Understanding Men’s “Experience of God”
How Men Experience God in an Urban Mennonite Congregational Setting and Beyond

by

Scott Brubaker-Zehr

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

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Doctor of Ministry
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Abstract
Set in the context of Canadian Mennonite urban congregations of European ancestry, this qualitative research study explores men’s “experience of God.” Men were asked in individual interviews to describe how they have encountered what they consider to be God in the context of their congregation and beyond. They were asked to reflect in relation to personal life events instead of abstract ideas. Employing grounded theory methodology, the author learned that the majority of men consider God to be an indefinable mystery. For the most part, they did not describe their spiritual experience in explicitly Christian, Biblical or theological terms. They spoke primarily about their awareness of unmerited goodness and their desire to live moral lives. The author proposes a theory for how the men experience God and reflects on the implications of this theory for the pastoral task of nurturing a specifically Christian, Mennonite spirituality.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I am the eldest son of Melvin and Delphine (Erb) Zehr who raised their three children in the city of Kitchener, Ontario. Both of my parents came from Amish Mennonite congregations that joined with other Russian and Swiss Mennonite congregations to become the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada in 1987. Our family belonged to the First Mennonite Church in Kitchener where I was baptized at age 16. Following high school I attended the University of Waterloo for a bachelor of Environmental Studies Degree. I lived at Conrad Grebel College, the Mennonite residence on campus, where I met my wife and was married in 1986. During the course of my undergraduate studies, I discovered a deeper interest in questions of faith and theology. Following graduation and marriage I enrolled in the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary where I began studies toward a Master of Divinity Degree. My sense of pastoral call grew through these studies and through chaplaincy and pastoral counselling internships. I completed my M.Div. degree with a year of residence at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana in 1987. Following a year of urban ministry studies in Chicago, my wife and I served as mission workers with the Mennonite Church of Colombia, South America. I wanted to serve the church in another culture before taking a pastorate at home. Our first two children were born in Bogotá. The four and a half years in Colombia were difficult and formative. I experienced what it was like to be an outsider in another culture. We struggled with issues of economic disparity and with different styles of leadership and faith expression. After much thought, we decided to return home in 1994. Our third child was born in Waterloo in 1995. Following a year of itinerant speaking, I joined the pastoral team at Steinmann Mennonite Church in Baden, Ontario where I worked part-time until the summer of 2000. I was ordained there in the fall of 1998. In the year 2000, I felt a desire for a fulltime pastorate where I could have more responsibility. I was hired as pastor at Rockway Mennonite Church in August 2000 and have served this congregation until the present time.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank members of my Collaborative Learning Group, Mark, Val, Bernardine, Dan, Gailmarie, Heather, Blair, Joon, Vernal, Brian, and Ibrahim for their friendship and support through the course of this study. I also want to thank the members of my Ministry Base Group, Sue, Brice, Arnold, Eleanor, Elizabeth and Miriam. It is with sadness that we recognize the untimely loss of our co-member and friend Stan in the spring of 2011. With much patience and good humour this group helped me to re-focus my project as a listening study and provided friendship and support throughout the process.

I also want to acknowledge the institutions that provided financial support for my research. Thank-you to Regis College for a yearly bursary and to the Rockway Mennonite congregation for providing some assistance over and above the regular allotment for professional development. Thanks to Mennonite Church Eastern Canada for some financial assistance during the first year of the program. Thank-you as well to the congregation for a generous study leave provision which allowed me to complete this thesis in a timely fashion while continuing fulltime pastoral work.

And most of all, a heartfelt thanks to my wife Mary and to my children Ben, Emily and Micah for putting up with a project which took so much of my time and attention over these past 5 years. Through all of you and the people and communities listed above, I have experienced the goodness and grace of God.

Christmas, 2012
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Chapter 1: MINISTRY CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Introduction

We live in a time of great challenge and uncertainty. The Rio +20 Congress has passed without any firm commitment on sustainable development. The world’s greenhouse gas emissions have risen by 48% in the last 20 years when the goal was a stabilization or reduction. Gwynne Dyer pessimistically predicts that we will only take the environment seriously when people in wealthy countries begin to suffer significant tragedies. Europe is in deep economic crisis, there is ongoing violence in Syria, instability in the Middle East and grinding poverty in Africa. We know that as a human race we must work together to solve the pressing issues of our day, but we seem unable to do so. People of wealth and power continue to be motivated more by short term comfort and security than by the pressing need for long term economic and environmental stability.

In Canada, Christian church attendance is on the decline. This is especially the case among the mainline Protestant denominations and within Roman Catholicism.

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Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC)\textsuperscript{3} has seen its membership remain stable, but this is largely due to the influx of recent immigrants from the southern hemisphere. It is widely recognized that the northern/western church of Europe, North America and Australia is shrinking in terms of size and influence.

These challenges have given rise to some new visions and initiatives within the church. Some are saying it is time to leave traditional doctrine and worship practices behind in search of more heterodox, inclusive approaches. In Canada, the Centre for Progressive Christianity, founded by a minister of the United Church of Canada, articulates a revisionist approach which seeks to “promote forms of individual and community celebration, study, and prayer that use understandable, inclusive, non-dogmatic, value-based language by which people of religious, skeptical, or secular backgrounds may be nurtured and challenged.”\textsuperscript{4} Belief in the God of the Bible is not a criterion for membership. There are other innovative movements such as Emergent Village, which are also critical of many church institutions and practices, but who seek to retain a commitment to historic, orthodox Christianity and its spiritual practices.\textsuperscript{5} It is both an exciting and confusing time to be a minister in the Christian church. Our challenges may be similar to those faced by faithful ministers in other generations, however, they are also different. This is the first time in history that our parishioners have had access

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} MCEC is one of the four regional church bodies that make up the national entity Mennonite Church Canada. The ecclesial bodies and context will be explained in more detail later in the chapter.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Point seven on “Our Eight Points,” Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, \url{http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6}. Accessed June 3, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{5} “Values and Practices,” Emergent Village, \url{http://emergentvillage.org/?page_id=77}. Accessed June 3, 2012.
\end{itemize}
to such a quantity of information combined with the ability to communicate so quickly and directly with people and cultures that span the globe.

1.2 The Research Problem

In the face of new challenges, denominations and congregations are faced with re-visiting their reason for being in the world. The congregational life cycle is a tool that is helping many congregations process issues of identity and change in this fluid time. It is presented as follows:

Table 1: A Typical Life Cycle of a Congregation

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6 Slightly adapted from a presentation by Betty Pries in May 2012 at Conrad Grebel University College. Based on the work of Mary (Sellon) Huycke and Daniel P. Smith as well as the work of Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations*, (Bethesda MD: Alban Institute, 1993).
The curved lines in the centre indicate opportunities to cycle back to the work of Stage 3: Creative Formation. This is done by assessing the answers to the following Formational Questions: (at stages 4, 5 and 6)

*Who are we? Who is our neighbour? Why are we here? What shall we do?*

*What time are we in? Who do you say that I (Jesus) am?*

This model, while designed to help particular congregations, can also be applied to the church at large. In North America, due to declining attendance and influence, the church appears to be past the point of performing stability (stage 4) and most likely into a stage of crisis and confusion (stage 6). It is time to return with urgency to the foundational questions of identity. Who are we? Who do we worship? What makes a church a church? How is the church different from other social groups? What is inherently unique about the church?

In this thesis, I will present my conviction that the church is unique because of whom it worships. The church exists through a living connection with God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. At its core, the identity of the church is spiritual. She is born of the Spirit and finds her life in God. This is portrayed narratively in the account of Pentecost and also symbolically in the image of the vine and the branches from the gospel of John. If the church is to remain alive and vibrant, she must maintain her connection to the living Vine. The concern underlying this study is how the church as a whole can

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7 All throughout the Bible the identity of God’s people Israel and the church is described in personal and relational terms. Other adjectives include, “beloved, chosen one, bride.”
maintain its connection to its spiritual source and how I as a pastor can help my particular congregation remain connected to the Trinitarian God in a living and vibrant way.

The Pastoral Concern

It is possible for congregations to continue existing for a time without personal knowledge and experience of God’s presence. Personal experience of God’s presence can be understood in many ways. For many in my congregation, the phrase “experience of God” carries connotations of emotional or charismatic manifestations often associated with pietistic or Pentecostal groups. While “experience of God” may include such characteristics, it is not limited to a heart-felt style of perception. I am defining personal experience as “owning” or “appropriating” an awareness of God in such a manner that it can be communicated to self and others.

By “congregational experience” I mean an awareness that is appropriated by a group in such a way that it becomes part of the corporate story or memory. For example, our congregation experienced what it considered to be the leading of the Spirit in our move of location into the downtown core. The majority of members

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8 By personal experience of God’s presence, I mean a personally appropriated sense of God in the midst of everyday life that can be communicated to self and others. Throughout history, renewal movements in the church have sought to revive a living sense of God’s presence. The desert fathers are an early example. The Anabaptist movement of the 16th C is another example as are Bernard of Claivaux of the 12th C, Pietism of the 18th C and Pentecostalism of the 20th C.

9 Just as there are various styles of learning and personality, there are also numerous styles of experiencing God. Corinne Ware has outlined four basic spiritual types in her book, Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1995). The four types are head, (rational) heart (emotional) mystic (contemplative) and kingdom (social action).
remember the decision-making process, the renovations, the settling in and the expanded sense of mission and program. This move has become part of the corporate story of God’s presence and guidance.

In this paper I will be arguing for a need to stimulate personal and corporate experience of God. Much has been written on the “turn to experience” in contemporary culture and theology. Following the modern period of trust in reason, progress, authority and institution, we have entered into a time of uncertainty and skepticism. People are no longer willing to take a tradition or an institution’s word at face value. We want to experience the truth for ourselves in our own way. I am suggesting that for the members of the Mennonite church, this desire for personal experience must include knowing God for themselves. This is especially so since the Mennonite church is historically rooted in personal and corporate experience of God.

While much of the current culture of “personal experience” is eclectic and relativistic – “truth is whatever feels true to me” – I will argue for the wisdom of traditional and communal parameters for knowing God. For Christians, God is known in relation to the Biblical witness and the theological and spiritual traditions of the church. Christianity is a revealed faith which is appropriated communally and historically through the generations.

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10 For a good treatment see Donald Gelpi, *The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).
11 By theological and spiritual traditions I mean the historic creeds as well as Anabaptist practices of baptism, the Lord’s supper, church membership, communal accountability, prayer, Biblical discernment, as well as attention to the liturgical calendar in worship.
In one way, this study moves in synchrony with current culture in advocating for personal experience of God. In another way, it is in tension with popular culture by proposing the necessity of Biblical and theological boundaries for interpretation of this personal experience. To survive and thrive, churches will have to be grounded in personal experiences of God which exist within the larger frame of corporate, historical experience as witnessed in scripture and theological traditions. If this spiritual taproot is lacking, congregations begin to decline because they lose their spiritual identity. They begin to look like other non-religious social groups. While they may continue existing for a time as communities of support to their members and as advocates for a general morality, they eventually lose their vitality. This often becomes apparent with an increased difficulty in finding volunteers to fill the roles of mission and ministry. People discover that they can meet their personal needs in other places without worship. If connection to the spiritual vine is lost, congregations begin to function according to the predominant values of the culture; values such as rationality, success, and personal autonomy. They slip into what Graham Standish calls a “rational functionalism.”[^12] They begin to base their decisions more on human reason and cultural preference than on the knowledge and experience of the gospel, which includes the presence of the risen Christ among them.

[^12]: “Rational functionalism is the tendency of denominations, their congregations, and their leaders to subscribe to a view of faith and church rooted in a restrictive, logic-bound theology that ignores the possibility of spiritual experience and miraculous events, while overemphasizing a functional practice disconnected from an emphasis on leading people to a transforming experience of God.” Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence and Power* (Herndon VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 15.
In an important study of the faith and spirituality of U.S. teenagers, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton conclude that another “religion” has infiltrated and colonized churches and religious communities across the spectrum of denominations and faiths in North America. They call this new religion “Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism” and describe it as a non-Trinitarian derivative of Christian faith based on popular cultural values of personal fulfillment and choice.\(^\text{13}\)

God is acknowledged as the creator of the world but is not understood to be present and active in everyday affairs. Baseline morality is affirmed, but never at the expense of personal choice and wellbeing. The goal of this religion is to help people get along and be as happy as possible. The authors describe the new religion as a “new spirit living in the old body.”\(^\text{14}\) They say that teenagers have learned this new faith from their parents and that it has become an implicit sub-stratum of the faith life of teens across denominations and religions.

As a pastor, I am concerned primarily with attending to the living spiritual connection with the triune God in order to prevent such a slide into moralistic deism. How is this best done within the urban Mennonite church today? There are

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\(^{14}\) Ibid., 51.
certainly many ways to approach this problem. My particular perspective is influenced by my own history.

**Personal and Vocational Background**

I am the eldest child of three in my family. I grew up in a Mennonite home where I was taught values of thrift and responsibility. As a young person, my understanding of faith centered around Mennonite themes of discipleship and ethics. I was baptized at age 16 with the understanding that God had sent his Son Jesus to teach us how to live as disciples. My image of God was a benevolent taskmaster; kind but serious. There was a lot of work to be done in fixing the world and I imagined God to be the concerned parent in heaven, wanting to enlist us in his service.

**University and Seminary**

My world opened up in many ways when I entered studies at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo. When I entered University, I was uncertain about what to study. During orientation week, I switched from the Engineering faculty to Environmental Studies and Geography. The course, however, that interested me most that first year was an elective entitled *Introduction to the New Testament*. Even though I had been raised as a Mennonite, attended First Mennonite Church in Kitchener and was baptized at the age of 16, I had not thought

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15 The catechism I experienced as a teenager was largely based on the sermon on the mount. Discipleship, church as voluntary, accountable community, and the ethic of love and non-resistance were the main principles of Harold S. Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision” published in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67-88. This essay set the tone for Mennonite identity and education in the ensuing decades.
a great deal about the substance of my Christian faith. In the New Testament class, I was exposed to issues and questions I had never before considered. I found the exploration to be intensely energizing and thought-provoking; far more stimulating than my geography courses. I particularly enjoyed conversations with new friends in the college residence on questions of faith and meaning. For the first time, I was engaging with people from other Christian traditions who thought differently about God and faith. I began to conceive of a God who was bigger than duty and ethics. I tasted my first glass of wine and felt exhilarated that God could accept me even though I was not following all of the tenets of my youth. Conversations and friendship were the defining elements of this time in my life. A few male friends and I met regularly to discuss books and talk about our own relationships and dreams for the future. It was a time of discovering new freedom and possibilities. As I progressed in my undergraduate studies, I became much more interested in theology and philosophy than I was in my major. I opted to finish a general bachelor’s degree in Environmental Studies which would enable me to enter the seminary to pursue studies in theology.

