due to proximity and the cohort approach. Initially the focus of my topic was the issue of ambiguous loss experienced by missionaries in transition

through the lens of spiritual formation. The challenge of researching this complex, broad, and relatively unexamined dimension of missionary life prompted me to narrow the focus specifically to reentry transition. However, working with available resources to identify a concrete ministry problem and develop an adequate solution felt like trying to fit pieces from three or four different puzzles together into one cohesive picture. As I delved into reentry and member care resources, the absence of an overarching spiritual formation frame of reference was glaring. Likewise, I found few if any spiritual formation resources that specifically addressed core aspects of reentry transition. I saw how the lack of connection between the experience of reentry transition and spiritual formation on the macro (broad perspective) level is reflected on a micro (personal) level in the common occurrence of disconnection between returned missionaries and their local Christian friends. At this point I further revised the focus specifically on spiritual companionship/friendship as the mediating context. The need for incorporating practical theology process and pilgrim identity imagery slowly emerged as I wrestled further with the ministry problem. This description partially summarizes the iterative process I experienced in the development of Sections One, Two, and Three.

In terms of the Artifact, from the outset, my hope was to produce a devotional resource for use by both returnees and local Christians that would foster mutual connection spiritually in the midst of disorienting life circumstances. In the end, what I have proposed aims to accomplish that goal, albeit more indirectly. The issues are irreducibly complex – there are so many different aspects intersecting and influencing both sides in terms of their own personal life journeys and in local community and broader socio-cultural contexts as well.

On a basic level, my hope is the published Written Statement and the Artifact will serve as resource and catalyst for personal reflection and conversations among members of the body of Christ to promote “progress and joy in the faith”¹ in the midst of disorienting and isolating life transition experiences. I also hope this dissertation will raise awareness and serve as a catalyst for further exploration on the phenomenon of reentry transition. Reentry transition is relatively unrecognized, irreducibly complex, and inherently ambiguous. There are theological, ecclesiological, and socio-psychological dimensions related to reentry and the ambiguous loss of home that have been overlooked and therefore warrant more deliberate consideration and application. What new understanding of Christ, of spiritual formation in community, and of *missio dei*, might reentry transition with its ambiguous loss of home offer members of the body of Christ?

On a broader level, both the thesis and proposed devotional guide are invitations to Christian thinkers and practitioners to explore in greater depth God’s perspective on disorientation and ambiguity in life together in Christ and the implications in terms of both the broader context of theology and Christian spirituality practices. In particular, I propose the need for a more thorough analysis of the theory of ambiguous loss and further consideration of a more robust biblical perspective on relational ambiguity and the ambiguous loss of a sense of “home.” Also needed is ongoing critical re-assessment and enhancement of current support resources and programs for people in ambiguous and disorienting life contexts.

¹ Phil. 1:25.

APPENDIX A:

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS THEORY

Introducing the Concept of Ambiguous Loss

A helpful tool for understanding and responding to ambiguity and its effects on close relationships is the theory of ambiguous loss developed by family therapist and researcher Pauline Boss.¹ In 1999 Boss introduced the concept in her book *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief and Loss*.² Ambiguous loss theory provides a conceptual model with practical applications for moving forward despite the lack of clarity in the situation itself. Essentially, ambiguous loss occurs when the *presence* of someone we are close to has changed in a way that cannot be clearly defined and in a way that defies closure.³ “This involves living with two opposing ideas says Boss. The person “is still here, but not all here. Part is gone, part remains. As a result, there is no possibility of resolution or closure.”⁴

¹ Pauline Boss’ primary works are *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (1999) and *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (2006).

² Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Psychologist and missionary care specialist Dr. David Wickstrom introduced me to AL in a pastoral counseling course on grief and loss in 2006. *Wickstrom* knew of my interest in spiritual care issues related to high levels of transiency in missionary life and encouraged me to read the book *Ambiguous Loss* by Pauline Boss. The book’s opening words, “I grew up in a midwestern immigrant community where everyone I looked up to came from someplace else,” caught my attention. I sensed a strong resonance with first-hand missionary life experiences as well as with the stories of many missionary colleagues. My heightened awareness of ambiguity in the phenomenon of reentry transition stems directly from reading *Ambiguous Loss* in 2006.

³ Pauline Boss, with Kristen Tippett, “The Myth of Closure,” Transcript of NPR Interview, aired June 23, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016 http://www.onbeing.org/program/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/transcript/8761#main_content.

⁴ Pauline Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 59 (2010): 140.

Boss identifies two primary types of ambiguous loss. One is physical absence but psychological presence as with a kidnapping, migration, incarceration, military personnel MIA, and divorce. The second is physical presence but psychological absence as with Alzheimer's, addictions, and preoccupations. Presence or absence—physical or psychological—may be partial or intermittent as with college-age children, military deployment, or cancer treatment. The precipitating event, which contains the ambiguous loss, may have a sudden onset as with an overseas move, kidnapping, or run-away teen. It may emerge over time, as with dementia, workaholism, or infertility.

In situations with ambiguous loss, the lack of closure is often seen as personal weakness and/or denial of reality. However, an important contribution of ambiguous loss theory is the recognition that the lack of closure is not the fault of the person. The fault is overlooking the ambiguity in the loss and striving for closure when no closure is possible because what has been lost is not clear.

Ambiguous Loss Theory and Reentry Transition

Does reentry transition with its accompanying disorientation and disruption of close relationships qualify as an instance of ambiguous loss? Although ambiguous loss as a therapeutic and theoretical concept does not appear to have been previously applied directly to the context of reentry transition, there does seem to be relevance.⁵

⁵ A literature review of references to ambiguous loss shows more common contexts include missing persons, dementia, adoption, chronic illness, foster care, and various forms of displacement and (non-intercultural) re-entry. I found few direct references to ambiguous loss in intercultural reentry transition research or popular literature. I found no direct references to ambiguous loss in either life transitions resources or Christian spirituality sources. There are references to ambiguous loss associated with uprooting, immigration, migration and other forms of displacement and re-entry (military deployment) but little if any direct reference to intercultural re-entry transition. One recent exception is Marilyn Gardner's on-line blog post (April 2016) on discovering the concept of Ambiguous Loss "frozen sadness"

Boss began developing the concept of ambiguous loss while working with families with missing family members or members with dementia. She found that most loss and trauma therapies were inadequate for helping these families find meaning, resilience, and hope because the focus was primarily on recovery and restoration. Overlooked or ignored was the fact that recovery from loss was impossible due to prevailing ambiguity inherent in the situation itself. Throughout the ambiguous loss literature, Boss notes that the ambiguity often lies in the answers to questions such as: Who is family? Where is home? Ambiguity about the meaning of home and the disruption of close relationships are also central features in the reentry transition experience. Another indicator of the theory's potential relevance is positive resonance expressed by missionary returnees when introduced, even briefly, to the concept of ambiguous loss.⁶

I believe Boss's discovery has important application in the context of reentry transition and this ministry problem. Reentry transition resources recognize that returnees commonly find themselves in a lingering state of disorientation and unsettledness. Perspectives vary in terms of whether this should be viewed as a "new normal" or as a failure to reintegrate adequately. All sources acknowledge the need for closure through grieving losses, integrating gains, and moving on with life. However, the recommended approaches for readjustment and resolving grief and loss do not adequately address the lingering experience of feeling like a stranger at home and the sense that "everything sort

and seeing its profound contribution toward understanding the Third Culture Kid (TCK) reentry experience of complicated grief and loss.

⁶ For example, after reading the proposal for this thesis a fellow missionary returnee wrote, "Just hearing the new-to-me term 'ambiguous loss' helped me! I look forward to your publication." L. Speyers, email to author, Monday, July 11, 2016 at 1:19pm.

of fits but not quite.” These symptoms are indicative of the presence of ambiguity in the situation.

Ambiguous loss theory potentially contributes valuable perspectives and recommendations that could help spiritual friends like Anna and Sarah make progress in restoring mutual connection. Ambiguous loss theory provides a “more inclusive lens” for responding stress, trauma, and relational disruption of reentry than traditional grief and loss approaches referred by intercultural reentry transition approaches because it takes into account “contextual ambiguity.”⁷ According to Boss, the recognition of ambiguity in the context of loss is essential in order to help people “internally reconstruct their sense of themselves in relation to others When there is ambiguous loss, the maintenance of health depends on the resiliency to be able to tolerate an identity that is not quite clear—may never be.”⁸

Is this approach merely an expanded version of the approach that advises returnees to simply accept that they need to “become comfortable being uncomfortable?”⁹ In the case of ambiguous loss theory, tolerance of the ambiguity is not the ultimate goal. Instead, acceptance of the ambiguity is part of an on-going intentional inter-relational process aimed at the greatest degree of healthy relational intimacy and connection possible. The therapeutic process is portrayed as dialectical and circular, not linear like transition, grief and loss, and reentry stage models. The process involves

⁷ Pauline Boss, “The Trauma and Complicated Grief of Ambiguous Loss,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 59 (2010): 137-45.140.

⁸ Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience*, 116-117.

⁹ Hélène Rybol, “Reverse Cultural Shock Toolbox: Expats, What Kinds of Tools Do You Need If You Decide to Repatriate?” *The Displaced Nation* (blog), February 25, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, <https://thedisplacednation.com/2016/02/25/reverse-culture-shock-toolbox-expats-what-kinds-of-tools-do-you-need-if-you-decide-to-repatriate/>; italics in original.

finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachments, and discovering hope together.¹⁰

Whereas transition and reentry resources tend to be individually focused, ambiguous loss is primarily a family systems oriented approach that advocates a holistic therapeutic process. Boss portrays the desired outcome of ambiguous loss therapeutic work as “helping individuals, couples, families, and communities stay healthy and resilient despite the strain of having to live with the uncanny nature of ambiguous loss.”¹¹ Ambiguous loss therapeutic work primarily focuses on the reconstruction of fundamental relationships ruptured by ambiguous loss within a family system or social support network. In contrast, the majority of reentry transition resources focus more on functional relationships in vocational, professional, and organizational interpersonal roles on an individual level.¹²

Ambiguous loss theory perspective and recommendations fill gaps left by the commonly accepted grief and loss approaches recommended by most transition and reentry resources. It warrants further study in terms of helping friends like Anna and Sarah to respond constructively to ambiguous losses affecting their relationship so that they can reconnect more meaningfully. However, since ambiguous loss theory is focused

¹⁰ Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience*, 195. Ambiguous loss theory is stress and resiliency focused, but does not ignore symptoms that need medical treatment. Benner and Vanier also recognize similar distinctions between relational-type care and more clinical care and the need for both in their discussion of companionship in community.

¹¹ Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience*, 7. Some Christian perspectives express concern that pursuing human well-being and resiliency undermines the biblical mandate to die to self and life for Christ. Biblical spirituality is, however, infused with a fundamental high regard for human flourishing and community.

¹² There is a valid place for occupationally/vocationally-oriented personal and professional development and support services. However, these are performance oriented, functional roles, --- different from non-functional familial connections.

on human flourishing, there are only hints in terms of understanding ambiguous loss from a biblical perspective of mutual spiritual formation.

APPENDIX B:
ARTIFACT

IT'S COMPLICATED, NEVERTHELESS ...
AN INVITATION TO LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRIST
IN TIMES OF AMBIGUITY AND TRANSITION

GAIL HUTCHINSON

HANDBOOK AND DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

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It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God.

—John Stott, *God's New Society*

We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.

—Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*

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PREFACE

Unexpected and complicated times of transition are scattered throughout many chapters of my life story. The following personal story is just one example:

In 1988, after several years of intensive preparation and training, my husband and I and two young children were finally ready to move overseas to help translate God's Word for a Bibleless people group. However, a week or so before our scheduled departure overseas to our field assignment we received news that our visa application was stuck somewhere in the process. This was an unprecedented and seemingly inexplicable development. How long it might take to get unstuck, the field director couldn't tell us. He guessed the delay could be a matter of weeks. We postponed our departure pending further notice.

Suddenly, we found ourselves facing a time of perplexing, complicated, disorienting transition. We felt stuck in limbo, immobilized by circumstances beyond our understanding and control. Our bags were packed. Our car was sold. We were house-sitting briefly for friends. We couldn't go forward with any clarity and there seemed to be nothing to go back to.

At first, a cacophony of urgent decisions consumed our attention. If it was only to be a few weeks where should we stay? What should we do about transportation? What about our extended family? Should we stay in our home area and make them go through the hard good-byes all over again? What should we tell our sending partners who were supporting us financially?

Almost immediately we were offered temporary lodging at our mission headquarters. This meant relocating cross-country from our home area. The first week or so of waiting turned out to be a welcome time of rest and renewal for us as a family.

Gradually other urgent concerns got sorted out. However, the waiting got harder and our situation seemed to get more complicated and ambiguous as the delay stretched into one month and then another and then another, with still no definite word concerning our visa. Nothing seemed to make sense. We had experienced such clear leading in terms of a call to overseas missionary service. God's desire for people to have His Word in their own heart language was irrefutably certain. Nevertheless ... there we were stuck in an indefinite state of transition. Gradually we became increasingly confused and disheartened without a clear picture of what God was up to in our lives.

Then, one day a friend thoughtfully and vulnerably shared with us about some experiences of unexpected and perplexing changes in his own life. In a gentle, humble way he suggested that this visa snafu didn't catch God by surprise, that from God's perspective it wasn't a delay. He encouraged us to remember the words of David in Psalm 139:5, 16: "*You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. ... All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*" We were reminded that our lives were in God's good hands. Although we still couldn't see God's specific purposes clearly, we made a conscious decision to stop using the term 'delayed.' Our hearts grew more settled and we were better able to live with joy, peace, and purpose even in the midst of ongoing uncertainty and ambiguity. This made a huge difference in our overall well-being throughout the remaining five months until our visas were finally granted.

My memory of this life-giving, heart-transforming shift of perspective is still fresh even though it happened almost 30 years ago. Two things have stuck with me in particular. One is that the friend who shared with us didn't actually tell us something we

didn't already know. What he did was help us make a fresh connection between our lived experience and the reality of God's steadfast love, sovereignty, and faithfulness. The other is how much this shift of perspective helped to reorient us towards greater attentiveness to God's loving presence and purposes in our immediate situation.

I'd love to report that I have never again felt disoriented, disheartened, or forsaken again since this life-giving, spiritually transforming experience back in 1988. But the truth is I have felt disoriented and disheartened and forsaken ... many times ... especially in the midst of other disruptive, complicated, and perplexing circumstances. In each of these circumstances, God has been consistently faithful in providing a way back into renewed hope and trust in Him. However, finding myself yet again disoriented and distressed used to be incredibly discouraging to me. What was wrong with my faith walk that I couldn't seem to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus? A sense of shame would hang over me and I tended to withdraw into myself. I would try to hide my heart troubles from others. I couldn't make sense of what I was doing wrong (though privately I certainly tried and tried to figure it all out) and didn't know how to talk about my struggles.

Gratefully, through scripture, classical Christian writers, and spiritual companions along the way, I've been invited to see cycles of disorientation and reorientation through the broader lens of spiritual formation in community and pilgrim journey imagery. I still do not like to be confused. It is very difficult for me to walk in the dark. I want to make sense of what's going on. I don't like feeling disoriented and unsettled. I want to be well-prepared for whatever is coming up. I don't like feeling helpless and out-of-control. However, now, instead of seeing disorientation and unsettledness as a sign of spiritual weakness or back-sliding, I am coming to appreciate them as a normal and integral part

of life together in Christ. Even when the circumstances don't change, I find I am less anxious, less self-absorbed and more attuned to God's initiative and presence in both my daily life and in the lives of others. This change of perspective has motivated and enabled me to be more open and honest with others about what I am experiencing even in the midst of the disorientation and distress.

Becoming more open with others personally can promote a greater openness and attentiveness to the wide spectrum of life transitions other people might be going through. In the process, we are invited to realize although the details of our complicated life may be distinctive, nevertheless, others struggle with the similar issues in the midst of transition. When we share and listen to other one another's stories, we come to realize we are not alone. "You mean you have felt this way, too?" A common thread I've heard is the desire not only to be understood, but also to make sense of what God might be up to in the midst of transition. The desire may be unspoken but many Christians in complicated transitions long for spiritual companionship that helps them "find strength in God" in their present circumstances.¹

These personal experiences (and hearing similar experiences from fellow Christians) are the driving force behind compilation of this handbook and devotional guide—*It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... : An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Ambiguity and Transition*.

¹ The concept of helping a fellow believer "find strength in God" comes from the story in 1 Samuel 23:15-18 where Jonathan went to David in the wilderness and "helped him find strength in God."

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK AND DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

It's Complicated, Nevertheless ... is a handbook and devotional guide for Christians who genuinely want spiritual companionship with fellow Christians but feel stuck in the process due to life complications and perplexities. Its core perspectives and recommendations are rooted in the basic framework of mutual spiritual formation in community as described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:15-16. Paul writes:

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (Ephesians 4:15-16 NASB)

Its overall goal is to help members of the body of Christ take steps towards engaging in genuine spiritual companionship in ways that are mutually attentive and responsive to God's loving presence and redemptive purposes in all of life's complicated circumstances.

A growing number of contemporary spiritual formation approaches affirm that significant spiritual formation takes place in community and incorporates all aspects of everyday life. These approaches provide a biblical framework and practical guidance for coming alongside one another so that the way is opened for fresh encounters with the sufficiency of Christ individually and corporately. However, many recommended practices presume or even mandate a level of stability and capacity of shared communication that is not viable for people in complicated, disorienting life transitions, such as aging, unemployment, intercultural reentry, chronic illness, dementia, caregiving, military deployment, addictions, divorce, and retirement. Consequently, complicated life experiences characterized by disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness have been overlooked or marginalized or viewed primarily as problems

rather than being seen as an integral part of spiritual formation in community. People in complicated transitions are much less likely to benefit from spiritual formation fellowship opportunities where they are explicitly or implicitly viewed as a project or a problem.

I am convinced that God is as fully present with those in disorienting, unstable circumstances as He is with those who are in stable circumstances. God is as fully present with someone who is at a loss in terms of how to make sense of their own story, no less find words for adequately describing their present circumstances as He is fully present with someone who is able to share their own story clearly and meaningfully with others. Reentry transition as well as other disorienting, complicated life circumstances needs to be understood more fully in the context of the larger narrative of God's redemptive love.

This pilot edition has been written primarily with Christians in mind who are in transition after living and ministering overseas. However, this devotional resource is also applicable in a much wider variety of complicated, ambiguous, and disorienting life circumstances, such as unemployment, family care-giving (e.g. Alzheimer's, chronic illness), burn-out, post-graduate studies, retirement, or immigration.

Recognizing that complicated and complex circumstances and relationships will benefit from a flexibility of approaches, this handbook and devotional guide is a multifaceted resource. It is designed for personal devotional use with elements suited as well for one-on-one companionship or small group Bible fellowship settings. Its four distinct parts can be used separately but also are designed to support and reinforce one another.

- **Part 1 An Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Ambiguity and Transition** introduces readers to a practical theological framework for making sense of life together in Christ in seasons of transition and ambiguity.
- **Part 2 A Collection of Devotional Reflection Readings** contains selected scriptures, prayers, and readings related to life together in Christ in times of ambiguity and transition.
- **Part 3 Life Orientation Practices** offers a set of life orientation practices based on the apostle Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi.
- **Part 4 A Guide for Small Group Bible Fellowship for People in Transition** provides guidelines for starting and facilitating a small group Bible fellowship designed to provide people in transition a Christ-centered, safe place to sort things out in the company of others who understand and care.

The content of all four parts is oriented toward the perspective that times of ambiguity and transition are invitations to life together in Christ. The four parts differ in process and context so that people in transition and those coming alongside people in transition can mutually benefit from this resource.

This handbook and devotional guide has emerged out of a growing desire to provide a practical resource for Christians feeling lost and alone in the midst of complicated, disorienting life circumstance. It is also my desire to offer insight and help to the friends, family, and broader community of individuals in transition life together in Christ that Paul describes in Ephesians 4. I approach this endeavor with a fair bit of trepidation. Throughout the process of working on this manuscript, I have found encouragement and guidance from spiritual writer Robert Mulholland's introduction to

Shaped by the Word. To borrow Mulholland's words, "I do not claim to be an expert in the experience of spiritual formation. In fact, there probably aren't any 'experts' in this field. We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage."¹

You and I are fellow pilgrims on a journey homeward in our life together in Christ. We each have a story to tell. So, as a starting point, this handbook and devotional guide is partly autobiographical. In the Preface, I share a personal story about how God used a timely word from a spiritual friend to bring about a life-changing perspective during a complicated season of ambiguity and transition in my own life. However, take any slice of my life stretching back even to my earliest childhood and there are subtle yet prevailing elements of ambiguity, disorientation, and transition. Whether in terms of birth-order, family heritage, my father's occupation and with many other reference points, it seems that something about my life has always been hard to make sense of. Furthermore, so far in my lifetime I have moved more than three dozen times and lived in seven states in the U.S. and five other countries. Throw into the mix an assortment of unexpected and perplexing circumstances scattered throughout 40 years of missionary service in a variety of ministry, include the diverse experiences of marriage, parenting, and now grand-parenting – and it all adds up to a very complicated life story to try and make sense of personally, never mind to try and share with others in any meaningful way.

It has been a complicated life and there were many times that deep down I felt very lost and alone, even though I grew up in a loving family and from an early age had a

¹ M Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1985), 17.

very strong belief in God's sovereignty and goodness. Finding myself, yet again, in the midst of complicated disorienting and unsettling circumstances used to be incredibly discouraging to me. It was baffling to me. I felt like I was trying as hard as I could to follow Jesus faithfully, and yet my life's complicated circumstances seemed to keep getting in the way. It seemed so hard to figure things out. I felt like a puzzle put together all wrong. The high level of change and ambiguity in my life made it hard to connect with other believers in a local fellowship. For a number of reasons hiding my heart struggles from others and minimizing the complications and perplexities of my life circumstances seemed like the right thing to do. However, over the years, my reticence and restraint about sharing more openly and honestly from my own complicated and perplexing life experiences has been slowly dismantled. Instead, I now see that sharing openly and honestly with one another about the messy, inexplicable, contradictory, complicated issues of everyday life is a vital part of the life together in Christ.

This change of perspective enabled and motivated me to begin to become more open and honest with others about what I am experiencing even in the midst of the disorientation and distress. Becoming more open with others has been coupled with a greater openness to others and the ways that their life unique experiences highlight different facets of our shared faith. As C.S. Lewis expresses so well, "Each has something to tell all others — fresh and ever-fresh news of the 'My God' whom ... all praise as 'Our God.'"² Gradually, over the years, the Lord has used scriptures, spiritual companions, classical Christian writers, devotional reflection, and scholarship to continue to direct and sustain this change of perspective in my life and practice. In the process, my faith in God has become more and more rooted in a heart-level love relationship with

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 150.

God and trust in His presence and purposes in all things. As pastor Craig Barnes so aptly described in *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*, “It is precisely when we are not where we want to be, where we feel unknown, uncomfortable, and not at home, that our souls are opened to receiving the blessed gift of being home with God.”³

Although I anticipate many more steps of living into the truth of this perspective, I now experience some of the most profound moments of intimacy with God and with the people He has placed in my life in the context of disorienting, perplexing transition.

This handbook and devotional guide has emerged out of a growing desire to share about this change of perspective in a way that could be helpful for others who are feeling lost and alone in the midst of complicated, disorienting life circumstance. In compiling this handbook, I chosen core theological concepts, key scriptures, influential writings, prayers and practices that have become most life-giving and spiritually transforming to me in times of ambiguity and transition. Some I have discovered on my own, but many have come from fellow pilgrims who have shared with me in conversations or writings from their own unique life experiences and spiritual journey. It is my desire to offer insight and help to the friends, family, and broader community of individuals in transition as well. Ultimately, it is my hope that this resource will be a catalyst for prompting further devotional reflection, biblical study, theological consideration, and spiritual conversations about ambiguity and transition in our life together in Christ.

³ M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 31.

Brief Personal Background for Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4

Part 1: Invitation to Life Together in Christ in Times of Transition and Ambiguity

Part 1 introduces readers to a practical theological framework for making sense of life together in Christ in seasons of transition and ambiguity.

Part 1 Background: The discovery of writings that describe the Christian life in terms of spiritual journey and spiritual formation in community has been tremendously helpful to me. This overview represents my own attempt to express in my own words a practical and theological “working model” of the Christian life that views ambiguity, disorientation and transition as integral part of spiritual formation in community. It introduces the key elements from my biblical and theological studies and devotional reflections on life stories (my own and others) integrated with insight from other Christian writers.

Part 2: A Collection of Devotional Reflection Readings

Part 2 contains a collection of daily devotional reflections with selected scriptures and readings related to ambiguity, disorientation, spiritual companionship, and worship.

Part 2 Background: All of the items included in this collection have a meaningful connection to some piece of my own life story. Many of them have been particularly influential in terms of directing and sustaining my shift of perspective regarding recognition of God’s presence and invitation to spiritual companionship in times of ambiguity and transition.

Part 3: Life Orientation Practices

Part 3 offers a set of life orientation practices based on the apostle Paul's letter from prison to his friends in Philippi.

Part 3 Background: While preparing some devotional reflections on life together in Christ in times of ambiguity and transition I was drawn to the way that the apostle Paul exemplified living with joy in the midst of disruptive and perplexing transitions. And yet at the same time, he didn't minimize the difficulties. In Philippians particularly Paul shared openly with his friends about what he was going through. Additionally, Paul repeatedly invited other believers to learn from his own life and teaching and to follow his pattern of practices in order to experience the peace of the God and the God of peace.⁴ So, that is what I set out to do—learn from Paul's perspective and practices, especially his relationship with the church in Philippi while he was in prison.

Part 4: A Guide for Small Group Bible Fellowship for People in Transition

Part 4 provides guidelines for starting and facilitating a small group Bible fellowship custom designed to provide people in transition a Christ-centered, safe place to sort things out in the company of others who understand and care.

Part 4 Background: This small group approach is modeled after a weekly fellowship gathering called LimboLinks that I helped to start and facilitate for women in reentry transition back to the U.S. from living overseas as missionaries. The initial concept for LimboLinks emerged out of my personal familiarity with how difficult it can be for someone in a disorienting, unsettled time of transition, such as like intercultural reentry, to fit into the structures, relationships, and

⁴ Philippians 3:17; 4:9; 2 Timothy 1:13-14.

expectations of a more typical Bible study or life group setting. I was hesitant to start a focused group like LimboLinks, however, because I also felt very strongly about promoting ways for returnees to be able to engage more fully in already available local fellowship and life group opportunities. Over time I was very encouraged to see that for many women in reentry transition, participation in LimboLinks became a much appreciated bridge to being more able and willing share their experiences openly and meaningfully in a broader fellowship context (i.e. not just with fellow returnees.)

PART 1

Invitation to Life in Christ in Times of Ambiguity and Transition An Introduction and Overview

This devotional guide and handbook focuses on how Christians in complicated and perplexing life transitions can connect with other Christians in ways that promote genuine spiritual companionship, joyful worship, and faithful witness for Christ.

It is hard to share with others when life is complicated and you don't even quite know yourself what to think or feel about a matter. Without the help of a biblical frame of reference, it is common to be lost, confused or mistaken in understanding of what is going on in our lives spiritually. The following biblical and practical theological reflections form the overarching framework of this collection of selected scriptures, prayers, readings, and reflective considerations on life together in Christ in times of transition and ambiguity.

The Big Picture of Life Together in Christ

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. ... And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

—Revelation 7:9-10

The Bible paints an awesome picture of the whole amazing diversity of God's creation worshiping Him in all His majestic goodness and glory. The wonder of it all! God's steadfast love expressed through Christ reaches to each of us, remaking our hearts so that we can worship Him in spirit and truth through the vast diversity of human experience.

God's desire is to be known and worshipped in all His goodness and glory by all people personally and corporately. However, studying the Bible and reflecting on our

own personal experience alone are not enough to know God fully. The window of our own personal experience through which we come to know God is far too limited for us to know Him in all His glory. He intends that we share personally together with one another so that we get to know Him more fully through a greater variety of human experience.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul describes the spiritual formation that happens in the context of life together in Christ. In Christ, “we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:5-6). These gifts are given that the body of Christ may be built together in love “to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22; 7-16). “From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

In the words of church historian Andrew Walls, “None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.”⁵ The main point is that Christians really do need each other no matter how complicated or complex or difficult it is to connect in meaningful relationship. Through sharing together our personal encounters with God through our own experiences, more and more biblically grounded knowledge of the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus becomes alive and confirmed in each of us by the Holy Spirit. The life we share together in Christ culminates in a global hallelujah as we share together “glimpses of God we have been allowed to catch.”⁶

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 79.

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 12. In the prologue, Nouwen describes the many interruptions in his life that have led him to new experiences of God. He then explains, “Each time life required me to take a new step into unknown spiritual territory, I felt a deep, inner urge to tell my story to others—perhaps as a need for companionship

Spiritual Companionship in Everyday Life Together in Christ

Even with a solid biblical frame of reference, the ability to see what God is doing in our lives in the present moment comes through a process of discernment that often involves spiritual companionship in the body of Christ. Spiritual friendship is the particular type of spiritual companionship in focus in this guide. Spiritual friends meet as equals and help one another remember “this is our Father’s world.” They help one another seek God together. They encourage and build one another up in the faith (1 Thess. 5:11).

In a spiritual friendship, the central focus is on the reality of the presence of Christ in the whole of life. It is essential, therefore, that spiritual friends be able to share about their everyday life openly and honestly with one another in a way that does not filter out whatever seems inexplicable, too complicated, or negative. In fact, having a safe, connecting place where to talk openly about all that is going on in life, internally and externally, is vital for Christians who find themselves in the midst of disorienting and perplexing life circumstances.

Understanding the Ripple Effects of Change

Changes break the continuity of life. They alter the status quo. Changes do that to all of us to a greater or lesser degree. Even changes considered a normal, positive part of life can be disruptive. Things aren’t the way they used to be, nor the way they are supposed to be. Changes call our expectations and assumptions into question. They often touch core needs of security, significance and belonging. All changes require going through a personal process of transition from the way things used to be to new, unfamiliar

but maybe, too, out of an awareness that my deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.”

ways of being and doing. While in the midst of transition, we often lose a clear sense of who we are or how we fit. As contradictory thoughts and feelings emerge, we can easily get disoriented and disconnected from our present everyday life experiences.⁷ Pastor Craig Barnes aptly reminds us that this can be very dangerous because “when the present tense disappears in your life, so does the manna. The mysterious, life-giving, blessed grace of God only comes in the day you have. . . . Without the ability to see what God is doing today you are always anxious, never at home, and thus never joyful.”⁸

The core issue with disorientation is the loss of knowing what sense to make of the situation. We don’t know what sense to make of an experience because something in the situation is ambiguous. What does ambiguous mean? According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, *ambiguous* means to be “susceptible of multiple interpretations.” *Ambiguity* refers to the lack of clarity of meaning because a matter can be seen from multiple perspectives, but not one. *Ambiguity* comes Latin *ambi-*, around + *agere*, to drive, lead—that is, “going about” or “to wander about.” It carries the meaning of “being driven in both ways” so that we cannot chart a single way forward, even of being simultaneously pulled in contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable directions. Ambiguity leaves us unable to think about a matter with clarity and accuracy. This is the experience of disorientation.

With ambiguity there is a sense of loss of control. In the context of ambiguity, we often experience an increase in ambivalence. *Ambivalence* refers to the existence of mutually conflicting feelings or thoughts, such as both love/hate, being simultaneously

⁷ This brief overview of the dynamics of change and transition presented paragraphs is drawn primarily from *Transitions* by William Bridges.

⁸ M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 118.

pulled in contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable emotions. Ambivalence creates a lot of tension in our being and in our relationships. We can't decide what value to put on a situation.

Ambiguity and Disorientation in the Life of a Christian

Theologian Bruce Demarest reminds us that “many reliable and trusted Christian authorities have taught that at times God orchestrates seasons of ambiguity and distress in the lives of his people for their eternal welfare.”⁹ Complicated and ambiguous circumstances are disorienting in ways that remind us of our human frailty, our need for one another, and our utter dependence for God. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann proposes a three-fold repetitive pattern in the life-long process of spiritual formation that places disorientation as a common and integral part in the process of a deepening love relationship with God. Brueggemann says, “Each of God’s children is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.”¹⁰ He depicts the experience of disorientation as a “churning, disruptive experience of dislocation.”¹¹ Brueggemann also highlights “how urgent the descent into disorientation is for the practice of faith.”¹²

“Human life is a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, ... One move we make is out of a settled orientation into a season of disorientation ... a new season of chaos. ... The other move we make is a move from a

⁹ Bruce A. Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul: Stages of Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2009), 7.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 3.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 18.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), xv.

context of disorientation to a new orientation, surprised by a new gift of God, a new coherence made present to us just when we thought all was lost.”¹³

Brueggemann’s insightful contribution to understanding the process of spiritual formation is that the loss of clarity and control in our lives (disorientation) is the necessary precondition for new life/ transformation (new orientation).¹⁴ When familiar established ways of making sense of life experience become inadequate for our present circumstances, we become disoriented. Disorientation thrusts us into a position of vulnerability. We lose our bearings. We are reminded of our lack of control and helplessness, forced to reconsider assumptions and preoccupations, and invited to discover new ways of seeing and being. This clears the ground for a new encounter with the living God in light of the particular circumstances of our present context.

Making clearer sense of ambiguity in our lives helps bring increase recognition and acceptance of God’s presence and loving, redemptive, reconciling purposes in times of perplexing, disruptive, disorienting and often isolating transitions in life and ministry. Ambiguity in life experience unsettles, disorients, and disrupts our sense of coherence. Thus ambiguity provides fresh opportunities to engage together in theological reflection through actively seeking to make sense of portions of lived experience (and the experience of others) that seem to lie outside of the patchwork theological framework that each of us have acquired through life-long participation in varied fellowship community, academic and ministry contexts.