**Pastoral Work in Colombia**

I spent two years at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Waterloo and then a final year in residence at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana where I graduated with a Master of Divinity degree. Following graduation, I wanted to see more of the world before serving a local Mennonite congregation. My wife and I accepted an invitation to serve as fraternal mission workers with the
National Mennonite Church of Colombia in South America. The next four years, from 1990 to 1994 were difficult but formative. I felt as though we had parachuted into dangerous territory without the supplies needed to survive. The country was in the midst of a protracted violent conflict with leftist guerillas on one front and drug traffickers on another. Crime levels were high in the city and the police were considered corrupt. After being robbed, the national Mennonite Church offices refused to call the police for fear of reprisals and harassment.

My wife and I worked with a small Mennonite congregation in a poor neighbourhood of Bogotá which lacked telephone service and paved streets. The economic needs were overwhelming. It was stressful for us because the people were asking for resources and support and we did not always know how to respond. We were in need of pastoral support ourselves, but the small national Colombian Church was not in a position to provide this for us. We developed friendships with other Canadian mission workers but struggled to form relationships with Colombian pastoral colleagues. I struggled with the economic disparity that existed between us. I remember a young Colombian couple, colleagues of ours, who came to visit. During the visit they inquired as to whether they might ask us a personal question. I took this as a sign of growing friendship and intimacy, until I heard the question: Could they have our sleeping bags when we left the country in two years?

We struggled with the cultural differences and barriers to deeper friendships. I also struggled with knowing how to respond to people’s spiritual
needs. Members of my congregation in Bogotá were looking for spiritual power more than ideas and values. I returned home to Canada with a deep sense of disillusionment. I had lost my innocence and optimism. I was struggling with a personal sense of inadequacy and a loss of inner confidence and hope. I realized that if I was going to continue on in pastoral ministry I would need to reflect deeply on the path I would take.

Search for a Deeper Spiritual Grounding

It was this sense of discouragement and personal need that led me to register for a spiritual retreat at Loyola House in Guelph in the fall of 1995. It was to be a time of silence and spiritual direction. During my seminary studies in the late 1980s, I had become interested in spirituality and the inner journey. In an integration paper in 1987 I wrote about the difference between primary and secondary experience of God, recognizing that my faith needed to move beyond intellectual knowing to a personal experience of God’s presence. I was interested in the notion of Christian meditation, but had not managed to practice it with any regularity. On my return from Colombia, these interests came to the fore once again as I felt an acute need for a personal experience of God. My spiritual director

16 Members expected the pastor to pray for healing and to organize “vigilias” of prayer that would go through the night. On one occasion I was called to cast out an evil spirit from a teenage boy who was behaving strangely. The needs and spiritual expectations were much more immediate and visceral than I was accustomed to. They expected God to be real and able to intervene. I was not adequately prepared to respond.


at the time identified my experience in Colombia as an awareness of spiritual poverty. She considered it a gift that could lead me forward.

The visit to Loyola House was the beginning of a series of retreats in which I experienced God’s presence in a personal way. I began to look for ways to incorporate some of this experience into my pastoral ministry. From 1995 until 2000 I was part of the pastoral team at a rural church on the outskirts of Kitchener-Waterloo. During my time there I began a small contemplative prayer group where I attempted to guide others into a more experiential encounter with God. I also collaborated with a colleague on offering the Alpha Course, an introduction to Christian faith, developed in a charismatic Anglican context. I was looking for ways of making Christian faith experientially real for people.

In the summer of 2000 I began as pastor Rockway Mennonite Church in Kitchener. I identified my calling as helping the church attend to the core of its faith. I attempted to lead another Alpha course, but with limited participation from the congregation. I continued with personal Ignatian retreats and spiritual direction and in the spring of 2004, began the year-long prayer in daily life known as Annotation 19 (Spiritual Exercises). Over the course of that year, I came to a greater awareness of God’s invitation to a personal relationship of love and friendship. Although I continued to wrestle with the paradox of unconditional love and ethical command, it was clear to me that God desired friendship before obedience. In numerous meditations, I found myself in the company of Jesus and Mary. I had the distinct sense that I was being invited into a communion of relationships. It was an
invitation into Trinitarian spirituality, which I will refer to later on. My spiritual
director continually encouraged me in the discovery that God wants relationship
more than performance. This was a significantly different paradigm from the duty-bound imagination of my youth, and one I wanted to develop further.

Throughout the year of these prayer exercises, I was also developing an
interest in the men’s spirituality movement. In May 2006 I had the formative
experience of participating in a Men’s Rites of Passage retreat led by Fr. Richard
Rohr at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. This was a time of interacting with other men
and also for solitude in nature. It was powerful to participate in a confession of pain
and grief in the company of other men. It became clear how hard we try to maintain
an aura of control and strength. This experience freed me to be more gracious about
my failures. As men, we were initiated into a spiritual path of “downward mobility”
where we experienced the mission and character of Christ in concrete ways. The
retreat employed dramatic rituals by which we were marked for the spiritual
journey of discipleship. We became deeply aware of our own weakness and sin
along with a corresponding, tangible sense of grace and support. The retreat
provided living signs and memories that have become benchmarks on my Christian
spiritual path.

Desire for Ministry

Such experiences have led to the discernment of my pastoral calling as one of
attending to the connection with the Vine. I believe that personal and corporate
experience of the risen Christ, in relation to Creator and Holy Spirit, is central to our
identity and mission as an Anabaptist church. Congregational life, however, can carry on with little disclosure and reflection upon personal experience of God. Worship, fellowship, Christian education and work for social justice can proceed without personal awareness of God’s presence in one’s life. Months and years go by without hearing personal stories of members’ experience of God. Church begins to function much like any other social club or support group, and loses sight of its spiritual identity and calling. How do we experience God’s presence and share this with one another in the congregation? How can I as pastor facilitate spiritual experience and reflection upon that experience within the congregational setting?

There are a few people within the congregation who find it helpful to meet with a spiritual director. This is certainly to be encouraged, but I also want to find ways to enable such sharing and reflection within the congregational setting, since the majority are not inclined to seek one-on-one spiritual direction.

1.3 Current Context of Ministry

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC)

Rockway Mennonite is one congregation among approximately 100 who make up the larger body of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC). MCEC,

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19 Anabaptism by definition rests on a voluntary, adult decision of faith which is able to be spoken publicly.
20 See previous definition in note 8.
21 This desire is in line with conclusions reached by Miriam Frey, “At the Crossroads: Spiritual Direction in a Mennonite Context” (Toronto: Regis DMin Thesis, 2003), 94. She sees spiritual direction as filling a need that is not being met in many Mennonite congregations. She suggests that pastors take a more deliberate approach to encouraging the sharing of spiritual journeys within the congregational setting.
together with four other regional churches make up the national body called Mennonite Church Canada. The polity of Mennonite Church Canada is congregational in nature. Congregations join together to enable ministries that cannot be accomplished alone. Such ministries include leadership training and development, credentialling of pastors, international mission and service, as well as participation in national, ecumenical dialogue. Conference leadership is understood primarily as a resource to congregations. The national and regional conference bodies do not have ultimate authority over the hiring of pastors or congregational matters of faith and practice. In the 1960s the churches moved away from a hierarchical system of bishops to a flatter, managerial structure in which a “conference minister” was primarily responsible for caring for pastors. The bishop’s role of spiritual authority was turned over to congregational leaders and pastors who were to be in conversation with conference leadership. Authority now rests somewhat ambiguously among congregational leaders, pastors and conference leadership. Currently, MCEC exhibits a wide range of cultural and theological diversity, due in large part to the new Canadians and members from other faith traditions who have joined. On any given Sunday, congregational worship within MCEC takes place in thirteen distinct languages.

**Congregational Setting**

The Rockway congregation began in 1960 and met for 45 years at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener before moving to share space with Zion United Church in downtown Kitchener in the fall of 2005. Worship follows a set pattern
with the sermon as the focal point. Classical music and four part hymn singing are an important part of the worship culture. Many of the members are professionals in the fields of academic research, health-care, law, social work, business and teaching.

An informal survey conducted in 2007 portrayed the congregation as a “head” type according to the spiritual types outlined in the book, Discover Your Spiritual Type by Corinne Ware. Head types prefer to encounter God through ideas. There is, however, a growing interest in the mystical dimensions of faith. Music is highly valued as well, as are symbol and silence within worship.

Historically, Rockway has considered itself a welcoming place for progressive Mennonites who are not at home in more conservative churches. The vision has grown to embrace numerous people from non-Mennonite backgrounds as well. Diversity and inclusiveness are important values. The longest serving pastor who retired in the late 1980s referred to himself as “pastor-coordinator.” He was influenced by a liberal Protestant theology and the anti-institutional spirit of the 60s and 70s. Record-keeping and policies around membership were seen as confining and overly bureaucratic. It was not until 2000, just prior to my arrival, that the first record book of members was compiled by an interim pastor. All entries were written in pencil.

Traditionally, membership in the Mennonite Church occurs through baptism or a public membership transfer ceremony officiated by the pastor. The informal

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22 Corinne Ware, Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1995). Rockway shows a preference for a rational approach to faith.
practice at Rockway in the 70s was to say, “If you feel like a member, then you’re a member.” Tradition was downplayed and great emphasis was put on personal choice. This vision was in part a reaction to authoritarian and pietistic practices of the past. Educated, urban Mennonites were looking for something more open and respectful of secular culture. In the early years, worship was centred around “presentations” by members on topics of interest, not necessarily connected to the Bible. A congregational history, published in 1992 states:

While the diversity of topics, questions and discussions was troubling to some, this was the very program which others found intensely exciting. But the special makeup and direction of Rockway in these years prompted the question, “Is Rockway a way out of the Mennonite Church?”

The congregation was certainly breaking new ground with its format of open discussion and its rejection of traditional leadership. For many who joined, however, it was not a way out of the church but rather a way of remaining connected in the midst of a rapidly changing social culture.

Worship and congregational life at Rockway have become more traditional over the years. We now have a preaching team that follows the Revised Common Lectionary for most services. There is a set order of service which includes a time of silence before the scripture reading and a sung response afterwards. There is Sunday School for children and youth and one adult education class that meets before worship. Sunday morning education and worship are the main events of the

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23 Some members joining at that time had grown up under the strict leadership of Bishop C.F. Derstine at First Mennonite Church and some had also experienced the tent revival campaigns held in 1950s. In each case the requirements for membership were set by strong leaders.
week, however, more mid-week activities have been organized since moving to Zion in 2005. Women gather to knot comforters once a month and several committees meet at the church. There is also a monthly book club that meets in homes, a bowling night and a Monday walking group. Several new, younger families have started to attend. Over the past year we have sensed the need to coordinate our Christian education activities and have organized a Christian Formation Team. We have deliberately chosen the term “formation” over “education” because we believe that we become followers of Jesus not only by educating the mind, but also by developing relationships and habits that form our character and attitudes. The committee understands that spirituality – a relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit - is central to that formation.

I enjoy a healthy pastor-congregation relationship at Rockway even though there are areas where we differ. At meetings I prefer to begin with a devotional or personal sharing, while some members like to get right down to business. In sermons I seek to be personal and pastoral, while some speakers prefer a lecture-style format. I speak about faith as a personal relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, lived in community, while some within the congregation prefer to speak of faith more in terms of ethical values. In general, I find that I am theologically more conservative than the average member. In my sermon for our 50th anniversary on October 3, 2010, I stressed that the freedom to question would always remain, but that the task for us now in this open, pluralistic culture is to strengthen our core Christian identity in order to provide an authentic and persuasive witness. As
pastor I feel called to attend to the centre of Christian faith, helping the
congregation claim its specific identity and mission in the midst of a post-Christian
society. I believe that part of what makes our partnership fruitful is the differences
that exist between us. I have stressed the importance of membership based on a
common confession of faith, and have sought to emphasize faith in Christ and not
ethnicity as the centre of our life together. As a pastor I’m seeking to root our
congregational life in the scriptures and traditions of the church. I see myself as
attending to our relationship with the Vine who gives us identity and life.

1.4 The Research Question

The general pastoral concern in this context is how to more effectively engage
people in practicing and reflecting upon their Christian spirituality. The specific
research interest is to learn more about how men describe their “experience of
God.” I have chosen to focus on men for several reasons. First of all, working with
one gender allows me to focus my research and obtain greater depth. Secondly, as a
man, I have a natural entry into the experiences of other men. Thirdly, since the

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25 North American and European Mennonites have a strong sense of ethnic identity based in part on
a counter-cultural theology and the persecution they experienced, especially in the former Soviet
Union. For some, it is possible to self-identify as Mennonite without having faith in God, in much the
same way as secular Jews.

26 See note 11.

27 By spirituality I mean our response to an innate desire for self transcendence, meaning and
purpose. In Christian terms I define spirituality as our experience of the triune God and the living
out of that experience in a life of discipleship. Spirituality will be discussed in more depth in chapter 2.
advent of feminism, and the so-called “postmodern”\textsuperscript{28} shift in our culture, men are seeking new ways to understand their place and identity.\textsuperscript{29} Men are in need of pastoral and spiritual guidance. They seem much less inclined than women to enter into reflective discussion on questions of spirituality. In my experience with attending spiritual direction courses and conferences, men are clearly outnumbered by women.\textsuperscript{30} Numerous colleagues in spiritual direction have said that more research needs to be done in the area of men and spiritual formation.

This project is designed as a listening study with the intention of laying qualitative and theoretical groundwork for future pastoral work. The research question is as follows: \textit{How do men who attend an urban Mennonite church experience God within the congregational setting and beyond?} This question will be explored through a methodology of one-on-one interviews which will be explained in depth in chapter 3. It is important to qualify from the outset the phrase in question, “experience of God.” In a church context, where belief in a living God is assumed, it is an appropriate question to ask. As Mennonites we do believe that God exists and that God can be perceived within our daily experience. In academic discourse

\textsuperscript{28} “Postmodern” is a contested term that refers in part to the breakdown of modernist assumptions including the universality of reason and the triumph of the scientific method.

\textsuperscript{29} Educated men of my generation are generally in favour of women’s liberation, but are uncertain about how to talk about their own. Men struggle with a sense of guilt and uncertainty about the inherent goodness of maleness. In an article by Hannah Rosin, “The End of Men,” \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} July/August, 2010, she describes how men are falling behind with the loss of traditional gender roles and the move to more fluid, communication-centred workplaces, which favour the strengths of women.

\textsuperscript{30} This is an observation based on my own experience and comments from other men. Women clearly outnumber men in ecumenical training programs for spiritual direction. At a recent April, 2010 gathering of Spiritual Directors International, a global, inter-faith group devoted to education and training for spiritual guides, less than ten percent of the attendees were men. In my own circles, I am aware of more women seeking spiritual direction than men.
however, one must be clear that responses to this question are highly interpretive and disputed. It is not possible to speak of the reality of God in terms that are scientifically verified. In this study, not only will the men be interpreting their experience, but I as researcher will be interpreting their interpretations. There is no way to determine what is objectively an “experience of God” and what is not. The study seeks to understand how men who participate in a Mennonite congregation perceive and describe the phenomenon of God within their everyday experience. Another way of phrasing the question could be to refer to the “religious dimension” of their experience; religious dimension meaning those aspects that touch on deepest longings, desires or perceptions of meaning. However to ask the question in this way within a congregational setting would appear unnaturally technical. I have chosen to use the phase “experience of God” for its simplicity and openness, all the while aware of the interpretive issues involved. To signify these issues, the phrase will often appear in quotation marks.

31 For a good discussion of the issues surrounding “experiencing God,” see William Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* 2d. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2009),17-23. In this second edition, in order to clarify terminology within a critical context, they use the terminology “religious dimension of experience” rather than “religious experience,” or “experience of God,” since such “religious” experiences are not discrete but mixed in with other elements of social and psychic life and perception. However, in the practice of spiritual direction within a setting of Christian belief, the authors do ask directees to reflect on their experience of God.

32 These issues will be discussed further in Chapter 2 under the heading, *Psychology and Spirituality.*
1.5 Conclusion

We live in a time of great fluidity and change. Congregations, denominations and individuals are re-visiting foundational questions of identity. Men are re-defining their roles in the home, workplace and the church. As Mennonites in Canada, we are exhibiting an increasingly diverse combination of styles and opinions with respect to worship, spirituality and theology. As a society as a whole, Reginald Bibby suggests that we may be seeing a growing polarization between those who take religion seriously and those who do not.33 A related polarization may also be making itself felt within the churches: those who hold to more traditional/orthodox views of Scripture, theology and spirituality, and those who are pushing for more eclectic or inclusive expressions. This thesis will explore ways of nurturing a specifically Christian faith in this fluid time. I will argue that a vibrant faith is one rooted in personal and corporate experiences of God and that these experiences, if they are to be Christian, must be interpreted within a Biblical and Trinitarian framework. It is to these theological issues that we now turn.

Chapter 2: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LIVING GOD

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

John 15:4

2.1 Introduction

Spirituality is a very popular topic today, both within our secular culture and the Christian church. However, the way I seek to define it here may be less than appealing to the average person in a typical, urban Mennonite or mainline Protestant congregation of European heritage. I am seeking to locate and understand the phenomenon within a specifically Biblical, theological and ecclesiological framework and to probe its practice in relation to men. My approach may be “counter-cultural” for several reasons. First of all, the framework of Biblical revelation, theological tradition and communal accountability is seen by many today as too confining. The general preference among liberal, educated Christians, Mennonites included, is to seek a more eclectic and inclusive spirituality. The prevailing mood in my context is one of suspicion toward religious institutions or traditions that claim any exclusive authority. The preference is clearly toward the unencumbered personal quest. Secondly, men are not usually the ones showing the

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34 By theological tradition, I mean the early Trinitarian creeds of the church (Apostle’s, Nicene, Chalcedon) as well as our Mennonite confessions of faith, particularly the current Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).

35 The term “inclusive” is generally not used in the sense of including someone within a particular practice or belief. In popular usage “inclusive” tends to mean including everyone no matter what their particular idea or practice. Theological boundaries and convictions are perceived as obstacles to inclusion. This is problematic in that it does not acknowledge an implicit worldview of liberal individualism. One must ask, included into what?
most interest in the topic of spirituality. Many pastors report that congregational prayer groups, spiritual retreats and spiritual direction are more popular with women. The renewed interest in spirituality over the last few decades has been primarily demonstrated by women. In these two ways the direction of my work seems to go against the cultural grain.

All good pastoral theology is a lively and critical interaction between cultural context and tradition. In this chapter, the interaction will be carried out in three main sections. First of all, spirituality will be discussed in a broad, cultural sense and a case will be made for an ecclesial understanding rooted within a specifically Christian theological framework. Secondly, particular Biblical and theological dimensions will be discussed along with resources within the Anabaptist and Ignatian traditions that can stimulate a renewal of Mennonite spiritual practice. In the third section, issues involved in the cultivation of Christian spirituality in a congregational setting will be discussed with particular attention to men's experience and the men's spirituality movement. The overall purpose of this chapter is to describe the theology of ministry that undergirds this study.

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36 Generally women outnumber men in spirituality training programs and in the field of spiritual direction by a large margin. For example, of the 44 spiritual directors listed for Toronto, Ontario on the Spiritual Directors International website, only 8 are men. [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org). Accessed Oct. 10, 2012.
2.2 Spirituality in the Cultural and Congregational Context

Multiple Understandings of Spirituality

When working in the area of spirituality, it is best to begin with a definition, since the term is notoriously slippery. It belongs, as one author describes, “to that family of curious, and often embarrassing concepts, which one perfectly understands until one wants to define them...”\(^{37}\) The word *spirituality* has come into popular North American parlance only within the last three or four decades.\(^{38}\) It has become a concept related to well-being, meaning, personal fulfillment and may or may not be connected with God or religion. An example of a popular definition is cited in the *Journal of Geriatric Care*: “Put in practical terms, spirituality is the way a person seeks, finds or creates, uses, and expands personal meaning in the context of place in the entire universe.”\(^{39}\) Definitions such as this bear witness to the

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\(^{38}\) The term "spirituality" was first used as a noun in France in the seventeenth century to critique the Spanish Quietists for only being interested in non-material realities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it began to take on a more positive note referring to the inner life of devotion and piety. The term didn’t come into English usage until the twentieth century when the Catholic Dictionary of Spirituality was published. Use within the Protestant world can be traced to a 1967 conference in Durham, England and its papers published under the title “Spirituality for Today.” Here the word spirituality seemed to express a general experiential dimension of faith for which people were longing. *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986),xxiv-xxvi.

widespread view that it is possible to be spiritual without being religious. Some popular teachers even say it is best to keep them separate.\textsuperscript{40}

The split between spirituality and religion is a major cultural trend making itself felt within Canadian Christian churches. Several of the people in my congregation who show a specific interest in the spiritual life are choosing not to pursue it within the traditional framework of Christian thought and disciplines. One young woman said that her spiritual life improved greatly when her spiritual director encouraged her to lay aside Christian language and doctrine in order to imagine God in ways that were more personally meaningful. For many people, doctrine and theology are seen as too restrictive. Others have found spiritual meaning in yoga classes and Buddhist meditation where technique is stressed rather than doctrine. Concepts such as “mindfulness” and “being present to the moment” are more readily embraced since they do not require adherence to the beliefs and practices of any particular religion.

A common denominator in many popular definitions is the notion of personal experience.\textsuperscript{41} Spirituality generally refers to personal experience that touches the non-material realm.\textsuperscript{42} Jack Miller, a holistic educator, defines

\textsuperscript{40} Eckhart Tolle espouses a common view that spirituality should be liberated from organized religion. Ken MacQueen, “Eckhart Tolle vs. God” Macleans (Oct 26, 2009): 62.\textsuperscript{41} Terry Patten is a faculty member in the Integral Executive Leadership Program at the University of Notre Dame and hosts an online teleseminar series on the future of spiritual practice. He says, “There are many ways of talking about spirituality, but all authentic spirituality has at its core a profound and life-changing experience that is beyond all categories and conventional modes of speech.” Terry Patten, “Spirituality is About the Mystery,” \url{http://www.integralheart.com/video/spirituality-is-about-the-mystery} accessed Feb 18, 2010.\textsuperscript{42} "Spirituality refers to the deeper resources of the human spirit and involves the non-physical, immaterial dimensions of our being; the energies, essences and part of us that existed before and will
spirituality in terms of qualities such as “awe, wonder, compassion and joy.”

Spirituality, as discussed by many current practitioners, gives witness to a yearning for lost meaning and purpose within our culture. It seems that many have not been finding what they need in religious congregations.

**Pastoral Commitment to a Christian Understanding**

As a pastor, my vision is to re-connect this cultural yearning for experience of transcendence, wonder and meaning with the Biblical and theological traditions of the church. There are rich resources within our tradition that lead to great depth and human fulfillment. David Benner provides a helpful model for understanding Christian spirituality in relation to the broader spiritual yearning in our culture.

He describes Christian spirituality as a more specific development of a natural phenomenon:

> The ground of all religious spirituality is a natural spirituality - the need and subsequent longing for self-transcendence and surrender, a need that is a fundamental part of our having been created in the image of God.

Christian spirituality is not an other-worldly pursuit, disconnected from common human experience and desire. In seeking to re-connect Christian spirituality with

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45 Ibid., 105. This is in line with the thinking of Ronald Rolheiser who says: "Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality. Thus, we all have a spirituality whether we want one or not, whether we are religious or not." Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1999), 7.
the cultural yearning noted above, it is important that the descriptor “Christian” not be seen as a reactive or fearful attempt to re-assert the identity and boundaries of the institutional church. The mood today among my parishioners is to build bridges rather than fences. At the same time, for our spirituality to have integrity and substance, I believe it must be consciously rooted within the Christian tradition and worldview.

The problem with personalized, eclectic spiritualities is that they underestimate the worldview that governs them. They proceed with the false assumption that the individual is autonomous, standing above the influence of all tradition. Broad, “inclusive” spiritualities tend to operate out of individualistically biased worldviews since they promote the idea of the sole seeker who freely directs the spiritual quest. Are we really more free when we cut ourselves loose from historical traditions? It is perhaps the opposite; we become more captive to the individualist assumptions that guide us. While there has been much reflection on the phenomenon of “postmodernism,” much of our culture still operates under the spirit of the liberal, modern era which places the individual at the centre of all reality. Slavoj Zizek, Slovenian philosopher and critic of modern liberalism, shows how popular themes such as diversity, tolerance and inclusion are far less open and communal than they appear. While “tolerance” might seem to favour living together in community, in reality, the current culture of “tolerance” is quite different. Instead of meaning deep respect and engagement, tolerance actually means “don't come too
close to me.” We have learned to be tolerant of others by not invading their personal space or challenging their worldview. We are tolerant so long as we are left alone to do our own thing and to create our own personal meaning. Hidden behind the culturally popular view of tolerance and inclusion is an ideology of individualism, which has its roots in Descartes and the modernist project. This worldview holds that there is no higher authority than the self, which is centred in the mind. This orientation seems to underly much of the popular, anti-institutional spirituality being marketed today.

In contrast to this, a truly Christian spirituality needs to be rooted in a communal worldview as articulated in Christian Trinitarian creed and doctrine. Christian spirituality has historic and theological roots that transcend the interests of any one individual. The communal witness of scripture, the creeds and confessions of faith over the centuries reflect a rich, communal discernment that serves as the “container” or reference point for individual experience and spirituality. Louis Bouyer, a well respected theologian of the second Vatican Council states it this way: “the acceptance of dogma, a living awareness of it in the bosom of the Church, is the condition sine qua non of a spirituality that is truly and fully

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46 Slavoj Zizek in a lecture given at Boston University on June 25, 2008
http://deimos3.apple.com/WebObjects/Core.woa/Feed/bu.edu.1499463808.01545588487
Christian." 47 Catherine LaCugna, likewise argues for the necessity of doctrine if one is to avoid a "generic" spirituality that caters to individualism.48

I define Christian spirituality as relationship in and with the triune God and the living of that relationship in a life of communal discipleship, with the understanding that this experience and response grows out of an innate human desire for self-transcendence, meaning and purpose. This innate desire, according to Augustine, has been planted within us by our Creator. The souls of all human beings are restless until they rest in God. This natural longing is an inherent part of our dependent nature. A specifically Christian spirituality is the response to this natural longing through an encounter with the gospel - the self-giving act of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit - and an appropriation of this gospel within one’s life. Other non-Christian spiritualities engage our natural longing for meaning and transcendence through other belief systems and means.

In Christian spirituality, the autonomous self and its search for meaning becomes re-situated through the gracious encounter with God in Christ. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the paschal mystery; dying to self and being born anew into a larger reality. Through encounter with the living God, the self ceases to be the centre and becomes content to “abide” and receive, rather than direct the

48 “In order to formulate an ethics that is authentically Christian, an ecclesiology and sacramental theology that are Christological and pneumatological, a spirituality that is not generic but is shaped by the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, (emphasis mine) we must adhere to the form of God’s self-revelation, God’s concrete existence as Christ and spirit,” Catherine LaCugna, God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 378.
spiritual journey.  

2.3 Theological Dimensions of Christian Spirituality

Current Cultural Presuppositions

How does one make a case for Biblical and theological parameters when it comes to spirituality? Why not pick and choose from different traditions according to one’s own sensibilities and tastes? The reason has to do with appropriate intellectual humility. In this “postmodern” milieu, we have come to discover that it is no longer possible to stand above various worldviews and evaluate them objectively. We are all embedded within culture and language. Critics of modernism, such as Jacques Derrida, have shown the fallacy of believing in a universal and stable truth that exists apart from human writing and interpretation. His phrase, “there is no truth outside the text,” asserts that we can only access reality through language and interpretation. We cannot extract ourselves from tradition to arrive at objective, un-mediated truth. Even when we appear to be making decisions on our own, we are being conditioned and guided by values and assumptions that are invisible to us. They are like the air that we breathe.

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49 John 3:30 and Mark 8:35 are examples of this spiritual principle. The self is not lost, but rather reborn into a bigger and more gracious reality. I find Thomas Merton’s concept of “false self” and “true self” to be very helpful in understanding this spiritual dynamic. Thomas Merton, Seeds of Contemplation (New York: Dell Publishing Company Inc., 1949), 18-24.


51 For example, the notion of personal choice is embraced today as a benign and common value. What is not so evident are the agendas and worldviews benefiting from and driving this popular
If all truth is interpretation, then the Christian and Biblical worldview stands on equal ground so to speak with others in the sense that there is no value-free or neutral territory. Christians no longer need to make their case to a skeptical culture which claims to be guided by a universal reason free from belief and tradition. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was ahead of his time in critiquing his liberal colleagues for seeking theology’s foundations in something other than the Word of God in the witness of scripture. Liberal theology sought to appeal to the cultural norms of modernism in an effort to be relevant. With the rise of national socialism in Germany, Barth saw that the liberal approach was unable to mount a substantial critique of culture. In its desire to be relevant, it became blind to the anti-Christian elements of its underlying worldview. God became domesticated to serve a racist, totalitarian agenda. Barth’s view was that humanity needs a saviour from beyond human culture; a saviour who cannot be constructed according to human reasoning. In a polemical way, he sought to undermine any attempt to control or limit God through the use of reason.