¹³ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 9, 10, 11.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, xi.

Spiritual Companionship in Complicated, Disorienting Circumstances

The process of sharing meaningfully with one another as spiritual friends in the midst of life transitions can be very complicated nevertheless. When we don't know what sense to make of a circumstance because of inherent ambiguity, we don't have a way of thinking about it ourselves or talking about it with others with clarity and meaningfulness. We are therefore hindered in being able to process it in terms of spiritual discernment in the context of spiritual friendship. Gaining some clarity about the process of transition and the concept of ambiguity itself helps people in disorienting transition in an ambiguous situation see the situation more accurately. By identifying the ambiguity in the situation and understanding its disorienting effects, the whole situation becomes more mutually meaningful, because disorientation and ambiguous circumstances are common human experiences. This opens a way for sharing more meaningfully with others, even when the ambiguity in the situation itself remains and even if the specific experiences are unfamiliar to one another.

Pilgrim Journey Imagery

In order to truly offer one another companionship on the spiritual journey, spiritual friends need to be able to identify with each other in the same picture of life together in Christ, regardless of how different their circumstances might be. Connecting as spiritual friends can be challenging when one friend is in a season of life that is fairly stable and ordered and the other in a season of life that is unfamiliar, unsettling and disorienting.

Of the many biblical metaphors for members of the body of Christ, pilgrim imagery incorporates both seasons of settledness and transiency, abiding and journeying,

orientation and disorientation. From a pilgrimage perspective, spiritual formation is viewed in terms of a life-long journey homeward. Pilgrim journey imagery provides a way for spiritual friends to view the differences between their circumstances and state of being as holy invitation rather than obstacles or hindrances. Transformation is experienced along the pilgrim journey in a cyclical pattern of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation through which God invites us into a deepening intimacy and love relationship with Him which overflows in loving service and witness to the world. At the same time, we were created to be recipients of God's grace and truth through relationship with fellow members of the body of Christ from their encounters with God in their life journey as well. As Robert Mulholland describes,

“We are all fellow pilgrims on the way toward the wholeness God has for us in Christ. We build one another up as we share with each other what we have encountered, what we have experienced, what we have learned in our pilgrimage.”¹⁵

¹⁵ M Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Upper Room, 1985), 17.

PART 2

A Collection of Devotional Reflection Readings

Introduction

What's on your heart and mind . . .

when life is complicated and hard to make sense of?

when you are walking in the dark or disoriented in the fog?

when you are grappling with perplexing matters, or maybe just lost in a muddle?

when you feel like a stranger in your own life?

when someone you deeply care for is in a complicated, perplexing season of life and you are wondering how to come alongside?

God is as fully present with people who are in the midst of a complicated, unsettled season of life as He is with those who are in midst of settled, well-ordered circumstances. God is as fully present with someone who is at a loss in terms of how to make sense of their own story, no less find words for adequately describing their present circumstances, as He is fully present with someone who is able to share their own story clearly and meaningfully with others. However, when we are in the midst of in the midst of complicated, disorienting, and unsettling circumstances it is easy to feel lost and forsaken. To feel like the problem child. To wonder what is wrong.

Although seasons of transition and disorientation are more commonly associated with character building and other types of developmental benefits, more is going on spiritually in the midst of disorientation and ambiguity than lessons to be learned, problems to be resolved, or disobedience to be dealt with. Christian contemplative writer Thomas Merton highlights that on a deeper level, “the ever-changing reality in the midst of which we live should awaken us to the possibility of an uninterrupted dialogue with

God. ... We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good.”¹⁶

Disorienting, complicated life circumstances need to be understood more fully in the context of the larger story of God’s redemptive love. In many circumstances, we are powerless to change what is happening. What can change are our perceptions of our experiences. “What we need,” writes pastor Craig Barnes in *Searching for Home*, “is a peace that goes beyond understanding since understanding is exactly what we do not have and may not get for a long time. We can live with that confusion, but only if our souls stop churning.”¹⁷ What matters most during times of disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness is our open and honest recognition of how scattered and confused we actually are and our core perception of these types of experiences from a biblical point of view.

Each of the following devotional readings includes a selection of Bible narratives, scripture passages, and quotes that relate in some way to God’s presence and invitation to life together in Christ in times of disorientation, ambiguity, and transition. These selected devotional reflection readings are not exhaustive. Rather they are offered as a sampling of the type of reflective readings that can provide opportunity for the Lord to direct your heart toward God’s love and Christ’s perseverance (2 Thessalonians 3:5) in the midst of complicated, disorienting transitions. These selections have been designed primarily for personal devotional use. However, they may also be used as guides for study, reflection, and sharing in a one-on-one or small group context.

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 14-15.

¹⁷ M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 127.

Devotional Reflection Reading #1

Scripture:

¹⁹Just thinking of my troubles and my lonely wandering makes me miserable. ²⁰That's all I ever think about, and I am depressed. ²¹Then I remember something that fills me with hope.

²²The LORD's kindness never fails! If he had not been merciful, we would have been destroyed. ²³The LORD can always be trusted to show mercy each morning.

²⁴Deep in my heart I say, "The LORD is all I need; I can depend on him!"

—Lamentations 3:19-24 CEV

Quote:

“To be certain of God means that we are uncertain in all our ways, we do not know what a day may bring forth. This is generally said with a sigh of sadness, it should be rather an expression of breathless expectation. We are uncertain of the next step, but we are certain of God.”

—Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, April 29

Reflection:

In the midst of your circumstances, what's on your mind? Who is on your mind? What experiences of the Lord's kindness, mercy and faithfulness can you recall to reorient your perspective and restore hope?

A Journey Prayer

“My Lord, God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Amen.

—Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

Devotional Reflection Reading #2

Scripture:

*As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."
He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"
Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"
Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"
"Lord, I want to see," he replied.
Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.*

—Luke 18:35-42

Quote:

"My deepest vocation is to be a witness of the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch."

—Henri Nouwen. *Beyond the Mirror*, p. 12

Song

Open My Eyes, Lord, I Want to See Jesus.

Devotional Reflection Reading #3

Scripture:

¹² Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’” ¹³ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

¹⁴ The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.” ¹⁶ How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

¹⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

¹⁸ Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

¹⁹ And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

—Exodus 33:12-19

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering from each man whose heart prompts him to give. . . . Then have them make a sanctuary [tabernacle] for me, and I will dwell with them.”

—Exodus 34:5-7

Quote:

“The tabernacle was a mobile meeting place with God that traveled on the backs of the priests as they wandered through the desert. Even then they did not know where they were going, the important thing was to continue meeting God along the way.”

“So while we inevitably journey through contemporary society, we have the opportunity to be so much more than a people who settle for a place, and even much more than meandering nomads who seek only the next place. We can be pilgrims who nurture the memory of the Father’s house where we truly belong. We will never settle down, and certainly not expect God to settle down, but will travel though life as a part of the tabernacle community of pilgrims who are settled only in the certainty that the Savior is in our midst.”

—Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home*, p. 143-144

Devotional Reflection Reading #4

Scripture:

¹⁷ Dear brothers and sisters, after we were separated from you for a little while (though our hearts never left you), we tried very hard to come back because of our intense longing to see you again. ¹⁸ We wanted very much to come to you, and I, Paul, tried again and again, but Satan prevented us.

¹ Finally, when we could stand it no longer, we decided to stay alone in Athens, ² and we sent Timothy to visit you. He is our brother and God's co-worker in proclaiming the Good News of Christ. We sent him to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith, ³ and to keep you from being shaken by the troubles you were going through. But you know that we are destined for such troubles. ⁴ Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come—and they did, as you well know.

—1 Thessalonians 2:17-18; 3:1-5

Quote:

“Here is even greater mystery. No one comes to know himself through introspection or in the solitude of his personal diary. Rather is in dialogue, in his meeting with other persons. It is only by expressing his convictions to others that he becomes really conscious of them. He who would see himself clearly must open up to a confidant freely chosen and worthy of such trust.”

“The human being needs fellowship; he needs a partner, a real encounter with others. He needs to understand others, and to sense that others understand him.”

—Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other*, p 30

Prayer:

May our lives:

Be filled with God

Deepen in the knowledge of God's will

Expand in wisdom and understanding

Have an awareness of the Spirit's presence

Live worthy of the Lord

Please the Lord

Bear fruit of good works toward one another and others

Grow in the knowledge of God

Be strengthened with the power of God

Demonstrate endurance

Develop patience

Express joyful thanks

Thank you God, that you rescue us from darkness, bring us into the kingdom of light, fill us with the love of Jesus, bring redemption, and forgive us always.

—Adapted from Colossians 1:9-14 by Steve Fawver

Devotional Reflection Reading #5**Scripture:**

We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead.

—2 Corinthians 1:8-9 NLT

Quote:

“All of our experiences along the pilgrimage are used to change us closer and closer into the image of the beloved Son, with whom the Spirit makes us joint heirs of the Father.”

— Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home*, p.12, 27

Prayer:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Apostle Paul, Romans 15:13.

Devotional Reflection Reading #6

Scripture:

When I came to the city of Troas to preach the Good News of Christ, the Lord opened a door of opportunity for me. But I had no peace of mind because my dear brother Titus hadn't yet arrived with a report from you. So I said good-bye and went on to Macedonia to find him.

—2 Corinthians 2:12-13 NLT

When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside. But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. His presence was a joy, but so was the news he brought of the encouragement he received from you. When he told us how much you long to see me, and how sorry you are for what happened, and how loyal you are to me, I was filled with joy!

—2 Corinthians 7:5-7 NLT

Quote:

“The true test of a saint’s life is not successfulness but faithfulness on the human level. We tend to set up success in Christian work as our purpose, but our purpose should be to display the glory of God in human life, to live a life ‘hidden with Christ in God’ in our everyday human conditions (Col 3:3).”

—Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, Nov 16

Prayer:

Dear God,
As you draw me ever deeper into your heart, I discover that my companions on the journey are women and men loved by you as fully and as intimately as I am. In your compassionate heart, there is a place for all of them. No one is excluded. Give me a share in your compassion, dear God, so that your unlimited love may become visible in the way I love my brothers and sisters.

Amen.

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 97

Devotional Reflection Reading #7

Scripture

⁶ *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

⁸ *Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"*

—Genesis 3:6-8

⁵ *Trust in the Lord with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.*

⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*

⁷ *Do not be wise in your own eyes;
Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.*

⁸ *It will be healing to your body
And refreshment to your bones.*

—Proverbs 3:5-6 (NASB)

Quote:

“What a wonderful realization to know that God does not have an ulterior motive in His relationship with us. Loving intimacy with God in Christ has profoundly transforming effects on every aspect of our lives.”

—Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart*, p. 26

Prayer:

Dear God,

I want so much to be in control. I want to be the master of my destiny. Still I know that you are saying: “Let me take you by the hand and lead you. Accept my love and trust that where I will take you, the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled.”

Lord, open my hands to receive your gift of love.

Amen.

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 61

Devotional Reflection Reading #8

Scripture:

From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

—Acts 17:26-27

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

—Revelation 7:9-10

Quote:

“Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ’s completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the life ways of all the world’s cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.”

—Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 79

Prayer:

For this reason I kneel the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.

—Apostle Paul, Ephesians 4:14-17

Devotional Reflection Reading #9

Scripture:

Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

—Isaiah 50:10

But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'you are my God.' My times are in your hands.

—Psalm 31:14-15a NLT

*Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. ...
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

—Psalm 34:5, 8

Quote:

“Your physical eyes can see one thing but it’s how your heart understands that allows you to perceive the world around you from God’s perspective... or not.”

— Allison Brown, Brilliant Perspectives website

Prayer:

Dear God,

I do not know where you are leading me. I do not even know what my next day, my next week, or my next year will look like. As I try to keep my hands open, I trust that you will put your hand in mine and bring me home. Thank you, God, for your love. Thank you.

Amen

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 125

Devotional Reflection Reading #10

Scripture:

² *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* ⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;* ⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism;* ⁶ *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* ⁷ *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. . .*

—Ephesians 4:2-7

⁹ *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* ¹⁰ *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.* ¹¹ *If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

—1 Peter 4:9-11

Quote:

“Every Me is an integral limb of an organic We are rooted in Jesus, from whom we derive our core identity. Our relationship with God and each other are intrinsic to the integrity of our identity as human beings and as collective “bodies” of Christ. . . . Discipleship is a story lived together, authored by God, and scripted and scribed by people who are all uniquely designed by God.”

—Leonard I. Sweet, *Me and We*, p.11

Prayer:

May you, being rooted and established in love, grasp how wide and long and deep is the love of Christ, and know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

—Adapted from Ephesians 4:17-19.

Devotional Reflection Reading #11

Scripture:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

—Leviticus 19:33-34 ESV

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

—1 Thessalonians 5:11

Quote:

“How have we come where we are? ... We got where we are through intimate experiences of faith together with other, through participating with others in our search for light and growth, through discussing and praying and often agonizing with other Christians. One asks, then, whether we will be able to transmit these intimate experience of the love and grace of God to other people in any other way than by walking this road with them.”

—David Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, p. 70

Prayer:

Dear God,
 As you draw me ever deeper into your heart, I discover that my companions on the journey are women and men loved by you as fully and as intimately as I am. In your compassionate heart, there is a place for all of them. No one is excluded. Give me a share in your compassion, dear God, so that your unlimited love may become visible in the way I love my brothers and sisters.
 Amen

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 97

Devotional Reflection Reading #12

Scripture:

*O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty;
 Nor do I involve myself in great matters,
 Or in things too difficult for me.
² Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;
 Like a weaned child rests against his mother,
 My soul is like a weaned child within me.
³ O Israel, hope in the Lord
 From this time forth and forever.*

—Psalm 131

Quote:

“The life of a Christian is a pilgrimage of deepening responsiveness to God’s control of our life and being.”

“Spiritual formation is the great reversal: from being the subject who controls all other things to being a person who is shaped by the presence, purpose and power of God in all things.”

—Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to Journey*, p.12, 27

Prayer:

Dear God,
 I want so much to be in control. I want to be the master of my destiny. Still I know that you are saying: “Let me take you by the hand and lead you. Accept my love and trust that where I will take you, the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled.”
 Lord, open my hands to receive your gift of love.
 Amen.

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 61

Devotional Reflection Reading #13

Scripture:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

—John 15:5

Quote:

"We often call ourselves channels or instruments which God uses ... Our understanding of such a channel usually is that of a clean water pipe which does nothing but allow an unrestricted flow of water. ... The whole idea is for the instrument not to get involved with the contents. ... The New Testament metaphor is not the instrument but the branch (John 15). A channel remains unaffected by what flows through it, but a branch has, first of all, to absorb the nutritive power which comes to it from the roots and trunk. It has to make all this a part of itself, and allow itself to be affected and renewed and transformed by that power. Only after having assimilated such energy can the branch impart it to the fruit. The branch is, therefore, itself involved in the process of transmitting nourishment."

—David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, p. 41-42

Song

Jesus, I am Resting, Resting

Devotional Reflection Reading #14

Scripture:

Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

—John 14:23

... you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world..

—John 15:19

But we are citizens of heaven and are eagerly waiting for our Savior to come from there. Our Lord Jesus Christ has power over everything, and he will make these poor bodies of ours like his own glorious body.

—Philippians 3:20-21 CEV

Quote:

“All that heaven has to offer is already ours as the heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. What this means is that we are made a part of the Triune Family of Father, Son, and Spirit. That is our home. That is where we find life. It is where we belong, and we will never be content with any place other than that communion. And that is why we go to worship when the world is crashing down around us. Being in worship isn't the same time as being at home. But it is our only way of calling home.”

—Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home*, p. 35

Prayer:

O LORD, MY LORD,

I am a stranger in a strange land. Absent are all the subtleties of custom and language and sight and smell and taste which normally give me my bearings.

Jesus, everliving Teacher, use my out-of-placeness to remind me again of my alien status in this world. I belong to another kingdom and live out of another reality. May I always be ultimately concerned to learn the nuances of this eternal reality so that when it becomes my permanent residence I will not find it strange in the least.

In the name of him who entered a foreign land so that whosoever will might come home to that for which they were created.

Amen.

—Richard Foster, *Prayers from the Heart*, p. 51

Devotional Reflection Reading #15

Scripture:

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

—Philippians 4:13-14

I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me [I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him Who infuses inner strength into me; I am ^self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency]. But it was right and commendable and noble of you to contribute for my needs and to share my difficulties with me.

—Philippians 4:13-14 AMP

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". ... That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:9a, 10

Quote:

"Yet is a wonderful word."

—A fellow pilgrim

Prayer: Strengthen My Hope

Dear God,
I am full of wishes, full of desires, full of expectations. Some of them may be realized, many may not, but in the midst of all my satisfactions and disappointments, I hope in you. I know that you will never leave me alone and will fulfill your divine promises. Even when it seems that things are not going my way, I know they are going your way and that, in the end, your way is the best way for me. O Lord, strengthen my hope, especially when my many wishes are not fulfilled. Let me never forget that your name is Love.
Amen.

—Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 78

Devotional Reflection Reading #16

Scripture:

*The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;
your love, O LORD, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands.*

—Psalm 138:8

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—Psalm 139:23-24

A Prayer of Relinquishment

Today, O Lord, I yield myself to you.
May your will be my delight today.
May your way have perfect sway in me.
May your love be the pattern of my living.

I surrender to you
 my family,
 my friends,
 my future.
Care for them with a care that I can never give.

I release into your hands
 my need to control
 my craving for status,
 my fear of obscurity,
Eradicate the evil, purify the good, and establish your Kingdom on earth.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.

—Richard Foster, *Prayers from the Heart*, p 24.

Devotional Reflection Reading #17**Scripture:**

²¹ *When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
²² I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.
²³ Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

—Psalm 73:21-26

Quote:

“The life of a Christian is a pilgrimage of deepening responsiveness to God’s control of our life and being.”

“Spiritual formation is the great reversal: from being the subject who controls all other things to being a person who is shaped by the presence, purpose and power of God in all things.”

—Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to Journey*, p.12, 27

Devotional Reflection Reading #18**Scripture:**

I will never leave you nor forsake you.

—Josh. 1:5

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

—Matthew 28:20

Quote:

“Take a look around for a moment and notice everything in your sight that is blue. Go ahead. When you do, you develop ‘blue eyes,’ that is, eyes sensitive to the things around you that are blue. We need to develop ‘God eyes.’ We need to develop the sensitivity to see evidence of what we know to be true, namely, that God is with us. Look for God everywhere and in everything. Say to yourself often, ‘The Lord is here,’ especially in the ordinary places of life. While sitting at the computer, or when at the gas pump, the mall, or the grocery store, remind yourself that the Lord is present. Whether you are in the car, the kitchen, or involved in the most earthy and intimate experiences of life, reaffirm the fact that God is with you. ... As we develop these ‘god eyes,’ we will be more like Jesus, who always recognized His Father’s presence.”

—Donald Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, p.67

Devotional Reflection Reading #19

Scripture:

For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

—Matthew 18:20

You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

—Psalm 16:11

But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.

—Psalm 73:28 NASB

The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will quiet you in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

—Zephaniah 3:17

Quote:

“Here’s the great danger: when the present tense disappears in your life, so does the manna. The mysterious, life-giving, blessed grace of God only comes in the day you have. If you miss that daydreaming about the future, or longing for the past, your soul will never find its only source of nurture and you’ll never survive the journey. Without the ability to see what God is doing today you are always anxious, never at home, and thus never joyful.”

—Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home*, p. 118

Devotional Reflection Reading #20**The Serenity Prayer**

God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next.
Amen.

—A prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

Devotional Reflection Reading #21

Scripture:

To bring you up to date, Tychicus will give you a full report about what I am doing and how I am getting along. He is a beloved brother and faithful helper in the Lord's work. ²² I have sent him to you for this very purpose—to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you.

—Ephesians 6:21-22 NLT

Tychicus (a well-loved brother, a faithful minister and a fellow-servant of the Lord) will tell you all about my present circumstances. This is partly why I am sending him to you. The other reasons are that you may find out how we are all getting on, and that he may put new heart into you. With him is Onesimus one of your own congregation (well-loved and faithful, too). Between them they will tell you of conditions and activities here.

—Colossians 4:7-9 Philips

Quote:

“Let me start with an experience we all have in common, the experience of taking a trip somewhere to see the sights. . . . I remember, for instance, the first time I went to the great palace of Versailles outside Paris . . . I wanted and sorely needed to name to another human being the sights that I was seeing and the thoughts and feelings they were giving rise to. I thought that in a way I could not even surely know what I was seeing physically until I could speak of it to someone else, could not come to terms with what I was feeling as either real or unreal until I could put it into words and speak those words and hear other words in response to mine. But there was nobody to speak to, as it happened, and I can still remember the frustration of it: the sense I had of something trying to be born in me that could not be born without the midwifery of expressing it: the sense, it might not be too much to say, of my self trying to be born, of a threshold I had to cross in order to move on into the next room of who I had it in me just then to become. “In the beginning was the Word,” John writes, and perhaps part of what that means is that until there is a word, there can be no beginning.”

Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*, p. 164-165

PART 3

Life Orientation Practices in Times of Transition

Introduction

It is common among those of us who have moved many times to feel like we have left ‘pieces’ of our selves scattered all over world. Relocations aren’t the only changes that leave us feeling fragmented or disoriented. We face similar disorienting effects as we experience changes in our roles, health, family, finances, beliefs, as well. Changes (whether chosen or not, major or minor, gradual or sudden) have ripple effects on many aspects of our lives. When changes break the continuity of life, we lose a familiar context in which we have come to know ourselves. In the midst of change and transition, we are susceptible to becoming disoriented and disconnected from ourselves, from God and from others.

Transition may be defined as a process of inner reorientation and adjustment over time that allows us to incorporate changes into our life.¹⁸ Some types of changes can leave us in a seemingly semi-permanent state of transition, stuck in a disorienting, murky state of limbo between “no longer” and “not yet” where restoration to a “new normal” is indefinite or impeded. This can leave us in stuck in a semi-permanent state of relational ambiguity where it hard to figure out what God is up to in our lives and hard to know who we are and where we fit with others in the body of Christ.

Living well in the crux of the ambiguity and uncertainty that often accompanies transition requires taking time regularly to reconnect with ourselves, with God, and with others. We need a practical and scriptural means of orientating ourselves to what is going on in our everyday life in light of our relationship with God.

¹⁸ This definition of transition is drawn primarily from *Transitions* by William Bridges.