Barth perhaps overstated his conviction due to the heightened tension of his time. Paul Tillich accused him of undervaluing human culture and promoting a

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value. Freedom of choice is a key principle of consumerism which is a necessary ingredient in Western capitalism which tends to concentrate wealth at the top.
52 Liberal theology has its roots in part in Immanuel Kant who sought to articulate a universal ethic based on human reason, to which the Biblical witness must conform. For a recent critique of the liberal approach as exemplified in David Tracy’s theological model see chapter 1 of Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy* (Indiana University Press, 2010)
blind fideism that provided little or no contact with nature.\textsuperscript{53} I agree with Barth’s basic concern, but would want to moderate his position somewhat. In his doctrine of the Trinity he draws a sharp distinction between the economic Trinity (God as witnessed in history and scripture) and the immanent Trinity (God as God exists within God’s self.) Barth wants to say that “who God is in himself” does not necessarily follow from “what God has done for us.” He wants to prevent any way of reasoning our way to God based on past precedent or analogy. God is totally and utterly free. While I appreciate this impulse, I agree with other theologians who say that practically speaking we can only know and respond to God through what God has done.\textsuperscript{54}

The point of the preceding paragraphs is to argue for Biblical and theological tradition as the foundational framework for Christian spirituality. However, it is important to recognize that the authority of Biblical and theological tradition is not based on blind faith alone. Christian tradition, including scripture, is a time-tested interpretation of personal and corporate experience. The truth of theology did not simply fall from the sky. All theology derives in some way from an initial existential encounter with God. For the Hebrews, the experience of God in the exodus from Egypt was the basis for the creation and collection of writings which would later


\textsuperscript{54} Karl Rahner stimulated a renewal in Trinitarian reflection with his statement, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity; the immanent is the economic.” Catherine LaCugna says that the issue of “who God is in himself” must be deduced from what God has done for us as witnessed in scripture. References for these comments come from Paul M. Collins, \textit{The Trinity: A Guide for the Perplexed} (London: Continuum, 2008),104-105.
form the Hebrew Scriptures. The crisis of the exile to Babylon led to personal encounters between God and prophets such as Jeremiah and second Isaiah. These prophets spoke not as rational philosophers, but as messengers who had personally heard a word from the Lord. In the first century CE, it was personal encounter with the risen Christ that gave rise to intense reflection and writing on the life of Jesus. Without personal and corporate spiritual experience, the movement would not have continued and the gospels would not have been written. Likewise, the epistles of Paul are rooted in his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Disputed letters, such as Ephesians, are likewise anchored in the experience of Paul, although they display a more cosmic and philosophical tone. The New Testament is best described as a testimony and reflection on lived experiences of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In a recent address on the task of theology in the 21st century, A. James Reimer names existential encounter as foundational to the discipline of theology. Roman Catholic Canadian theologian, Bernard Lonergan, says that the foundation for systematic theological reflection is the experience of religious conversion which

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55 In Ephesians 3:3 Paul (or the writer) grounds the whole of the ministry to the Gentiles in the “mystery that was made known by revelation.” The revelation is Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus. In his letters, Paul repeatedly grounds his authority and apostleship in this personal encounter with Christ. It was his existential experience of conversion which provided the energy and inspiration for his writings and ministry, which effectively opened the Jewish faith to the Greek world.

is an apprehension of God’s unconditional love and a response to that love.\textsuperscript{57} Anselm of Canterbury defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.”\textsuperscript{58} Faith, being the response of trust to an experience of God, undergirds all attempts at greater rational understanding of the experience and the God behind it. Reason is used strenuously in the theological task, but can never be utilized to prove God’s existence, nor should it be used to replace a dependence on God’s gracious initiative and personal encounter with us.

**Trinitarian, Ecclesial and Missional Framework**

Trinitarian doctrine asserts that God exists in dynamic inter-relationship within God’s own self and with the entire creation as three in one. God’s transcendence is in constant relationship with God’s immanence and God’s historicity. If spirituality is defined as the relationship with the triune God and the living of that relationship in a life of discipleship, it will therefore have multiple relational dimensions as does the Trinity. It will involve relationship with one’s self, with God, with nature and with other human beings. It will be both physical and non-material, historical and eternal, and encompass the cosmic as well as the mundane. Instead of an esoteric, speculative doctrine on the nature of God, the Trinity provides a dynamic and practical framework for Christian spirituality.\textsuperscript{59}

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\item \textsuperscript{58} Chapter 1, first paragraph of the *Proslogium* http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp#CHAPTER XXVI (accessed April 4, 2013)
\item \textsuperscript{59} The meaning of Trinity however cannot be reduced to its practical applications.
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A. James Reimer has been a major voice in Mennonite circles for grounding faith and practice within a Trinitarian understanding of the gospel. He takes issue with John Howard Yoder and others who consider the doctrinal formulations of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon as compromised due to the Constantinian shift in the church. Yoder tends to see the creeds as part and parcel of the imperialization and Hellenization of the church. Trinitarian formulations are considered a Greek departure from the Hebraic and historical narratives of the life of Jesus. Reimer agrees with Yoder’s critique to some degree. The Constantinian alliance of church and state was problematic in many ways and represents a move away from the ethical teachings of Jesus. However, Reimer persuasively argues that the creeds are not necessarily supportive of the imperialist shift. He claims that Trinitarianism raises the status of Jesus – in contrast to the heresy of Arianism – and therefore ultimately gives more weight to his life and teachings. Reimer contends that Arianism which allowed for demi-gods was much more conducive to Constantianism than orthodoxy.

Catherine LaCugna adopts a similar approach in her work on Trinitarian theology, advocating for the spiritual and practical vitality of the doctrine. She claims that the Trinity has been neglected until recently because of the arcane, medieval, philosophical categories in which it was communicated. She seeks to express its meaning and truth through the relational language of the Bible. People

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60 Yoder’s views can be found in his *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Elkhart, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1981).
correctly perceive the doctrine to be tangential if it involves only the nature of the Godhead within itself and not in relation to the affairs of the world. LaCugna asserts that God’s being is most properly understood in relation to God’s action in history and not in reference to medieval categories of “substance.” She asserts:

Classical metaphysics, the effort to ascertain what something is “in itself,” is perhaps the ultimate projection of masculinity. The God of Jesus Christ exists entirely for, with, through another. The law of personhood is that the only way one “has” oneself at all is by giving oneself away.”

“Person” is the essential ontological category instead of “substance.” She deduces this from the revelation of Scripture and not from the realms of philosophy. God has been revealed most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. “To say that person rather than substance is the cause and origin of everything that exists means that the ultimate source of all reality is not a ‘by-itself’ or an ‘in-itself’ but a person, a toward-another.” God is not separate from humanity, but has given him/her self as a person, known in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The life of God is a life that includes all of creation and seeks to draw all together in friendship and mutuality, as it exists within the Godhead itself. God is not only a distant other, but an intimate indweller seeking to redeem and draw together all that exists.

62 “There is an entirely different way of approaching the doctrine of the Trinity, one that is more consistent with the Bible, creeds, and the liturgy, and one that makes it possible for theology of God to be intimately related to ecclesiology, sacramental theology, grace, ethics, spirituality, and anthropology. It requires that we root all speculation about the triune nature of God in the economy of salvation (oikonomia), in the self-communication of God in the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.” LaCugna, God For Us, 15.
63 Ibid., 398.
64 Ibid., 14.
65 Ephesians 1:9-10 “He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in
An image from scripture that vividly portrays Trinitarian spirituality is the vine from the Gospel of John Chapter 15. It speaks of a mysterious *participation* in the life of the triune God on the part of the believer.\(^6\) One could understand God as root or soil, Christ as vine, the Spirit as living sap and the believers as branches. God is simultaneously mysterious and tangible, transcendent and immanent. The image sets ethics or “bearing fruit” within the context of a spiritual, communal and organic relationship. The essence of being the church is “abiding” rather than “doing.” The Vine is the centre and not the branches. At the same time, the Vine is inseparable from soil and sap. Branches exist only because of the gracious sustenance of the Vine and all growth is experienced through grace. The fruit is produced only through mutual cooperation. Apart from the Vine, apart from the living relationship with the triune God, the believer cannot thrive.

Christian Trinitarian spirituality is inherently communal and corporate. This means that it cannot properly exist outside of ecclesiology. Christian spirituality is not primarily an individual journey or quest. Central to Biblical revelation is the calling forth of a people to embody and share God’s being and heaven and things on earth.” NRSV. Edith Humphrey, a Protestant scholar talks about the Trinity in terms of ecstasy and intimacy: “The great pattern of life, then, is the ecstasy and intimacy of God himself, who went out of the self to the extreme point, and so dwells among us in an intimacy that we can hardly imagine.” Edith Humphrey, *Ecstasy and Intimacy: When the Holy Spirit Meets the Human Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2006), 4.

\(^6\) Dalrymple, a Catholic theologian says, “Man is not only created in the image of the Trinity, he is also re-created in that image. This latter phrase is not an empty one, but expresses the real truth, that redemption for man means a divinization of his whole self, which St. Paul did not hesitate to call being adopted into the family of the Blessed Trinity. According to him, new life in Christ means being able to call God ‘father’ and Christ ‘brother’ and being a co-heir of the son’s redemption. It is not going too far to say that the Christ life catches a man up into the Godhead while he still lives this earthly life.” John Dalrymple, *Theology and Spirituality*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1970), 22.
message in the world. Christian spirituality therefore is also missional. It is not so much about the self as it is about participating in God’s movement to bless the nations and ultimately reconcile all that exists.

The Hebrew Bible is the story of a people learning to understand their calling and to structure their corporate life accordingly. Throughout the scriptures God speaks personally to the community through the prophets. God has a relationship with Israel that is likened to the intimate bond between a husband and wife. In the time of exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah re-formulates the understanding of peoplehood in more humble and missional terms. Israel is not to be a kingdom unto itself, ethnically pure and with a grand temple, but rather a nation of priests that will bring light to the nations. Israel is to be an example of God’s will and way amongst the peoples of the earth.

Jesus acts in accordance with this tradition as he creates a community of twelve disciples, teaching them to be “salt” and “light” in the world. Mennonites have understood the Sermon on the Mount to be central to the gospel message. We are invited and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a redeemed community with a Christ-like ethic. Jesus instructs his followers to embody new understandings of power, to adopt an attitude different than that of the Gentiles.

Paul’s writings deal with what it means to live as part of this new community or “body of Christ.” He exhorts members to live in light of Christ’s death and

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67 This notion of peoplehood begins most explicitly in Genesis 12 with the calling of Abraham and the promise that all nations will be blessed through him.
68 Isaiah 49:1-6
69 Luke 22:24-27
resurrection. Current Biblical scholarship understands Paul to be more concerned with corporate than individual concerns. 70 The core of Paul’s theological concern is what it means for Gentiles to be welcomed into the people of God through the reconciling cross of Christ. His life’s work was to plant and sustain communities that embody the good news of God’s life and kingdom in the world.

The missional understanding of church as the beloved community called by God to live as a sign of the kingdom is central to my theology of ministry. The Mennonite theologian who has articulated this vision most persuasively is John Howard Yoder. Yoder was a student of Barth, and like his teacher, he became critical of liberal Protestant theology, particularly the “realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, which allowed politics to set the agenda for the church. Niebuhr roots his theology in human questions and practicalities, and thus, according to Yoder, limits the surprising radicalism of the gospel message. Yoder’s influential work, The Politics of Jesus,71 was a call to take Jesus seriously in establishing social ethics. It was a call to regard scripture as authoritative for human behaviour; allowing the Bible to challenge and re-formulate our questions and stance within the world. For Yoder, the scripture functions more as a window than a mirror. It shows us a new horizon, a new vision for living rather than a reflection of what already is. Yoder mounts a powerful challenge to the status quo, which all too easily assumes the

70 Krister Stendahl has shown how Paul has been misunderstood through the “introspective conscience of the West.” Krister Stendahl, Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).
necessity of violence and coercive force. He dares the Christian churches to listen with a fresh perspective to the teachings of Christ and to the hope of Christ’s resurrection and what this means for the practice and identity of the church.

Yoder’s theology calls the church to embody the ethic of Christ as its primary form of witness. Living as an alternative society within the world is the church’s primary vocation. Simply “being the church” is a legitimate form of witness. Yoder stressed that faithfulness to the counter-cultural kingdom ethic must prevail over so-called worldly relevance or success. Our calling is to follow Christ’s teachings and to leave the consequences up to God. The church must resist the Constantinian tendency to manage the affairs of the world. It must also resist the tendency to tame the call of Christ by “spiritualizing” the gospel message, making it refer primarily to salvation after death.

Yoder has been the largest influence on North American Mennonite theology and practice in the last several decades. He took Bender’s Anabaptist Vision and interpreted it for a critical, ecumenical audience. Under his influence, Mennonites entered mainstream theological dialogue with more confidence and became actively involved in social issues such as militarism, immigration and poverty.

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72 This is in line with the thought of John Milbank who in Theology and Social Theory shows how the ontology of violence underlies the supposedly neutral realm of “secular” life and politics. See Neal Blough, “The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgrim Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 78 no. 1 (Jan. 2004).
73 Discipleship, church as voluntary, accountable community, and the ethic of love and non-resistance were the main principles of Harold S. Bender’s Anabaptist Vision published in Mennonite Quarterly Review 18 (1944): 67-88. This essay set the tone for Mennonite identity and education in the ensuing decades.
Educated, urban Mennonites were anxious to leave behind a passive and separatist stance on the world. While much of this renewed social involvement has been good, Yoder's thinking has contributed to a strong ethical focus to the faith.\textsuperscript{74} Being Christian for many Mennonites has come to mean living with certain ideals and political positions. Faith is reduced to a set of values. What is missing or under-emphasized, particularly in urban and educated congregations, is a personal and inner spiritual connection to God.\textsuperscript{75} In order to have a healthy corporate life, the church needs to encourage and show its members how to be rooted in a personal and inner relationship to Christ and the Spirit. In my opinion, this is one of the biggest challenges facing the Mennonite Church. Other Mennonites share this concern and have articulated it well.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Yoder's point was that faith needs to be embodied. He was not saying that faith can be reduced to a set of ethics or values even though many people have tended to read him this way. For Yoder the basis for the Christian ethic is faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He says, “...the calculating link between our obedience and ultimate efficacy has been broken, since the triumph of God comes through resurrection and not through effective sovereignty or assured survival.” Politics of Jesus, 246.

\textsuperscript{75} In the summer of 2010, a member within the congregation preached a sermon saying that the only hope for progress in the world is liberal, democratic values. Christian faith is understood as a commitment to making the world a better place. Faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross, repentance from sin, conversion, and life in the Spirit move to the periphery. At a fall 2010 forum on faith formation at the local Mennonite high school, all of the young people spoke of Christian faith as a choice of values. None of them referred to God's love, forgiveness or friendship.

\textsuperscript{76} Stephen F. Dintaman wrote an influential essay in 1992 stating that, "The next generation of “Anabaptist vision” theologians talked passionately about Christian behavior and greatly deepened and extended the concept of discipleship, but gave only passing, non-passionate attention to the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit in the inner transformation of the person." Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," Conrad Grebel Review 10 (Spring 1992): 205. Dintaman believes that Harold S. Bender assumed an inner faith in Christ and a relationship with the Holy Spirit without speaking about it explicitly. What happened was that the heirs of the vision carried forth the outward, ethical concerns without picking up on the foundational spirituality. Dintaman is particularly concerned that the ensuing behavioural focus has not served us well in ministering to deeply wounded people. Ethically focused Mennonites are at a loss when confronted with people who are unable to choose the good.
Resources for Renewal of Mennonite Spirituality

Anabaptist Sources

The Trinitarian image of the vine appears regularly in early Anabaptist literature. Emphasis was placed on the inner, spiritual connection with God and the way it leads to outer transformation in character and behaviour. Arnold Snyder shows through his analysis of 16th century writings that the new birth in Christ was at the very root of the Christian life for these believers. "The Anabaptists believed, emphatically, that Christ must be borne in the heart of every believer by grace ‘through faith,’ and that this birth was a transforming power that produced actual (not imputed) righteousness." Salvation was more than a confidence in justification as put forward by Luther. It was a relationship of living, transformative power. Snyder goes on to say:

Mystical and Anabaptist spirituality contrast dramatically with Reformation spirituality. The accent falls on the experienced

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77 An unpublished Bern manuscript of 1589, states: “Therefore we should put on the proper, true, wedding garments for the Lord Jesus Christ, and guard against and purify ourselves from all sin and unrighteousness – not that we of ourselves would be able to be pure and without sin, but rather through our Lord Jesus Christ. As long as we are and remain twigs and branches in him, the true vine, the heavenly sap and good fruit from the vine will flow into the branches. For the mouth of eternal truth, which cannot lie, says: (Jn 14:12) ‘Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and will do greater works than these.’ For this reason Paul states: ‘You are his handiwork, created through Jesus Christ.’ Since we then are only the tools, and the Lord completes his work through us, we have absolutely nothing about which to boast, since in our own strength we are able to create nothing good; rather it is the Lord God who produces the good through his own, to whom belongs all praise and honor eternally.” This text is unpublished and was translated and sent to me by Snyder via e-mail on October 30, 2010.

78 Arnold Snyder describes this spirituality as a union of inner and outer dimensions in his book Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004). Much has been written on Anabaptist history and theology, but Snyder’s book, part of the Orbis Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series edited by Sheldrake, is arguably the most recent and complete treatment of Anabaptist spirituality. Anabaptism was not a monolithic movement and Snyder chooses to identify common elements across various streams of Anabaptism.

79 C. Arnold Snyder, Following in the Footsteps of Christ, 52.
presence of the living Christ within, transforming believers with power, rather than on the historic work of Christ’s atonement on the cross.\textsuperscript{80}

Snyder sees many connections between Anabaptist spirituality and the late medieval, affective tradition exemplified by Thomas à Kempis and the Brethren of the Common Life. His thesis is that early Anabaptist spirituality is more Catholic than Protestant.\textsuperscript{81} Many statements of à Kempis could have easily been embraced by the Anabaptist reformers.\textsuperscript{82} For the late medieval mystics as well as for the Anabaptists, salvation was not a one time event of faith. It was not understood forensically nor only in terms of participating in the official sacraments of the church. Salvation was rather a lifelong, relational process that depended on an ongoing connection with the living Spirit of Christ and a conscious cooperation with his will.

The early Anabaptists were heirs of the spiritually “inward” trend that began as early as the 12\textsuperscript{th} C with writers such as William of St. Thierry who urged Christians to move from the externals of the liturgy to their inner meaning. The early Anabaptists were part of this strong spiritualizing trend that had been making

\begin{footnotes}
\item[80] Ibid., 65.
\item[81] Snyder traces the roots of Anabaptist spirituality back to the inward turn of the high middle ages exemplified in Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Meister Eckhardt and others. In a lecture in February, 2011, he referred to Bernard McGinn’s third volume in the Presence of God series, \textit{The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism 1200-1350} (New York: Crossroad, 1998) to describe a movement away from outward focus on the sacraments to inner experience and receptivity.
\item[82] A Kempis stresses the importance of inner disposition: "Christ will come to you, and impart his consolations to you, if you prepare a worthy dwelling for him in your heart." “Be humble and a man of peace, and Jesus will abide with you. But if you turn aside to worldly things, you will soon cause Jesus to leave you, and you will lose his grace.” Thomas A Kempis, \textit{The Imitation of Christ}, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1952), 67, 77.
\end{footnotes}
itself felt in certain Catholic circles for centuries. They embraced the inward meaning of the sacraments to such an extent that they began to undervalue the outward signs. They were basically dualistic in their understanding of nature, believing that spirit and matter were opposed to one another. Spirit could renew matter, but matter was powerless to renew spirit. Hence they reacted strongly to the sacramental tradition which afforded efficacy to material substances.83

Early Anabaptism is a resource for renewal today in the sense that it values the inner encounter with the living God. Snyder says, “Our faith parents assumed an intense personal relationship with the living God.”84 Snyder states clearly that to be Anabaptist means to personally surrender to God, through the person of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. He calls for a renewal of spiritual practice and liturgy but does not comment specifically on how this could be accomplished in the context of current cultural and congregational dynamics. One of the intentions of this project is to build on Snyder’s insights and to make specific recommendations for pastoral practice in an urban congregational setting.

As was mentioned in the introduction, I have been greatly nourished by Roman Catholic, Ignatian spirituality through retreats and spiritual direction at Loyola House at the Guelph Centre of Spirituality in Guelph, Ontario. Ignatian

83 Today some Anabaptists, myself included, are seeking a recovery of sacramentality in light of more current understandings of the essential unity of spirit and matter. We are heirs to an over-reaction that deprives us of important liturgical and sacramental resources for the development of Christian spiritual life.
84 From lecture notes on Anabaptist Spiritual DNA, January 2012. Snyder gave two seminars in January of 2012 at Conrad Grebel University College and this quote is from one of these presentations.
spirituality provided me with something that was not immediately available within my own Mennonite tradition: an historically and ecclesiologically grounded method for nurturing the inner relationship with the triune God. The early Anabaptists, for all their zeal, were not able to develop a tradition of prayer and spiritual discipline:

In short, the liturgical underpinning of regular prayer, reading and worship that sustained medieval religious life from its earliest days is absent from Anabaptist testimonies. We can assume from this general silence in the sources that regulated prayer was not one of the Anabaptist spiritual disciplines.¹⁵

Their main discipline was communal Bible reading,¹⁶ but very little is said on how they went about it, what they did when there was a lack of will and how they carried it on into subsequent generations. One reads their testimonies and witnesses a vibrant personal relationship with Christ that is largely assumed. When called to give account of their faith at time of trial, more often than not they quoted scripture verbatim. One wonders how they met the living Christ. Where did they find the desire to memorize scripture? How did they pray and what did they experience in prayer? What was the process though which they turned from their own will and received the healing grace of the Holy Spirit? We are left to our own imaginations and this has been a significant problem for those of us in the Anabaptist tradition who seek to follow in their footsteps.

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¹⁵ Snyder, Following in the Footsteps of Christ, 115.
¹⁶ The Mennonite Historical Library in Goshen Indiana contains a copy of a Biblical concordance organized under 66 topical headings, which was published in 1600 by the Swiss Anabaptists. www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/concordance
Arnold Snyder has written on the influence of the *Devotio Moderna* on the early Anabaptists, but I am not aware of any scholarly writing on the connections between Ignatian spirituality and Anabaptism. The link, in my opinion, would be the *Devotio Moderna*, since Ignatian spirituality is the tradition that clearly carries on these exercises of affective prayer. Learning about the *Devotio Moderna* school has helped me to understand my own attraction to Ignatian spirituality and leads me to wonder whether there is something here that can be practiced more widely within our Anabaptist communities today. The Christocentric and practical focus of Ignatian spirituality has much in common with Anabaptist convictions. The Mennonite church is in need of spiritual practices and disciplines that nurture the inner relationship with God. Such disciplines should be rooted within our own theological tradition and congregational context, while remaining in dialogue with others.

*Ignatian Sources*

*Contemplative Approach: Finding God in All Things*

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87 *Devotio Moderna* refers to a type of piety in the 14th and 15th centuries that stressed the individual appropriation of grace. It is associated with the Brethren of the Common Life, a lay religious organization founded in the Netherlands by Gerhard Groot in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.

88 "... one of the things that made the new devotion new was the structured and repeated pattern of exercises members undertook, meditatively focusing their minds on accompanying Jesus in different situations described in the Gospels, thus experiencing an imitation of Christ affectively and imaginatively." Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 115.

89 One helpful book that practically links elements of the Ignatian method with Anabaptist spiritual texts is Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1994).
Ignatian spirituality is a kataphatic\textsuperscript{90} tradition growing out of the experience and *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola in 16th Century Spain. This spirituality has its roots in Ignatius’ growing self-awareness during a period of convalescence after a battle injury at Pamplona in May of 1521. He spent considerable time daydreaming and paying attention to the effects of his imagination. As a soldier trained in medieval chivalry, he had great visions of winning battles for the King of Spain and seducing beautiful women in the process. He discovered, however, that such dreams, while pleasant in the moment, left him discouraged and unsatisfied as time passed. During his recovery, for lack of other books, he was given a book on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the saints. As he imagined himself doing great things in the service of God, as Francis and Dominic had done, he noticed a growing sense of well-being and peace that lasted long after the visualizations had passed. It was this experience of paying attention to his imagination and the lingering effects in his psyche that formed the basis of the *Spiritual Exercises* that he would begin to write during a time of extended prayer and meditation at Manresa.\textsuperscript{91}

The word “contemplative” is used in various ways within the traditions of Christian spirituality. For Ignatius, the term refers to an awareness of the depth

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\textsuperscript{90}Kataphatic traditions of prayer encourage the use of images. Apophatic traditions, such as Carmelite spirituality, stress the “unknowability” of God and encourage emptying the mind of all thought and image during prayer. See Frederick G. McLeod SJ, “Apophatic or Kataphatic Prayer,” *Spirituality Today* Vol. 38 (1986):41-52.

\end{flushright}
dimension of everyday life rather than a mystical, unitive experience of God. The phrase used most often to describe the Ignatian approach is "finding God in all things." This type of contemplative spirituality is undergirded by a Trinitarian conviction that God has created the world and continues to be present within it as Creator, Redeemer and immanent Spirit. One does not have to withdraw from the world in order to meet God. Rather, God is encountered through paying closer attention to one's everyday experience, moods and surroundings. God is present within the ordinary routines of life, desiring to communicate with us. Spiritual practice is best described as careful attentiveness. Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit and follower of Ignatius, speaks of living in the "divine milieu" and would say that experiencing God "is not a matter of seeing extraordinary objects in miraculous apparitions but of seeing the ordinary things of our experience in a different way. Christian faith is not about seeing different things; it is about seeing things differently."  

Desire and Discernment  
As one commits to contemplative awareness, one begins to notice patterns of mood or disposition which Ignatius refers to as spiritual consolation and desolation. Timothy Gallagher explains these concepts carefully in his discussion of the 14 rules.

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92 Harvey Egan, well known Ignatian scholar at Boston College, has referred to Ignatius as the "mystic of moods and thoughts." From the foreword in Timothy Gallagher, The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living (New York: Crossroads, 2005), xv.

of discernment for week 1 of the Exercises.\textsuperscript{94} Spiritual consolation needs to be distinguished from non-spiritual consolation which can be described as the sense of well-being derived from good food, friendship and the beauty of art and nature. While still being spiritual gifts in the broad sense, they are not \textit{spiritual consolation} in the specific sense that Ignatius suggests. Spiritual consolation has to do specifically with the love of God and the desire to do God’s will as it has been revealed through Christ.\textsuperscript{95} There is a difference between natural and supernatural revelation. Harvey Egan, a well known Ignatian scholar, laments the fact that many popular studies do not do justice to the real intent and depth of the teachings.\textsuperscript{96} Many seek to adopt the Ignatian style of spiritual discernment without a corresponding grounding in Biblical revelation and theological understanding.

Ignatian spirituality pays a lot of attention to desire. In contrast to Protestant inclinations, natural human longing is considered a resource for spiritual growth by Ignatius. The fall from grace, instead of totally ruining human nature, has only wounded it.\textsuperscript{97} This is a fundamental theological difference between Catholics and Protestants; Lutherans especially. In Ignatian spirituality, natural desires are to be welcomed and discerned. If a person has made a fundamental commitment to seek

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{94} Gallagher, \textit{The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living} (New York: Crossroad, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{95} Gallagher uses Ignatius’s own words to describe the phenomenon. Consolation is described as: “When the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord... when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all... when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord...and every increase of hope, faith, and charity and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things.” Ibid., 52-57.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., xvii.
\item \textsuperscript{97} This view is expressed in the thought of Aquinas, who says that grace perfects nature. Luther posited a more radical juxtaposition of grace and nature.
\end{itemize}
God though Christ, they can trust that by following their deepest consolations, they will move closer to God’s will and fulfillment for their lives.

In Ignatian spirituality, we observe our experience in order to notice and respond to God’s presence. Since our experience is mixed or “over-determined” and since it also includes the presence of sin or the “enemy of our human nature” as Ignatius called it, we need some means of discerning the voice of God. Ignatian spirituality understands the complexity of religious experience and offers a well structured means of discernment. The exercises are grounded in the life of Christ as revealed in scripture and invite the engagement of the whole spectrum of human faculties, including imagination, feeling and rational intellect.

**Summary**

To this point in the chapter, we have attempted to address the current cultural context and to define spirituality in relation to that context. Spirituality is the response to a natural God-given human desire for transcendence and meaning. We then sought to build a case for understanding Christian spirituality within explicitly Biblical, theological and ecclesiological categories. One must live within an interpretive framework; the idea of neutral, individual autonomy is no longer tenable. We described Trinitarian theology as the foundation for a Christian

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98 Barry uses this Freudian term to signify that each act and thought is determined by a plethora of motives and past experiences. We develop complex “schemata” through which we attempt to make sense of subsequent experiences. All new learning is based on previous learning. To understand God as “father” we necessarily have to move through our own experience of our natural father. William A. Barry, “The Complex Nature of Religious Experience,” *Human Development* 9, no. 3 (1988):6.

spirituality which is personal, communal, relational, historical and also transcendent. Spirituality is participating in the triune life of God and living that life historically in communities of faith. Internal conviction needs to be incarnated in ethical behaviour in the world. We then discussed the influential theology of John Howard Yoder and how it has unwittingly contributed to the problem of a Mennonite reduction of spirituality to ethics. Early Anabaptist spirituality as well as Ignatian spirituality were then discussed as resources for addressing this problem.

Something needs to be said now about what it actually means to have “an experience of God” or a “connection to the vine.” What does this actually look and feel like in the lives of my parishioners? How are men experiencing God? The purpose of this qualitative research is to find an answer to this question and then to reflect theologically on the findings. For now we present some initial theoretical understandings and hypotheses.

2.4 Cultivating a Congregational Awareness and Practice

Obstacles

In everyday pastoral practice I am aware of several obstacles that make it challenging to cultivate Trinitarian, Anabaptist spiritual experience and practice.

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100 This was not Yoder’s intent. See note 74.
**Problem of God**

First of all, many people in my congregation express fundamental doubts about the existence of a transcendent God who can intervene within history. The modernist, scientific, historical paradigm casts doubt on all claims that cannot be verified with concrete evidence and logic. Popular theologians like Marcus Borg seek to overcome this tension by referring to the truths of the Bible as “metaphors.” The resurrection of Christ, since it cannot be explained scientifically, becomes a metaphor for new beginnings and possibilities. While helpful in some ways, this approach relativizes the truth claims of Christianity making it more difficult to persevere in the spiritual path. Borg says that if he had been born in another culture, he would have grown up in another religious tradition and that would have been fine as well.\(^{101}\) All truths are valid. When one embraces the impossibility of a transcendent God intervening within history in definitive ways, religion is reduced to a set of cultural metaphors. It is difficult in the end to allow metaphors to have an existential claim on one’s life. Who is willing to make sacrifices for a metaphor?