A Look at the Life of the Apostle Paul

Particularly in his letter to the saints in Philippi and scattered throughout his other letters to the churches and individuals, Paul offers an insider's view of what it was like for him as he faced times of perplexing transition full of ambiguity, affliction and loss. At the same time, we also see that through all the hardships and distresses that he experienced, Paul exhibited a life of undaunted joy, deep love and gratitude, and unwavering hope in the Lord and deep compassionate connection with other believers. And he invited them (and us) to follow his example:

*Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine,
and learn from those who follow our example.*
(Philippians 3:17 NLT)

*Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me
—everything you heard from me and saw me doing.
Then the God of peace will be with you.*
(Philippians 4:9 NLT)

What are we to put into practice that we learn or receive or hear or see in Paul through the testimony we have of his life and teachings in the Word?

What patterns does he model for us to follow?

Over several months of praying and studying and dialogue with others on what Paul wrote in his letter to Philippians, I found that the following words seemed to describe the pattern of practices in Paul's life and teaching in the context of life in complicated and disorienting transitions:

Remember Receive Reconsider/Reckon Wrestle Reconcile/Render Rejoice

The Pattern of Paul's Practices

The following outline forms an informal guide based on a look at ways that the apostle Paul kept his bearings in the midst of constantly changing and ambiguous circumstances of his life and ministry. These practices are suggestions, not prescriptions, intended to help maintain orientation or get re-oriented to God's perspective in the midst of ambiguity and unsettledness.

Remember: recall to mind; to think again; to keep in mind as worthy of affection or recognition; to send greetings.

In the midst of uncertainties, Paul often took time to remind his self and others about what certain. He showed us how important it is to intentionally:

- Remember the presence, the promises, the power and the provision of God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit
- Remember partners in ministry
- Remember being remembered by others
- Remember to let others know they are remembered
- Ask others to remember us

Receive: to acquire; to meet with experience; to support; to take in: to greet; to welcome.

Instead of being defensive or threatened or ashamed of insufficiency and inadequacy, Paul trusted fully in God and saw every lack in his life (and in the lives of others) as an opportunity to experience God's grace more fully. He showed us how important it is to prayerfully and willingly:

- Receive God's gracious provision
- Receive one another in the Lord
- Receive the gospel message
- Receive the sufferings of Christ
- Receive care, including financial help
- Encourage giving and receive the same

Reconsider: to think carefully again – so as to alter or modify a previous decision; to deliberate, examine, study, judge again; to make an objective evaluation based on reflection and reasoning; reframe.

Reckon: to consider as being; to come to terms with; to calculate; to depend on.

Paul took time to process through how to think about various circumstances and situations in light of what he remembered and received. He shows us how important it is to intentionally and prayerfully take time to:

- Reconsider matters in light of what we remember and have received with willing to adjust our perspectives
- Reconsider what to hold on to, what to let go of
- Reconsider our perspective on our difficulties, on choices being made by other people

Wrestle: to contend; to struggle; to strive in an effort to master; to grapple; to fight earnestly.

Paul didn't leave his heart out of the process. He didn't minimize or shy away from struggles or conflicts. At the same time, he never let his earnest desires and zeal for the Lord be dampened. He shows us how important it is prayerfully and intentionally:

- Wrestle through quandaries and interpersonal conflicts
- Wrestle with mixed feelings and unmet expectations
- Wrestle against despair, laxity, loneliness and disillusionment
- Wrestle for longings, passions, sustained hope

Reconcile: to re-establish friendship between; to resolve a dispute; to make consistent, compatible; to overcome hostility.

Render: to give; to make available; to relinquish; to yield; to cause to become; to give proper due; to give back.

After openly struggling through losses, conflicts and disappointments, Paul consciously entrusted all that remained unresolved and unmet to Christ. He shows us how important it is to prayerfully and intentionally:

- Reconcile with God when unresolved difficulties and uncertainties undermine our faith
- Reconcile with others based on the oneness we have in Christ
- Reconcile ourselves with contentment to all that God provides—for He is enough

Rejoice: to gladden; fill with joy, pleasure, delight; full satisfaction.

Along with practicing the art of learned contentment, Paul consistently returned to a place of rejoicing in the Lord and gladness in his relationships with his beloved partners in ministry. He shows us how important it is to:

- Rejoice in the Lord always
- Rejoice in the advance of the gospel
- Rejoice in our sufferings
- Rejoice in anticipation of resurrection glory
- Rejoice in the community and fellowship of fellow believers

Life Orientation Practices — (re)Orientation Prayers¹⁹

The Practice of Remembering

God, how might I remember your presence, nature, love, the ways you have worked in the past, and the people you have brought into my life?

The Practice of Receiving

God, how might I receive the gifts you are giving me right now, gifts such as grace, callings, help from others, support, growth in the midst of disorientation, ambiguity, and vulnerability?

The Practice of Reconsider

God, what areas or things in my life do I need to be willing to hold onto or release as I let you bring new perspectives and insight into my life?

The Practice of Wrestling

God, how might I be honest, real, open, and willing to name the places of struggle, grappling, longing, and tension that I see and feel within and around me?

The Practice of Reconciling

God, as I offer my life to you, how might I find ways to reconnect, render, and let your presence provide for me even in areas that seem baffling, unresolved or challenging?

The Practice of Rejoicing

God, how might I grow in a spirit of gratefulness, joy, delight, and celebrating you as your deep love and presence is made known more fully in the midst of disorientation, ambiguity and loss?

¹⁹ Credit goes to Steve Fawver, Pastor of Spiritual Health & Care at Newberg Friends Church, Newberg, OR, for the wording of these six prayers.

PART 4

A Guide for Sojourner Bible Fellowship (SBF) in Times of Transition

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Introduction

Spiritual formation takes place in community. In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul describes the mutual spiritual formation that happens in the context of life together in Christ. In Christ, “we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Rom. 12:5-6). These gifts are given that the body of Christ may be built together in love “to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Eph. 2:21-22). “From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:16). Paul portrays an intimate, organic interrelationship between Christians, motivated by love and guided and empowered by God.

We experience the transforming work of God individually in the distinctive context of our personal lives. However, we need one another, not only to come to know God more fully, but to see our own life experiences more truly as well. God has provided an infinite variety of human diversity and life experiences through which we come to know and worship him. In our life together in Christ, we are called to share “glimpses of God we have been allowed to catch.”²⁰ This is the ministry of spiritual companionship in our life together in Christ.

At the heart of spiritual companionship is the process of practical theology—sharing personal experiences in ways that cause our awareness and understanding of God’s presence and person to grow. Spiritual companions serve to empower one another “to ask theological questions about their own life experiences as well as those of the

²⁰ Henri Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 12. In the prologue, Nouwen describes the many interruptions in his life that have led him to new experiences of God. He then explains, “Each time life required me to take a new step into unknown spiritual territory, I felt a deep, inner urge to tell my story to others—perhaps as a need for companionship but maybe, too, out of an awareness that my deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.”

broader community of faith.”²¹ This involves a process of “lifting out of our experience the latent theology that is present in them and then to refine it in prayerful, intentional ways” for mutual benefit in the body of Christ.²²

In the words of missiologist Andrew Walls, “None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.”²³ Christian author Leonard Sweet reminds us that a vital aspect of spiritual companionship is having our minds “marinated in the Word of God, and everything that happens to us put through the matrix of Scripture so that our being can recognize the living Christ when he appears.”²⁴ As we share with one another, more of the richness of God’s revelation of himself in Christ Jesus becomes alive and confirmed in and through us mutually. C.S. Lewis expresses the heart of spiritual companionship this way, “Each of the Redeemed shall forever know and praise some aspect of the divine beauty better than any other creature can ... Each has something to tell all others — fresh and ever-fresh news of the ‘My God’ whom each finds in Him whom all praise as ‘Our God.’”²⁵

As spiritual companions, we each need to be able to share our own stories openly and honestly with one another in a way that does not filter out life experiences that seem inexplicable, critical, or too complicated and confusing. The process of connecting with others in fellowship and sharing meaningfully as spiritual companions can be especially complicated

²¹ Elizabeth Dreyer, *Accidental Theologians: Four Women Who Shaped Christianity* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014), 130.

²² *Ibid.*, 130.

²³ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 79.

²⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 77.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 150.

when life is unsettled due to changing circumstances. Connecting in spiritual companionship can also be especially challenging when one person is in a season of life that is fairly stable and ordered and the other in a season of life that is unfamiliar, unsettling and disorienting.

Often, complicated life experiences characterized by disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettledness have been overlooked, marginalized or viewed primarily as problems rather than being seen as an integral part of spiritual formation in community. People in complicated transitions are much less likely to benefit from spiritual formation fellowship opportunities where they are explicitly or implicitly viewed as a project or a problem. And yet, it is precisely in these circumstances that God is most able to form us spiritually. Christians in transition can benefit from an intentional, supportive environment—designed to cultivate spiritual companionship—that understands the distinctive challenges and opportunities associated with complicated, perplexing life transitions. Initially experiencing spiritual transformation in safe supportive environment can then open the way to participating more fully in broader fellowship contexts.

The following provides considerations and guidelines for starting and facilitating a small group Bible fellowship custom designed to provide people in transition a Christ-centered, safe place to sort things out in the company of others who understand and care. By providing mutually supportive spiritual companionship for making sense of transition experiences in the larger narrative of God's redemptive purposes, people in transition are then enabled to share meaningfully in mutual spiritual companionship with people in more settled seasons of life.

1.0 What is the history behind the development of the SBF concept?

The concept of a Bible fellowship group for people in complicated transitions was first pioneered in 2010 as a weekly group support called LimboLinks in the JAARS missionary community located in Waxhaw, NC for women recently back from an overseas living experience.

2.0 What is vision and purpose of a SBF group?

It is a local area fellowship gathering for people in the Body of Christ who are in transition;

providing caring, spiritually nourishing, non-judgmental, un-pressured context for personal conversations about the experience of transition;

in community with other people dealing with a similar transition experience (people who “get it”);

for the purpose of mutual encouragement and mutual strengthening in the Lord;

so that those who participate are better able to respond to the challenges of transition and ambiguity in mutually faith-strengthening, life-giving and hope-sustaining ways;

which then overflows into the lives of others with whom and to whom they relate;

so that “the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”
(Eph. 4:16)

The aim of a SBF is cultivation of a relational context that promotes, facilitates the conversational dialogue of spiritual friendship/companionship which is different from networking, collaboration, care-giving, peer-debriefing — rather it is more like group spiritual direction, group discernment, a group in which primary focus is life together in Christ.

3.0 Who might benefit from participating in this type of fellowship group?

SBF is well suited for people who desire local spiritual companionship in Christ but who are in the midst of complicated, disorienting, unsettling life circumstances.

This small group approach was originally developed specifically for Christians in reentry transition after living and ministering overseas. However, this approach is applicable to Christians in a much wider variety of complicated, ambiguous, and disorienting life circumstances, such as unemployment, family care-giving (e.g. Alzheimer’s, chronic illness), burn-out, post-graduate studies, retirement, or immigration.

4.0 What features make SBF well suited (welcoming and effective) for people dealing with complex and/or difficult transitions in life and ministry?