**Spirituality as Elitist**

It is fairly common to understand religious or spiritual experience as belonging to the realm of the unusual or extraordinary. In the evangelical world, it is common to hear stories of crisis conversions where God intervened and people’s lives were changed dramatically. In the charismatic traditions, spiritual experience

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\(^{101}\) Borg says he does not believe that God cares whether we are Jewish, Christian or Muslim. All are acceptable paths; one’s religion is determined primarily by their culture. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 223.
is often equated with supernatural manifestations such as words of knowledge, physical healings or speaking in tongues. In the mystical tradition, spiritual experience has often been associated with monks, nuns or solitary ascetics who report strange and wonderful experiences of union with the divine. Unfortunately, these stereotypes can discourage average people from believing that they too can have a personal experience of God.

*Psychology and Spirituality*

If a person believes that the transcendent God is present within ordinary experience, the central question becomes one of discernment. What is of God and what is not? This is a complex question that may inhibit many people, especially men, from actively pursuing spiritual practice and conversation. The whole area seems so “subjective” and unclear. People in my congregation are generally skeptical of those who speak self-assuredly about what God has revealed to them. The question of many, myself included, is: “Was this really God speaking to me or was it just me imagining how God might speak to me?” Even after significant prayer experiences during a year of Ignatian exercises, this question continued to bother me. Did I really experience the presence of Christ, or was it just my imagination? I was pleased to see this concern echoed by William Barry, who has written extensively on the subject:

Recently, on a retreat, I felt that Jesus was telling me something very important for our relationship. The only trouble was that he sounded like me, in the sense that he seemed to have the same kind
of sense of humor.102

For rationally minded, educated professionals, spiritual experience and testimony can sound dangerously self-indulgent. Such questions must be addressed within the congregation if one wishes to encourage spiritual reflection and practice.

It must be said that just as no theological outlook is objective, so too, no experience of God or anything else is objective. We are embedded within language, culture and the natural world in which we live. Even though we are supposedly entering the post-modern period, the modern assumption still exists that emotional or spiritual experience can be measured against some rational, objective criteria. We need to clearly understand that there is no neutral, objective position from which to make judgments. At the same time, experiences are not entirely subjective either. Each human experience is an encounter between something that exists and human consciousness.103 All experience has multiple layers and dimensions. God does not reveal God’s self outside the bounds of nature, human psychology and sociology. Historical existence is one dimension of Trinitarian revelation. Therefore it is normal and unavoidable that religious experience contains elements of the psychological and personal. It is unrealistic to expect

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103 Barry says that even the most so-called “subjective” hallucination happens to a person who is encountering the air, the ground and the forces of gravity and that these “objective” conditions impinge on the experience. On the other hand, so called “objective” scientists are only able to see what they are prepared to see. Human reality is both/and. Barry cites the philosophy of John Smith and John MacMurray to make this point. Barry, Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Inquiry (New York Paulist Press, 1992), 22.
spiritual experiences to be completely alien from our known world and history.\textsuperscript{104} In the end there is no way to prove or disprove an experience of God. Such experiences are received and interpreted in faith. This is the case of all human experience – there is no outside objective criterion for judgment.

\textit{Ethical Orientation: “Should” As Opposed to “Is”}

The Mennonite tendency has been to focus more on how life \textit{should} be than on how it actually \textit{is}. John Howard Yoder was known for his phrase, “an ‘is’ does not make for an ‘ought’.” While true on one level, my thesis regarding spirituality is that unless we look more carefully at what actually \textit{is}, we will be less able to allow God to move us to what \textit{ought} to be. Our focus on the ethical command to “follow Jesus” has tended to suppress our attention to human nature and desire. We often talk the language of ethical discipleship without taking time to observe carefully how we are actually living. We fear perhaps that as we explore the reality of our lives we will encounter ambiguity. Instead of probing deeper, we are tempted to remain on the surface. Human beings are motivated more by desire than by reason or ethical command.\textsuperscript{105} If we are to truly follow Jesus, we will have to get in touch with our

\textsuperscript{104} Earlier I stated how the thinking of Karl Barth has been important in my theological formation. Barth is often accused of pitting the strange revelation of God in scripture against the more ordinary revelation of God in nature. I do not understand Barth as promoting an inseparable divide. I see him as rejecting the modernist notion of an external, neutral criterion upon which divine revelation can be judged. The revelation in Scripture could not be totally alien to human experience and nature or we would have no possibility of understanding it. Certainly there are connections and analogies to be made. What Barth was guarding against was the human tendency to want to control or limit God by means of natural analogies.

\textsuperscript{105} The notion of human desire has received renewed attention in various philosophical and theological critiques of modernity. James K.A. Smith, in \textit{Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation} (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 39-73 draws on French postmodern philosophy and the thought of Charles Taylor to say that we are driven primarily by
desire to do so or pray to receive this desire. Christian ethics must flow from a relationship of love and not only from an external standard. Discipleship will have to be an attractive vision because we cannot will our way to obedience on the basis of duty alone.

**Individualism**

Over the last three decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in spirituality and the ministry of spiritual guidance or direction. This corresponds with the “turn to experience” in both contemporary culture and Christian theology. Institutions in general and religious institutions in particular have come under increasing scrutiny and critique. Just as people are less willing to trust politicians, they are less willing to trust what religious authorities say about God. They want to experience God for themselves and make their own decisions. This desire has been fueled in great measure by the access to information that technology has provided.

As part of a general flourishing of spiritual interest over these last decades, the Catholic church has made an effort to provide the resources of its tradition to the wider public. A good example of this phenomenon is the ministry of Loyola House in Guelph, Ontario. John English and John Veltri, among others have translated the Ignatian exercises into language more acceptable to Catholic laypeople and non-Catholics as well. They have trained many laypeople in the practice of spiritual direction and the result is that the Ignatian method has become known and adopted

love. He’s not only referring to love in the sense of a feeling, but love in the sense of what we ultimately desire and long for, that which we seek and ultimately worship. Another helpful book is Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* (London: Darton, 2001).
by many people less familiar with its Biblical and theological roots. Now many
spiritual directors practice some form of this discernment without a strong
connection to Christian community and tradition. In many instances it has become
another form of discerning “what’s right and meaningful for me.”

As a Mennonite, I have benefited greatly from the Jesuit mission to share its
spirituality with a wider audience. I am concerned, however, that much of the
spiritual direction practiced today tends to follow an individual, therapeutic model
which does not specifically encourage accountable relationships within one’s
congregation or parish. As Catholic retreat centres have sought to open up their
wisdom and practices to Protestants and the general public, they have tended to
downplay the ecclesiological grounding of the tradition. Is this the movement of
the Spirit in our age? It may be. But it also may be more a function of North
American cultural preference.

My vision is to see practices of Christian spiritual reflection and discernment
taking root more firmly within the congregational setting.¹⁰⁶ In our Mennonite
churches, spiritual practice has traditionally been associated with prayer services
and Bible study. Even though early Anabaptism had more affinities with medieval
Catholic spirituality, in subsequent centuries, renewal movements turned more
toward Protestant forms of devotion which were concerned more with individual
salvation in the afterlife.

¹⁰⁶ This desire is in line with conclusions reached by Miriam Frey in her D.Min. thesis *At the
Crossroads*, 94. She sees spiritual direction as filling a need that is not being met in many Mennonite
congregations. She suggests that pastors take a more deliberate approach to encouraging the
sharing of spiritual journeys within the congregational setting.
Historically, pietism has had a larger effect on Mennonite spirituality than contemplative Catholic spirituality. In light of our early Anabaptist roots and the positive affinities with Ignatian spirituality, my vision would be to engage groups within the congregation in a more contemplative Catholic style of spiritual discernment based on personal life experience.\textsuperscript{107}

\textbf{Summary}

I have been arguing for the importance of personal experience in the spiritual life and also for a more positive view of natural human desire. I have also been arguing for the necessity of interpreting this personal experience within the bounds of Trinitarian theology which is rooted in scriptural and creedal tradition. When cut loose from a particular theological framework, personal experience and desire quickly merge with the individualistic and relativistic tendencies of our culture. I am attempting to articulate a mediating position between an eclectic, experience-based spirituality on the one hand and a doctrinally austere, rational approach on the other. Our personal desires and experiences can lead us toward God and bear spiritual and material fruit provided that we make the commitment to abide in the Vine.

\textbf{Engaging Men in Communal Spiritual Practice and Reflection}

I am particularly interested in engaging men in spiritual reflection. This interest comes in large part from seeing very few men participating in spiritual

retreats and direction as described above. Through my own informal surveys it appears the number of women giving and receiving spiritual direction is at least five times greater than that of men. One of the factors for the large participation of women in the movement may be due to their having been excluded from many pastoral leadership roles within the Catholic Church. Spiritual direction has become an available and attractive ministry for sensitive and gifted women. As women have predominated, so has a style that focuses on an awareness of feelings and relational dynamics. For whatever reason - social conditioning or genetic disposition - women generally seem more skilled than men in identifying inner feelings. Men tend to gravitate to outward realities and ideas. I have noticed that one-on-one spiritual direction is intimidating for many men, as are many forms of group sharing. I am interested in discovering new ways of engaging men in reflection on their experience of God.

Over the last three decades, there has been a good deal written on the phenomenon of men's spirituality. What insights and relevance might this movement have for engaging men in Christian spiritual reflection and practice in a

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108 I recently attended the Men’s Institute held at the Spiritual Directors International Conference in San Francisco in April, 2010. Brother Don Bisson from New York led us in some reflections on the male spiritual quest and we spent time discussing spiritual guidance for men. One of the points that came up repeatedly was that men tend to enter spiritual conversation through the process of thought rather than feeling. Several men reported feeling out of place in training programs directed by women, since the women’s way of emotion tended to dominate. The primary question in training was, “How do you feel about that?” Feeling was assumed to be the correct way to enter the process of spiritual reflection. Men were chided for doing things incorrectly when they entered with the mind. The important thing, according to Bisson, is to eventually arrive at issues of depth; issues of “heart and meaning” as he calls them. Whether we begin with thought or with feeling should not be the major concern. The point is to eventually arrive and engage both the mind and the emotions in discerning the presence and direction of God in one’s life.
congregational setting?

**The Male Spirituality Movement**

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a proliferation of writing on an apparent “masculine crisis” within North American society. One of the key authors of the time was Robert Bly. Bly was concerned that men had lost their identity amidst the rise of feminism:

> In the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call, the "soft male." Sometimes even today when I look out at an audience, perhaps half the young males are what I call soft. They're lovely, valuable people - I like them - and they're not interested in harming the earth, or starting wars or working for corporations. There is something favorable toward life in their whole general mood and style of living. But something’s wrong. Many of these men are unhappy. There's not much energy in them. They're life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. And why is it you often see these men with strong women who radiate positive energy? Here we have a finely tuned young man, ecologically superior to his father, sympathetic to the whole harmony of the universe, yet he himself has little vitality to offer.109

The 1960s and 70s was a time of social ferment in which many time honoured traditions were being re-evaluated. Male and female roles, sexuality and the “traditional” family were seen by many as outdated and restrictive. Social institutions and patriarchal systems of power came under critique. The civil rights movement highlighted the reality of institutional racism and the brutality of law enforcement agencies. With the protests against the war in Vietnam, one of the most masculine institutions of all - the military - was called into question. The rise in men’s literature in the following decades was directly connected to this ferment

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and to the rise of feminist consciousness. The world was changing rapidly and men were aware of losing their place. This was also the time of much philosophical critique of “modernity” with its commitment to order, control, progress and scientific certainty. The American philosopher Albert Borgmann refers to the “modern spirit” as a type of “masculine aggressiveness that seeks to break through ancient restraints and reserves.” Now that this particular way of thinking and being was coming under attack, men were beginning to seriously question themselves.

Robert Bly was sensing the growing crisis of masculinity and paying attention to the efforts of younger men to adapt to the changes. He felt that they were missing something; he believed that they were selling out to the feminine and that they had lost touch with their essential masculinity. He saw them as on the defensive, taking their cues from strong women and therefore “soft.” Bly’s call for a return to the essential masculine as articulated in Iron John, became a major catalyst for the “men’s movement.”

The men’s movement is made up of writers and practitioners from many fields. The American philosopher, Kenneth Clatterbaugh, attempted a description of the movement in 1990 and offers a synthesis of six perspectives. For my

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111 Bly is consistently mentioned by the majority of writers reflecting on this literature.
purposes here, I will deal only with his category of the “spiritual.” This stream alone is quite diverse. Joseph Gelfer, founder and current editor of *Journal of Men: Masculinities and Spirituality*, offers a helpful description of the various movements within the spiritual segment of the North American men’s movement.\(^\text{113}\) He identifies them as Mythopoetic, Evangelical, Catholic, Integral and Gay. I will deal primarily with the Catholic stream here.\(^\text{114}\)

The writer I am most familiar with is Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico who has been teaching on the topic of men’s spirituality since the 1980s.\(^\text{115}\) Rohr was influenced by the men’s movement and particularly by the mythopoetic tradition of Bly and others that relies on the depth psychology of Carl Jung.\(^\text{116}\) Rohr embraces Jungian psychology insofar as it provides an intellectual framework and bridge to secular culture for exploring the deeper issues of the soul. Rohr is quite careful in discerning the positive as well as the negative implications of such images. Evangelical writers in general seem to be less

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\(^{114}\) I am less familiar with the Evangelical stream which includes the Promise Keepers movement which was popular in the US in the mid 90s. This movement grew out of an evangelical/fundamentalist context and urged men to reclaim their role of spiritual authority in the home. For an interesting description of the movement see chapter 5 in Susan Faludi, *Stiffed* (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1999).


\(^{116}\) A key text in the field is that of Moore and Gillette which identified four core archetypes that connect with men’s experience: King Warrior, Lover and Magician. Robert L. Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).
critical of the patriarchal dimensions of the archetypes. He finds meaning in the myth of Iron John due to the light it sheds on male issues such as the relationship with the feminine. In the story, a young boy needs to find the key to unlock the cage which houses Iron John, the image of inner growth. The key is hidden under the Queen’s pillow. The Queen is his mother. Rohr takes this to mean that to grow into manhood, one must deal with feminine energy and particularly with one’s mother. He reflects on the ambiguity of the feminine in the lives of most men. It is the force that simultaneously gives men the stability and energy for growth, while presenting obstacles to that same growth. He speaks autobiographically about his own mother:

Right from the very beginning of my ministry, whenever my mother would hear about me getting into strange things like charismatic Masses or war protests, she would call me up and chide me for trying to be different. Why can’t I just be the nice, docile priest she had wanted her son to be...It is very hard to resist those maternal voices that do not understand or support risk-taking. I often see the same in other priests’ lives, not just in reference to their mothers but in reference to “our holy mother, the Church”... Holy mother doesn’t want her sons to be different, she does not want them to do anything that might rock the boat or tarnish the family image even if they are doing it to promote the gospel... In most male puberty rites the young boy must separate from his mother. If you think this is strange or unnecessary, witness Jesus’ action at age thirteen in the temple (Luke 3:41-52). I quote at length here to show how Rohr works with archetypal images. He speaks in reference to actual experience, and always in conversation with the scriptures.

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117 John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Waterville, Me.: Walker Large Print, 2004), 9. He claims that all men have a deep desire for three things: to go on an adventure, to be in battle and to rescue a beauty. The warrior image is prevalent in his book and he identifies in a positive way with contemporary battle movies such as *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*.