- 4.1 Custom-fitted for those in whose life circumstances lack predictability, simplicity, clarity, stability, and/or consistency, by creating an environment that:
- accepts intermittent attendance
 - requires no advance preparation
 - welcomes walk-ins
 - provides ample time for group sharing and one-on-one informal conversations
- 4.2 Scriptural focus related to both God’s person and presence and the experience of being ‘scattered and confused’ for those experiencing high levels of relational ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorientation.
- 4.3 Invitation to process what is perplexing, unclear, unexpected, contradictory, overwhelming, unfamiliar in your life in light of God’s presence and purposes without your spiritual walk or your faith in God being implicitly or explicitly called into question.
- 4.4 A place to talk with others about life experiences that are complicated, confusing, difficult without needing to have life all figured out. At the same time, provision of mutually supportive spiritual companionship for discernment of God’s presence and purpose in all that is complicated and ambiguous.
- 4.5 Freedom from the need to defend or struggle to explain yourself to others who haven’t gone through a similar situation, especially when you are still trying to sort things out for yourself.
- 4.6 Freedom from being inundated with well-intended advice and/or pressured with well-meaning expectations.

5.0 What are the basic perspectives and guidelines for the SBF approach?

5.1 What attitudes are important for coming alongside as a spiritual friend for someone who is in transition?

- Be Intentional. Take initiative.
- Be a friend. View others as a friend.
- Be present.
- Respect. Be willing to listen without judgment.
- Be open.
- Disengage your expectations and stifle your “shoulds.”
- Be relatable.
- Be expectant.

Be humble.

Be real.

Feel what you feel.

Ask what you need to ask.

Extend freedom to your friend.

Serve the way Jesus leads you, not trying to conform to expectations.

Be generous and encouraging without condemning or condescending or patronizing.

5.2 How can I prepare for coming alongside someone who is in transition?

Take time to become reflectively aware of your own experiences with and perceptions about being in transition, about living with disorientation, ambiguity, and unsettleness.

Allow the Lord to align your beliefs about being in transition to reflect His purposes and provision-- through the Word, the Holy Spirit's guidance, and wise counsel.

When affirming that God is sovereign, good and faithful, no matter it looks or feels like, be willing, as the Lord leads, to also share your own struggles with getting your heart to believe what you affirm in your head.

Pray.

Keep fresh in your understanding some of these "basics" about transition and disorientation:

"The outer forms of our life can change in an instant, but the inner orientation that brings us back into vital relationships to people and activity takes time."

William Bridges, *Transition*, p. 73

"It is precisely when we are not where we want to be, where we feel unknown, uncomfortable, and not at home, that our souls are opened to receiving the blessed gift of being home with God."

Craig M. Barnes, *Searching for Home*, p. 31.

6.0 When starting a SBF, what are some basic considerations to keep in mind in terms of composition of participants and size?

- 6.1 Plan for one main facilitator and up to two assistants to be present at each meeting.
- 6.2 Pray for and trust God will gather the right number and combination of facilitators and participants each week.
- 6.3 Keep in mind that it is common for the composition and size of SBF gatherings to vary greatly from week to week. This is due (for the most part) to the inherent nature of the unsettledness and competing commitments experienced by those in

transition. This means there may even be occasions when no participants show up for a SBF gathering.

6.4 Keep in mind the importance of adequate time for personal sharing and relationship-building when considering group size. When regular attendance averages over ten (see 7.3), it might be good to consider dividing into two smaller gatherings.

7.0 What are some logistical considerations for a SBF group?

Consider establishing fixed days, times, and venue. This reduces confusion for those who may miss scheduling changes due to intermittent travels, information overload, or other factors related to life in transition.

7.1 Schedule (Duration/Frequency/Longevity)

Consider providing weekly meetings similar to the local school year schedule (e.g. mid-September through mid-December; mid-January through mid-June), especially if the group is likely to include participants with children. However, if the attendance is more mixed, consider offering year-round weekly meetings with breaks for major holidays.

Consider providing ample opportunities for informal relationship-building in addition to more structured group time. A range of 2 – 2.5 hours per week would be optimal for most SBF contexts. A shorter meeting time may be adequate (and appreciated) for meetings scheduled for weekday evenings. Sometimes, it might become obvious that an optional ‘socializing’ time before or after the set times would enhance relationship-building.

Given that being in a complicated transition often has no pre-determined time frame, generally no limits are set on the length of time someone might continue to desire to participate. Many factors contribute to the decision participants make about when to discontinue coming to SBF meetings. For some, one or two weeks of participation are sufficient; others find it very beneficial to continue participating in this kind of group support for months.

7.2 Venue

Consider meeting in a set location that:

Is easy-to-find and conveniently located for those fairly new to the area.
Parking — not complicated ... !!

Is consistently available for weekly meetings.

Has a comfortable, informal, homey atmosphere. A home location is preferable over a classroom or fellowship hall type venue.

Has adequate living room-type seating plus coffee break-type socializing space for 3-10 people.

Offers privacy during the duration of each meeting (has no non-participating people regularly present or passing through).

7.3 Size

Intentionally designed for “come when you can” participation which ends up ranging from one-time to intermittent to consistent weekly attendance depending on the individual. Therefore, expect the possibility of a wide variation in SBF attendance.

Minimum size: A SBF can be personally beneficial if only one participant comes. Be prepared for the possibility of no participants showing up some weeks. If there are consistently very few or no participants, there may be other factors involved that need to be considered. NOTE: Assess viability, promotion, communication, facilitation and other factors that may affect low participation.

Maximum size: If the number of participants is consistently more than 10, consider ways to assure adequate opportunity for meaningful personal sharing -- such as dividing into smaller groupings.

7.4 Snacks and Beverages

Break time is very valuable for informal relationship-building.

Consider providing ample break time(s) with simple and convenient finger-food snacks and self-service beverages provided for participants.

By intentionally keeping the snacks and beverages very simple, space is created for participants who would love to contribute to step forward because there is “room at the table” for their offering.

At the same time, take care not to draw too much attention to those who brings snacks, so no undue pressure or sense of obligation is felt for those who really don't need one more thing to deal with.

7.5 Childcare

If childcare will be a consideration/need for potential participants, consider what already existing options might be available when scheduling SBF meetings.

7.6 Budget

Operating expenses can be kept very low if needed. Minimal expenses include: photocopying (average 1-2 sheets per participant each week); snacks and beverages; resources for a ‘lending library’; promotional flyers; coffee break supplies.

8.0 What are basic facilitation and meeting program guidelines for a SBF group?

8.1 SBF facilitation team composition.

Consider developing a SBF facilitation team composed of team members who are able and willing to serve in the role of main facilitator as well as in hospitality, assistant facilitator, and communication support roles. In some

cases, it is possible (though not advisable) that all of these roles might be filled for a while by a “team” of one.

Consider having one team member serve as the main facilitator each week. However, having an additional team member or two also present as assistants can be of great benefit in light of the high importance of relationship-building and personal connection with others who “get it.”

8.2 Recommendations for members of the facilitation team in light of the high importance of relationship-building and personal connection with other who “get it”:

It is recommended that members of a SBF facilitation team have personally gone through complicated transition experiences and are familiar with the types of transitions experienced by the participants. At the same time, facilitators ought to be in a settled enough season of life journey to be consistently present and adequately prepared.

Consider including people on the facilitation team from a diversity of backgrounds, personality types, and life-stage experiences.

Adequate screening of facilitators is essential - another important consideration is “presence.” High-intensity, problem-solving, idealistic, or teaching and/or exhorting oriented individuals would be better suited for facilitating in a different type of fellowship group settings.

8.3 Guidelines qualifications for all facilitation team roles:

Model the group guidelines through personal example. (See 5.0 and 11.0 Participant Guidelines Handout)

Respect and appreciation for divine appointments that God provides with certain individuals.

Demonstrate patience, understanding, openness and innovation in working together as team members in a ministry context that requires so much flexibility and adaptation.

Monitor the agenda with respect to the overall time frame and needs of the moment.

8.4 Responsibilities of the main facilitator include:

Make the final choice of the Scripture reading passage for that week.

Introduce and lead the time of Scripture reading and reflection.

Guide the sharing following the Scripture reading and reflection time.

Monitoring the conversational content and group dynamics and intervening sensitively if necessary to maintain safety, relevance, and respect for every one present. (See 11.0 Participant Guidelines Handout)

Screen and orient facilitation staff.

8.5 Responsibilities of the assistant facilitator includes:

Actively participate in the fellowship and share in a supporting role as fits the particular composition of the group.

Assist the main facilitator in ‘one another’ relationship-building and care with participants.

Assist the main facilitator in discerning and responding to group dynamics and individual needs, both during meeting and in follow-up.

9.0 What are basic meeting agenda/ program schedule considerations for a SBF group?

9.1 Recommended basic SBF meeting schedule:

Informal Visiting with Snacks and Beverage (+/- 30 minutes)

Preliminaries, Introductions, Check-in (+/- 30 minutes)

Scripture Reading, Reflection and Sharing (+/- 30 minutes)

Mini-Break with Informal Visiting (+/- 10 minutes)

Continued Sharing and Prayer (+/- 30 minutes)

Dispersing with Transition Time (open-ended – up to 30 minutes)

Total time for a full-length meeting: 2 1/2 hours. [e.g. 9 - 11:30 am; 7 - 9:30 pm]

9.2 Following are some basic recommendations and considerations for each part of the suggested agenda (9.1).

Informal Visiting with Snacks and Beverage (+/- 30 minutes)

Facilitators (or regulars) welcome newcomers, get acquainted briefly and offer a simple overview of what to expect, format, timeframe.

Provide nametags each week for everyone. The purpose of this time is for participants to engage in relaxed, informal conversations with one another.

Allow adequate time for “coffee break” type socializing which gives participants opportunity to connect informally.

Allow time for transition from informal visiting to group sharing so that people in the middle of a meaningful conversation have time to “pause” it or wrap-it-up.

Having the snacks and beverages in a different space from the group time can also help the facilitator shift the group from informal sharing to more facilitated sharing. (not essential)

Preliminaries, Introductions, Check-in (+/- 30 minutes)

Transition gently from informal connecting to the more structured meeting time. One way this may be done is by beginning the more structured time

with an opportunity for both the facilitator and participants to ‘check in’ by sharing brief personal updates.

If there are newcomers it is important for the facilitator (or an assistant) to review fellowship guidelines [see 11.0 Participant Guidelines Handout] followed by their own personal “check in” as an example.

Even when there are no newcomers, a periodically review of participation guidelines may be helpful, especially if done conversationally with shared input from those who are gathered. The idea is to mutually affirm and encourage one another in terms of core values and ways of relating to one another as spiritual journey companions.

At times, meaningful personal sharing together jumps the gate and is well underway before the Scriptures have been read. Rather than firmly sticking to the usual format of Scripture reading (see next step), ask the Lord for discernment concerning how to merge the reading of the selected Scripture passage into the on-going flow of conversation of the group.

At times, what is being shared conversationally may drift or stay stuck in focus/content that is more impersonal, logistical, problem-solving, or pedantic than personal life experience narrative. Consider a gentle suggestion that encourages participants to continue the flow of that particular conversation focus or content following the meeting.

Reminder: The aim of a SBF is cultivation of a relational context that promotes, facilitates the conversational dialogue of spiritual friendship/companionship. This is different from networking, collaboration, care-giving, peer-debriefing — rather it is more like group spiritual direction, group discernment, a group in which primary focus is life together in Christ.

Listen for a meaningful conversational bridge from the *Preliminaries, Introductions, Check-in* focus when facilitating a shift to a time of hearing/responding to the selected Scripture passage. Keep in mind that moments when a participant has opened up and is sharing with the group something which is personal, current, and full of woe or wonder are golden moments for spiritual nurture to be handled with Spirit-led sensitivity and care.