Contrary to certain critics,¹¹⁹ I do not see him promoting patriarchal values. He is seeking a way for men to access their own soul experience in such a way as to be transformed into mature and integrated men, with Jesus as their model. Rohr understands men’s development to include a deep respect for women and their own path of development.

The latest book on male spirituality from a Mennonite perspective was written by Gareth Brandt who teaches at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford B.C.¹²⁰ Brandt briefly reviews the literature on men’s spirituality and then takes issue with the prevalent use of Jungian archetypes. As a pacifist Mennonite, he is most concerned about the violent connotations of the warrior image. He quotes from the evangelical Mark Driscoll to give an example of the problematic attitude that the archetype seems to encourage.¹²¹ He is also concerned that the archetypes come from the realm of secular mythology and not from scripture. Brandt says the archetypes have their roots in the medieval era of Western Europe and the time of the Crusades. While true to some extent, the archetypes are much more ancient than he realizes.¹²² In place of Jungian archetypes, Brandt proposes a list of

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¹¹⁹ Joseph Gelfer in *Numen, Old Men.*
¹²¹ Ibid., 36. Driscoll wants to picture Jesus as a warrior with a sword and a tattoo on his leg. He says he doesn’t want to worship anyone “he can beat up.”
¹²² Brandt, *Under Construction,* 33. The author fails to take into account earlier history and literature such as the epic journey of Ulysses, the powerful Kings of Egypt, Alexander the Great, the lover of the *Song of Songs* and the wise men of ancient Israel. Certainly the archetypal images stretch farther back in time than the medieval period.
“metaphors” for men’s spirituality based on the story of Joseph in Genesis. The majority have a positive character and the book is certainly helpful for discussion in men’s groups. The metaphors, however, carry a didactic and moralistic tone. Perhaps without intending it, the book feeds into a Mennonite tendency to “be good” and to deny or repress the ambiguity that lies within.

Like Brandt, I am interested in engaging men on the spiritual journey, but feel we have been far too preoccupied with trying to be “good” instead of paying attention to what actually lies within us. In our attempt to be faithful, or perhaps due to a certain reading of Yoder’s theology, we move too quickly to what “ought” to be – we ought to be like Joseph or Jesus - instead of remaining present with “what is.” I believe that if men spend enough time reflecting on their experience, they will most likely encounter forms and variations of the four major archetypes welling up from within. It is a painful experience to meet the unintegrated and shadowy parts of ourselves and to have to admit that we are not as close to following Joseph or Jesus as we might think. This was certainly part of my experience on the men’s retreat in 2006. In order to take this journey, one needs to have a deep sense of unconditional love that sustains in the midst of disillusionment and loss.

An Assessment of Richard Rohr

While Rohr makes an attempt to bridge the language of Jungian archetypes

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123 Brandt’s metaphors are: Beloved, Dreamer, Wounded, Journey, Sexuality, Gifts, Builder, Reflection, Reconciliation and Legacy.
124 This has been Rohr’s experience. He says that all of the images he has encountered in his extensive work with men can be boiled down to “versions of the big four,” being King, Warrior, Lover and Magician. Rohr, Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation, 109.
with the scriptural tradition, his approach remains heavily psychological. He places a lot of emphasis on the inner journey, including the intra-personal relationship with the Ego. His work carries the therapeutic overtones of the new age movement that stresses freedom and enlightenment. He seems to consider the fundamental spiritual problem as one of perception as opposed to sin. The spiritual path for Rohr certainly engages the concrete social issues of the world but very little is said specifically about the Christian church and the local community of faith. These do not appear to be central components of spirituality in general or “male spirituality” in particular. Rohr appeals to a broad cross-section of men precisely since he does not emphasize church participation and congregational context. The “spiritual path” is not so much identified as faithfulness to Jesus within a local church under the guidance of Christian worship as it is “the way of transformation” or “living in the naked now.” Many of Rohr’s insights come directly out of his Franciscan heritage, but are re-formulated to speak to a diverse audience. Perhaps Rohr downplays the ecclesial context since he assumes it to be solid and well supported. These assumptions are not necessarily the case for Mennonite men and so I believe it is important to make the theological and ecclesial framework explicit lest the spirituality succumb to popular myths of individual choice and autonomy.

125 “Life is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we already are, but it is a self that we largely do not know. It is though we are all suffering from a giant case of amnesia.” Richard Rohr, Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 97.
126 His centre is named “Action and Contemplation” and includes environmental projects as well as contact with the community of Juarez, Mexico.
**Listening to Men’s Experience within the Congregational Setting**

How can men be drawn into the Christian spiritual life in the congregational setting? I believe the way must be non-threatening and able to engage the mind as well as the realms of imagination, desire and feeling. The practice should make connections with real life experience, men's psychology and archetypal images. In order for it to be Christian, it must also be firmly rooted in the congregational setting, and the Biblical and theological tradition. It is beyond the scope of this project to propose and test a particular spiritual practice for men that incorporates all of these dimensions. Through much consultation with my local ministry base group and colleagues, it was decided that it was most important to carefully listen to men’s spiritual experience and understanding before proposing a particular practice. Some hypothetical suggestions for future pastoral practice, however, will be given in the appendices.

**2.5 Conclusion**

At the heart of the Anabaptist Mennonite spiritual tradition is personal and corporate experience of the living God. In order for the church to thrive in her identity and mission, this experience needs to be encouraged and fostered. In God’s economy, apart from the triune Vine we cannot thrive. As a pastor, I am looking for culturally relevant ways of nurturing and reflecting upon primary experiences of God. I am also committed to understanding and interpreting our experiences of God within a Biblical, theological and ecclesial framework. What is an effective way of engaging average men from an urban Canadian congregation? Hopefully
some light will be shed on this question by listening carefully to how such men
describe what they perceive to be experiences of God in the congregational setting
and beyond. It is to this listening project that we now turn.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Action in Ministry: Listening for Experiences of God

The action in ministry was designed to answer the following question:

*How do men who attend an urban Mennonite Church experience God within the congregational setting and beyond?* As described in earlier chapters, I believe that personal and conscious experience of God is necessary for the life and wellbeing of the church. As important as this is to the life of faith, it is something rarely discussed in my context. What is the spiritual or religious dimension of the men’s experience? How would they say that they are “experiencing God” in their lives? This project is designed to ask this question of those in similar settings and to listen carefully to their responses.

The question includes “within the congregational setting”¹²⁷ because as a pastor, I want to learn about how such experiences occur within the realm of my influence. I added “and beyond” because I want to learn about men’s experience of God in all facets of life. God’s arena of activity is of course not limited to the church. My vision of the church is that it be a place to encounter God, and also a place to reflect on the presence of God in the world and in our lives at all times.

¹²⁷ By congregational setting, I mean worship as well as all other activities associated with the church including sports teams and social groups.
3.2 Research Methodology and Design

A Grounded Theory methodology was employed to facilitate close listening and theoretical reflection based on the data collected. In order to listen in depth, I engaged in individual interviews with a random sample of men from nearby Mennonite congregations. My assumption was that men would talk more freely in a one-on-one setting than in a group with their peers. This appeared to be the case, because of all the men contacted, only one declined, and this was reportedly due to an issue of time and not interest.128

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory methods consist of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves.”129 The goal is the construction of analytic theory that moves beyond mere description of the data.130 The method has its roots in the pragmatist tradition and was originally articulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their 1967 publication, The Discovery of Grounded Theory,131 in part as a critique of the traditional role of extant theory in sociological study. Their insight was that knowledge could be advanced more effectively through the creation of new theories

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128 The Ministry Base Committee and I were somewhat surprised at the willingness of the men to discuss this topic. I believe there would have been more reluctance to respond in a group format because of issues of comparison, appearance in front of peers, etc.
130 Charmaz states, “Thus data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct. Grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project.” Ibid., 2-3.
based on careful observation, rather than by seeking to interpret data through the lens of existing theory. In subsequent years, the philosophy and style of the two founders diverged, particularly with the publication of Strauss and Corbin’s 1990 text, which outlined systematic methods and matrices for coding. Much has been written on the similarities and differences in the approaches of these two founders. Charmaz critiques both for their empiricist assumptions and emphasizes instead the constructivist nature of theory and the importance of the role of the researcher. Theory does not emerge independently from the data; it is rather a product of social context, interactions and varied perspectives. I followed Charmaz’s general approach to the method.

**Selection of Research Participants**

Prior to selecting men to interview, a proposal was sent to the University of Toronto Ethical Review Board to seek approval to proceed. This approval was received on December 5, 2011. The recruitment process began on December 6, 2011 with a letter which was sent to all men listed in various church directories. An announcement explaining my research project and recruitment strategy was also

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133 Most texts have a section on historical development with particular mention of Glaser and Strauss. A good treatment can be found in the SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory, eds. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007).

134 “Unlike their position, (Glaser and Strauss) I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvement and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices.” Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, 10.

135 “Our actions shape the analytic process. Rather than discovering order within the data, we create an explication, organization, and presentation of the data.” Ibid., 140.
published in church bulletins on December 11 and 18, 2011. I explained that potential research participants may be invited to engage in one or possibly two individual, open-ended interviews on their perceived experiences of God. These interviews would take place in a mutually agreed upon private location. The purpose of the research was described as an effort to learn about their experience of God in their own words. It was emphasized that this research process was not a pastoral interaction, and was not meant as a test of faith or intended to influence the participants in any way. I informed potential participants that a perceived lack of experience of God is also valid and useful data. I was clear that I would be functioning as a researcher and would guard the confidentiality of all responses.

The men were informed that the names of all willing men, ages 21 and above listed in church directories, would be placed in a pool of potential participants. A member of my Ministry Base Group was assigned to randomly select names and approach these men in person, by phone or e-mail to see if they would be willing to be interviewed. Men were also given the opportunity ahead of time to withdraw their name from the potential pool. One man requested this. The men in the pool were informed that if their name was chosen, they would be free to decline the option of an interview without my knowing. When a group of fifteen willing volunteers was achieved, I was given five names at a time. I then contacted the men to schedule interviews. Of all the names randomly selected, only one man declined an interview, and this was reportedly due to an issue of scheduling.
Prior to the interviews, I provided participants with a consent form to sign which included more information on confidentiality. Men were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, at which time any data would be destroyed.

A total of ten, one hour long interviews were conducted between the dates of Dec. 16, 2011 and March 29, 2012. The process was stopped following the tenth interview when it had become clear that the thematic categories had become sufficiently saturated.

**Attending to the Role of Researcher**

My stated role as researcher and not pastor in this study could be regarded as problematic since my pastoral identity within the Mennonite community could be seen to limit or influence participants’ responses. While true to some extent, in the case of Mennonite Churches, this was not a major issue. The urban Mennonite context in question is non-hierarchical by nature. Ministers are generally not revered more highly than other members. Leadership of congregations is clearly in the hands of competent church councils. Pastoral authority is earned and exercised among competent lay people who are free to speak their mind. To mitigate the issue of my pastoral role, including power and authority, the representative from the MBG and I both spoke of the need for freedom and honesty and invited the men to withdraw from the study if they did not feel that they could be completely honest in their responses.
Data Collection

I conducted an open-ended style of interview that allowed the men to respond according to their own understanding and preference. I opened each interview by stating my interest in learning about their lived experience of God. I told them that I was functioning as a curious researcher and was open to whatever they wished to share. I then proceeded to ask about their own experience of God. As they spoke during the first part of the interview, I only asked questions for clarification. I let the participant set the direction of the conversation. Since I was primarily interested in their lived experience, I attempted to guide them back toward a grounded and holistic description when they moved into a discussion of speculative ideas about God. While ideas about God are certainly connected to their experience of God, they tend to be abstract. I was most interested in the actual events of their lives and how those events were interpreted. Ideas about God were also welcome, but I was continually looking for how the ideas were connected in a holistic way to events, emotions and relationships.

As the interview proceeded, I asked the man specifically about his experience of God in the context of his congregation if that had not already been mentioned. In several cases, I also asked about his experience of Jesus, as well as any habits or practices he engaged in to facilitate experiences of God.

All of the men were willing to speak at length throughout the interviews.

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136 Experience is a difficult word to define. I am using it in terms of holistic perception which includes events, their circumstances and one’s responses of emotion and thought.
Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed. Field notes on the setting and my impressions were taken immediately following each interview. Memos were also written during the coding of each interview and ensuing analysis.

**Theoretical Analysis**

The objective of Grounded Theory research is to move beyond describing data to creating interpretive theory. Corbin and Strauss define theory as “a set of well-developed concepts related to statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict a phenomenon.” Charmaz takes a more constructivist approach stressing that theory helps to understand, but not necessarily explain or predict: “interpretive theories allow for indeterminacy rather than seek causality and give priority to showing patterns and connections rather than to linear reasoning.”

The process of theorizing began with the coding of the first interview and continued by means of memo writing, identification of categories and interpretation of relationships between the categories. The description of the theory will be given in the following chapter.

**Validity Check**

In order to ensure that observations and the resulting theoretical description were carefully grounded in the data, a meeting was convened with the men several months after the interviews. All men were invited to come to hear about the results

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138 Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 126.
and offer their feedback. They were asked to keep the identity of all participants confidential. Of the ten men contacted, nine responded. All were willing to meet, but several were out of town and one had to cancel due to a last minute commitment. The meeting took place on September 13, 2012 with five men present. I described the process of data analysis and handed out a diagram depicting my theoretical understanding. The 90 minute meeting was digitally recorded. The contents of this meeting will be discussed in the next chapter.

3.3 Conclusion

The action in ministry has been described along with the research methodology. It is now time to turn to the results of the action and to the theoretical conclusions.
Chapter 4: REPORTING ON THE RESEARCH

All these years of thinking
Ended up like this,
in front of all this beauty
Understanding nothing.

-Bruce Cockburn, *Big Circumstance*, 1987

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research participants will be introduced, data will be presented and the process of analysis will be explained in detail. A theoretical hypothesis of how men experience God will then be presented.

4.2 Research Participants

As part of signing the letter of consent, each participant was asked to choose their own pseudonym from a list that was provided. Descriptions of the participants identified by their pseudonyms are as follows:

**Joe** - Joe is in his 30's. He grew up in a Mennonite family but has chosen not to be baptized. He comes to church occasionally. Joe makes his living as a craftsman.

**Mo** - Mo is in his 60s and is married with children and grandchildren. He is a retired professor. Mo grew up in a conservative church environment where his parents were fully involved. He attends church occasionally.

**Sid** - Sid is in his 60s and is married with children. He is a semi-retired professional. Sid grew up in another Christian denomination and began attending
his current congregation as an adult. Sid attended regularly for many years, but now only comes occasionally.

**Roy** - Roy is also in his 60s and is a retired professional. He left his more evangelically conservative church environment when he moved out of home to attend university. He attends his congregation sporadically and is not a member.

**Erv** - Erv is in his 40s and is married with children. He is a public school teacher. Erv grew up in a non-Mennonite church setting, but now regularly attends a Mennonite congregation with his wife. He is not a member.