Scripture Reading, Reflection and Sharing (+/- 30 minutes) (See 10.0)

Newcomers may have little or no familiarity with this type of Scripture listening practice. In order for participants to mutually benefit from this type of Scripture listening practice, briefly describe the practice. Listening together to Scripture intentionally orients each participant personally and collectively toward the reality of God’s presence and purposes in our every day lives as revealed in Jesus the Living Word, recorded for us in Scripture, the written word. Within this framework, space is created for open dialogue with one another about real-life complexities and conundrums. Here, in the context of life together in Christ, the

complexities and perplexities can be brought into the light in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Mini-Break with Informal Visiting (+/- 10 minutes)

This mini-break is recommended as part of a full-length meeting. It's a built-in opportunity for needed bio-breaks. Also, a brief pause in group interaction allows for those who process internally more slowly to catch up with their own thoughts. It also allows for brief more personal connections to be made between individuals following up on comments that were made in the group sharing. [Think here in terms of sensitivity to "divine appointments" type of interpersonal connections.]

Continued Sharing and Prayer (+/- 30 minutes)

The return from a mini-break during a full-length meeting provides a natural shift toward mutual encouragement and intercession following the earlier sharing together prompted by the Scripture listening and reflection conversations as a group. Various formats for engaging in prayer together are possible depending on group size, dynamics, familiarity. It might be beneficial to have a written prayer of dispersing that is read together at the end of each gathering, a prayer that acknowledges a oneness in the Spirit that includes both presence and absence from one another in our life together in Christ.

Dispersing with Transition Time (open-ended – up to 30 minutes)

Ending the group sharing fellowship within close range of the stated timeframe is important. However, providing an additional for socializing at the end allows opportunities for spiritual friendship-type connection between participants to be further strengthened.

9.3 Adaptation for a shorter-length meeting—suggested minimum time frame is 1 1/2 hours so adequate time is provided for sharing about complicated life experiences.

10.0 What are considerations and recommendations about presenting the Scripture engagement portion of the agenda?

10.1 What are recommendations for facilitating the Scripture reading/listening practice? (See 10.2 for specific guidelines for selecting Scriptures)

Briefly review the Scripture reading/listening practice with those who have gathered. More details might be beneficial if there are newcomers present so that they know what to expect and what might be expected of them.

Reminder: People in transition appreciate and benefit greatly when expectations are kept minimal and explicit.

Open with a prayer that helps the group center their hearts and minds on Christ and His presence in their midst. Follow with a brief period of silence, inviting those gathered to become as personally present as possible.

Read the selected Scriptures out loud slowly. Allow a long pause of silence (1-3 minutes).

Read the selected Scriptures again out loud slowly. Allow another long pause of silence. (1-3 minutes)

Distribute a copy of the selected Scriptures in written form to each one gathered. This action serves as an invitation/indicator for a time of open sharing.

NOTE: Throughout this time of open sharing, it helps if the main facilitator and assistants remain spiritually attentive to the conversational content and flow, interpersonal dynamics—keeping in mind the value of being able to talk about real-life experience openly with fellow journey companions on the same spiritual journey.

10.2 What are some specific guidelines for choosing the passage of Scriptures to read each week?

Each week ask the Lord to guide your selection of Scripture to be read. He knows the hearts of all who will be present each week. Stay open to the Lord's leading and guard against trying to figure out what just what scriptures you think would be best match the concerns of the group participants.

Consider a passage which the Lord has recently touched your own heart and life personally. Suggestions: Take notes of the scriptures the Lord brings to mind during the week – how His Word has been used by the Holy Spirit to encourage your heart, renew hope, provide perspective, strengthen your faith – in the context of your everyday life or as you carry concerns for loved ones, friends, fellow participants, colleagues, etc.

Consider a passage that highlights BOTH the reality of God's sovereignty, goodness and faithful AND the reality of perplexity, conundrums, disorientation, neediness, and utter dependence on God in the everyday life of faithful followers of Christ.

Examples:

Psalms 138:7-8 (ESV) Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Isaiah 50:10 (ESV) Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

John 16:33 (NLT) I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.

2 Cor. 1:8-10 (ESV) For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had

received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Consider a shorter passage (generally between 1-4 verses) for this type of Scripture reading and reflections context. A longer passage is often harder for people in the midst of a complex or difficult transition to process and benefit from because their minds are often too overloaded and their hearts too overwhelmed.

Examples:

Isaiah 33:2 (NIV) LORD, be gracious to us; we long for you. Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress.

Psalms 86:4-5 (ESV) Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

Romans 15:13 (AMP) May the God of your hope so fill you with all joy and peace in believing [through the experience of your faith] that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound and be overflowing (bubbling over) with hope.

Consider a passage that shows God's care in 'real life' difficulties and wilderness experiences. This could be a 'slice of life' from a longer biblical story. Before reading the passage to those gathered, you may sense the need to provide a brief summary of context of the passage, especially if the story or passage is not likely to be very familiar. Using a whole story could mean a slightly longer reading which can be effective if the story is more familiar and chosen with the challenges of living in the midst of transition in mind.

Examples:

1 Samuel 23:14-15 (NIV) ¹⁴ David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.¹⁵ While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life.¹⁶ And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.

2 Cor 2:12-13; 7:5-7 (ESV) 2:12-13 When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. ... 7:5-7 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn— fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

Luke 18:35-42 ³⁵ As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶ When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷ They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." ³⁸ He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ³⁹ Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁰ Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, ⁴¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, I want to see," he replied. ⁴² Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." ⁴³ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

10.3 What are some guidelines for choosing which translation/version of the Bible to use for Scripture reading passages?

Choose from translations/versions that are generally accepted as reliable by the participants (this you may find out by inference or by asking directly).

Consider which translation/version of the selected passage is most 'read-able' and which uses vocabulary that resonates with the experiences common to those going through complex and/or difficult transitions. Also, it is sometimes helpful to use a version not so familiar to highlight truth that might be overlooked due to familiarity. Include in the reference which version is being used.

Examples:

Lamentations 3:19-24 (CEV) Just thinking of my troubles and my lonely wandering makes me miserable. That's all I ever think about, and I am depressed. Then I remember something that fills me with hope. The LORD's kindness never fails! If he had not been merciful, we would have been destroyed. The LORD can always be trusted to show mercy each morning. Deep in my heart I say, "The LORD is all I need; I can depend on him!"

Philippians 4:13-14 (AMP) I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me [I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him Who infuses inner strength into me; I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency]. But it was right and commendable and noble of you to contribute for my needs and to share my difficulties with me.

With some shorter passages, it might be beneficial to read from one translation and at the same time include several other translations on the printed sheet as a way of enhancing the reflection /sharing experience together.

Example: Jeremiah 10:23-24 (multiple versions).

(NLT) I know, Lord, that our lives are not our own. We are not able to plan our own course. So correct me, Lord, but please be gentle. Do not correct me in anger, for I would die.

(NASB) I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O LORD, but with justice; Not with Your anger, or You will bring me to nothing.

(NIV) I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps. Correct me, LORD, but only with justice— not in your anger, lest you reduce me to nothing.

10.4 What are some guidelines for formatting the printed sheets of the Scripture reading passage?

Use your own preference for formatting the printed sheet that you as facilitator will use for reading the passage.

Consider standardizing the format used for the printed sheets to be handed out to the participants after the passage has been read aloud and a time of quiet has been provided for personal reflection. A standard format and size is helpful for those who choose to keep the printed sheets for later reference.

Consider using half sheets of letter size paper for the following benefits:

People in transition may not have their own place or office space so keeping track of study material can be a challenge. Or they may be thinking 'keep it minimal' because they will have to pack it all up again soon. A half sheet of paper that fits in a Bible sounds good and doable when in times of transition and uncertainty.

The smaller size is appreciated by those who find it helpful to keep it handy for reference during the week.

It conserves paper when the passage is duplicated on one page and the page cut in half.

For some, the smaller size reinforces their appreciation for being offered a nourishing "nugget" of scripture more fitting to what they can handle in the midst of transition than is usually offered in more typical Bible study group context.

Consider using a style and size of font clear and large enough for most people to read with ease. Most shorter passages will fit on a half sheet of letter-size paper with something like Times New Roman 16 font.

Example:

John 17:25-26

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Consider including the verse numbers when the passage is longer and/or when other factors seem to indicate it would be more helpful for understanding and for sharing in the group.

Example:

Psalm 84:1-4 (NLT)

¹ *How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Heaven's Armies.*

² *I long, yes, I faint with longing to enter the courts of the Lord.*

With my whole being, body and soul, I will shout joyfully to the living God.

³ *Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow builds her nest and raises her young*

at a place near your altar, O Lord of Heaven's Armies, my King and my God!

⁴ *What joy for those who can live in your house, always singing your praises.*

11.0 Recommended Handout with Guidelines for Sojourner Bible Fellowship Participants

Guidelines for Sojourner Bible Fellowship Participants

Attendance:	Regular participation is valued. At the same time, for people in transition, competing demands are normal. Extend grace and understanding to those (including yourself!!) who are not able to come every week, who come late, who leave early.
Participation:	Be truthful. Be real. Share as you feel willing. Share from your own experiences and present concerns. Avoid 'story-telling' that is detached and impersonal ~ hiding your feelings and thoughts. Be a good listener. Tune in to your own reactions as you listen to others.
Respect & Care:	Do not judge others, give unsolicited advice or criticize. Be open to the needs of others but refrain from 'fixing'. Do not dominate the group with wisdom or needs. Expect to grow and contribute to the growth of others. Share personal experiences that include 'organizational dysfunction' in a way that is respectful of different perspectives and non- divisive.
Confidentiality:	Do not share concerns, discussions, or stories outside of group. Feel free to talk about your own thoughts and feelings outside the group, but please don't share anyone else's stories. Each person has the right to tell their own story, but not to tell the stories of others without specific permission.
Outside Contact:	When meeting in other public contexts, remember to respect confidentiality of what you know from Sojourner Bible Fellowship.
Facilitator's Role:	To monitor guidelines to ensure a healthy context for all participants as they share and relate to one another. To help guide group sharing and interaction for the mutual benefit of all, to provide appropriate resources and to coordinate group activities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail Hutchinson and her husband John have been members of Wycliffe Bible Translators USA since 1976. Their home roots are in New England and they currently live in Oregon. Their three daughters and families live spread out between Oregon, Massachusetts, and South Africa.

Gail has a BA in Anthropology from Wheaton College and has also done graduate studies in applied linguistics and Bible translation. She has served in Asia and the U.S. in language work and cross-cultural training as well as in a variety of logistical and service ministry roles. Through her life experiences, relationships and training, God has grown in Gail a deep concern and passion for promoting and supporting the spiritual, emotional and relational well-being of fellow members of the body of Christ, especially in times of complicated and perplexing transition.

In 2008, Gail completed an MA degree in Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Formation from Columbia International University in Columbia, SC. Between 2009 to 2012 she pioneered the development of a ministry focused on helping returnee missionaries in perplexing transitions gain God's perspective and navigate undercurrents of change in life-transforming ways. In addition to working as a Transitions Consultant with individuals, she has facilitated the creation of several transition support groups. She also has prepared devotional workshop resources on the topic of *Living Well in the Midst of Change* oriented toward fostering mutual support among mission colleagues. Since 2013 she has been pursuing a Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation through George Fox Evangelical Seminary. Her special area of interest is focused on further development of Transitions Ministries resources with particular attention to goal

of fostering mutual spiritual formation in community in disorienting times of ambiguity and transition.

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