**Ty** – Ty is in his 30s and teaches school. He is married with children. Ty grew up in a Mennonite home but has chosen not to be baptized. He attends his church occasionally.

**Tom** - Tom is in his 70s and is married with children and grandchildren. He is a retired administrator. Tom is of Mennonite background and has regularly attended the same congregation throughout his life.

**Bill** - Bill is in his 50s and re-married after losing his first wife to illness. He is a retired professional. He grew up occasionally attending a non-Mennonite church. He now regularly attends a Mennonite congregation with his wife.

**Cal** - Cal is in his 70s and is married with children and grandchildren. He is a retired professional. Cal is of Mennonite background and has been a regular attender of several Mennonite congregations throughout his life.

**Ike** - Ike is in his 70s and is married with children and grandchildren. He grew up in a Mennonite home where his family attended church regularly. He is a retired
administrator and attends his church occasionally.

Table 2: Research Participant Descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Baptism</th>
<th>Church Membership</th>
<th>Worship Attendance Per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Craftsman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Retired Professor</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sid</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Semi-retired Professional</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>Retired Professional</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erv</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>30-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Retired Administrator</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>35-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Retired Teacher</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>35-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cal</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Retired Professional</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>35-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ike</td>
<td>70s</td>
<td>Retired Administrator</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographics

All decades of age from the 30s to the 70s were represented. All men are married with children. One of the men is previously divorced and one lost his first wife to illness. All of the others have been with the same partner throughout their lives. The three youngest men are in full-time careers, and the men aged 50 and above are all retired or semi-retired. Only the men in their later 70s have withdrawn substantially from work and volunteer commitments. Administration and teaching are the careers most represented. All of the men except two in their 70s are university graduates. There is a representative mix of commitment to membership and attendance. While not designed as an exhaustive sample, the mix of faith backgrounds, ages and professions provides an adequate representation of urban congregations in the Kitchener-Waterloo area.

Initial Observations

All of the men welcomed the opportunity to have this conversation, even though some expressed uncertainty about the significance of what they had to say. In general, I felt energized and grateful at the conclusion of each interview. The men expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect on this topic. A number of them said they had not really talked about this subject before. At the end of his interview, Roy said with a smile and an air of surprise, “it was almost therapeutic...almost cathartic...” I felt privileged to listen to their reflections and grateful for their honesty. They were open about their opinions on God which would not be in line with the Mennonite Confession of Faith. They appeared to trust
me as a researcher and did not try to tailor their responses to what a pastor might expect.

The question about their “experience of God” most often elicited reflection on their background and childhood at the beginning of the interview. In many cases as the conversation proceeded, they moved away from narrative responses to intellectual reflections on their ideas about God. I sought to gently guide them back to narrative reflections on their own experience. In all but two cases, the men identified the faith tradition of their youth to be limited or problematic in some way. They found experiences of God difficult to identify and so their responses tended to be reflective and exploratory in nature. They shared stories and experiences that they thought might be “spiritual” in some way. Frequently they would say, “I don’t know exactly, it’s difficult to verbalize.” Their understanding of God seemed very much in process.

Of all the men, only two seemed to be comfortable with the traditional Biblical notion of a personal God who acts within history. Most of the other men expressed a deep uncertainty or disbelief in the traditional Biblical worldview and language. None of the men discussed their experience in explicitly theological language. Many referred to science, the questions it raised and the difficulties it posed for their understanding of God. The men displayed a commitment to intellectual integrity. They were not content to use religious terminology loosely or

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139 By theological language I’m referring to traditional terms used for experiences of God such as conviction of sin, awareness of love, forgiveness, conversion, Jesus, Holy Spirit, sensing God’s call, communion, baptism, mission, salvation etc.
unconsciously. If they could not understand something, they preferred to name it as unresolved. Except for two, the men did not speak of their experience of God in personal or relational terms. This difference appeared to be related to age and possibly to university education. The two men who spoke of God in personal and relational terms were among the oldest and had not been to university.

The majority of men described God as beyond their rational understanding. They described experiences of transcendent mystery, most often in connection with unexplainable and unmerited goodness in their lives. Throughout the interviews there was very little reference to inner dialogue and introspection. There was little evidence of struggles with personal burdens such as depression, addiction, anxiety and relational alienation. Sexual issues and experiences were absent as well. The experiences they shared were positive – enjoyment of nature, good health, meaningful work and the blessings of family and community. They talked about when they felt “connected,”\textsuperscript{140} grateful and in awe. Nature was a significant theme.

All of the men made frequent references to their desire to be good people and to act ethically. While they didn’t describe this ethical desire as an “experience of God,” it seemed significant and therefore related to the question.

\textsuperscript{140} Connected is a word often used for feeling part of something. The word is being increasingly used for social relationships. “Let’s try to connect sometime.” As a newer term it demonstrates a greater cultural sensitivity to the interrelationships highlighted through globalization and the natural and human sciences.
4.3 Data Analysis

The data and resulting analysis do not seek to make a universal claim about how all men experience God. Neither can they say whether the men are in fact experiencing God or not. Qualitative data are also not strictly empirical in the sense of being objective indicators of reality. Interviews are complex social interactions and susceptible to the phenomenon of social desirability; they may indicate the impressions people wish to give as much as what they truly feel and experience. The power of this research will be found in its rootedness within the local setting and in its fidelity to the data. The value of the study should be assessed by its methodological strength as well as its resonance and usefulness to practitioners in similar congregational settings.

1. Initial Coding

After transcribing each interview, I methodically worked through the text line by line, highlighting excerpts and assigning each a code or codes to signal content. As I proceeded, each new excerpt was tagged to an existing code or a new code was created to accommodate new content. Each excerpt of text was generally tagged with more than one code. This systematic first round of coding was done for each interview in order to stay close to the data and avoid importing pre-existing

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141 I agree with Alvesson who says, “It is important not to simplify and idealize the interview situation, nor to assume that the interviewee is primarily a competent and moral truth teller, acting in the service of science, producing the data needed to reveal the “interiors” of the interviewees (experiences, feelings, values) or the practices of social institutions.” Mats Alvesson, Interpreting Interviews (London: SAGE, 2011), 4.

142 For a discussion of credibility, see Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 18.
assumptions. By the 8th and 9th interviews, very few new codes were being added.

By the end of the 10th interview, 211 separate codes had been created.

Following the initial coding, I analyzed all codes to establish general themes or categories. They are listed below with the number of excerpts associated with each category. For a full list of the codes represented under each category, please see Appendix B.

a) Experience of Mystery and Goodness (311)
b) Local Church (181)
c) Understanding and Believing in God (173)
d) Spiritual Practice (168)
e) Values and Ethics (158)
f) Organized Religion (158)
g) Tradition and Family (149)
h) Intellectual Integrity (146)
i) Growth and Development (113)
j) Tangibility (87)
k) Difficulties (74)

2. Focused Coding

I then proceeded to re-read each excerpt associated with each category in search of a deeper distillation of content and meaning. Each excerpt was reviewed with the purpose of the research in mind: to understand men’s experience of God. I listened most intently for their lived experience of God, rather than for their ideas or theories about God. As each excerpt was read, it was re-assigned to the most salient codes. A few additional codes were also created to distill the essence of the

143 “Initial codes help you to separate data into categories and to see processes. Line-by-line coding frees you from becoming so immersed in your respondents’ worldviews that you accept them without question. Then you fail to look at your data critically and analytically.” Ibid., 51.
men’s experience. I arrived at seven primary codes or categories most relevant to my research question. They are:

1) Sense of Connection (SC) n=106
2) Awareness of Unmerited Goodness (AUG) n=90
3) Ethical Desire (ED) n=78
4) Awe (A) n=62
5) Trust in Non-Malicious Universe (T) n=37
6) Awareness of Need (AN) n=32
7) Reverence (R) n=17

I present them here in turn:

**Sense of Connection**

There are two main aspects to the men’s experience of connection: being connected and wanting to connect. The predominant tone in the interviews was a sense of blessing and gratitude for “being connected.” Ty speaks of the sense of connection he felt at summer camp as a child:

I remember going to grandparents camp or family camp when you were a kid and then going to camp with other kids from all over. So that you know community and singing the typical church camp songs, the camp fire. There is something very special about that, and very spiritual about that...

Bill speaks of the sense of connection he experiences at church. During his youth, he did not attend church regularly. He experiences God through the people in his current congregation:
And I also sort of picture or experience God through the people around too. The people that are there, you sense everyone’s sort of uniqueness and everybody has something to offer. So there is that, I kind of view that as being part of God’s work as well, or how I might experience God.

Erv spoke about the connection that he feels with his students:

Like I feel that teaching for me is a pretty potent experience in a lot of ways like a fulfilling thing. It’s something I feel like I’ve been able to connect with a lot of kids over the years and that to me is a very important gift...

Roy describes a mystical experience he had alone on the river in a canoe. He felt a deep sense of connection to nature: “Elation, connection, meaning, everything I thought I needed was right there…”

While the “Sense of Connection” was mostly described in terms of gratitude for being connected to nature and other people, there were also elements in this category that spoke of “wanting to connect.” This was expressed both in terms of personal need and an ethical desire to honour connection with others and the environment. When Ike moved to a big city as a young adult, he experienced the shallowness of the business culture in his work environment. He lamented the fact that people seemed only to be interested in sports and celebrities. He realized his need for a deeper connection with people who were interested in world issues and politics. This is what eventually led him to re-connect to a church community and pursue membership and baptism. Following the death of his wife, Bill was aware of his need for support and connection to other people. He reached out to a colleague who had also lost a spouse and who was interested in the “spiritual side”
of life. When Tom was younger he experienced some bullying. He spoke about his need for a supportive family and church community at that time.

The men also felt an ethical desire to honour connections. Cal feels an ethical desire to serve the church community that he is a part of. He spoke of taking on committee tasks as a new young adult attendee:

I guess the best way to say it is you give your life to Christ and you step out in faith. And when you're asked to do something for the church for part of your Christian experience, you do it by faith. You know, it's like stepping out into the unknown and I sure did a lot of that.

Joe feels a strong ethical passion to honour the connections that we have with the environment:

We recycle Kleenex boxes, I tear out the plastic liner ... and the green bin thing is amazing. There was an article in the newspaper a while ago about people not using the green bin because it smells bad, and I'm thinking, you know I just want to punch people! Because like, come on! Pull your head out of your posterior here for a minute. Let's think about the long-term implications of this!

Mo feels an ethical calling to highlight the important connections between people, animals and the environment in his professional work. He feels it is his responsibility to educate people and communities on these connections. In most cases, the men express a need for connection, or an ethical desire to foster it because they have already tasted the goodness of being connected themselves.

**Awareness of Unmerited Goodness**

An awareness of unmerited goodness was an overarching response of the men in response to the question of their experience of God. It includes the
goodness of being connected to nature and community, but expands beyond that.

All of the men spoke of undeserved and unexplainable gifts in their lives. This was the most salient theme of all and penetrated most of the other seven major categories. Joe provides a good example of the tone of many of the comments:

I have been really fortunate in life like you know and I can sit here and I am going... I can think like... hell, we have got our house, it is almost all paid for... I have been fortunate to pursue a career that is crazy, enjoyable unbelievably fulfilling, satisfying... We have a car, we have good food to eat, we are phenomenally wealthy - not necessarily from a monetary standpoint but from a grand scheme of things standpoint...

In addition to the sense of connection treated above, the men expressed an awareness of unmerited goodness in the following three main categories:

**Nature**

All of the men with the exception of Sid and Erv mentioned their awareness of the goodness of the natural world.

Joe: we spent a lot of time in Northern Ontario at various cottages and spent a lot of time fishing and canoeing and being outdoors in a relatively pristine environment and that is to me the only evidence for the existence of God if you want to debate that. The best evidence that I have is the experience of our natural world.

Roy: in particular I find that nature that has been unaffected by man, or just landscape... I never feel more alive than when I am out there...

Others spoke about the beauty of gardens and flowers, about the feeling of being close to God while out on the water at the cottage, or on the Bruce Trail or in the presence of great mountains. Generally they did not theologize by attributing the creation to God. Rather they shared the feeling of transcendence and mystery they
have while observing nature. Most were open to considering nature to be spiritual in some way. Ike however, was not so sure:

I mean it is kind of cliché, but there is just something the mountains do to you. There is just a - you know everything, suddenly everything around seems so insignificant you know. It’s so vast and it is a bit like snorkeling on the... You just put your face into that water and it is an unbelievable world that is there. And all of these fish of every imaginable shape and size and colour. And so I mean it’s very affecting. It moves you. But I have never been drawn to describe that as spiritual.

Life Events

Many of the men commented on how various events in their lives have seemed to work out in their favour. These included regular things like finding work, meeting a spouse and also unusual things like being spared from an accident. Cal and Erv comment on what they experienced as mysterious interventions:

Cal: And I thought for sure we were going to have a rear-ender because I couldn’t control the car. But something held it back and we stopped. And my only comment was well we’re going to get down there safely. Because I felt that God somehow kept us from having an accident. God or his angels or whoever...

Erv: It’s not really logical...You just say you got lucky a few times and people do and you could have easily just gone upside down in the ditch and been dead too, but it didn’t happen that way. But I just felt like it was just not all pure luck; there was something else going on and I just couldn’t quite shake that sense.

Erv’s more tentative interpretation is most representative of the men in general. He experienced the event as unusual and had a sense that something else was going on. Unlike Cal, however, he was not willing to name this something as God.
Both Cal and Bill referred to the way in which they met their spouses. Cal understood his experience as an answer to prayer. Bill points to a mystery he can't understand:

But obviously if I hadn’t played hockey, if I hadn’t known G. and if he hadn’t introduced me to this group of hockey players I would have never known S. who wouldn’t have introduced me to K. you know and all those things. You know, how does that happen? There has to be some sort of something going on there, to make those sort of things happen...

Roy reflects on how his life has been “charmed” in so many ways. He knows that other people don’t have things work out so well and he also knows his good fortune is not due to him alone. He ponders it as an unexplainable mystery. In a similar way, Sid reflects on how things have seemed to work out for him in terms of new job contracts. He is grateful for this mysterious good fortune in his life. Joe is very aware of the gifts in his life including relationships with several clients who are especially generous. He keeps meeting generous people and doesn’t know how to explain it.

*Work and Family*

A meaningful vocation and family relationships were also described as mysterious gifts by several of the men. Bill, Joe, Ty and Erv all expressed their gratitude. Erv was most expressive:

Look at what is going on, like I mean this is crazy... There are millions of people who have not even near this and I can’t imagine not having them, so why am I... like I just...And that doesn’t even have to be spiritual, it’s maybe more of an outlook or a perspective of just really trying to be aware of how incredibly
fortunate I am to be in the place that I am with the work that I do
and what I have at home...

It was very evident that the men were not taking for granted the good gifts in their
lives. They reflected on them with a sense of reverence and awe. With the
exception of two men, all were willing to invest these gifts with some sense of
spiritual significance. The majority, however, were unwilling to speak explicitly
about God's leading or intervention. Biblical and theological notions of a personal
God, active in history, were problematic for the majority of the men. The majority
were not comfortable naming a personal God as the source of their blessings.

**Ethical Desire**

A desire to be good and to do good was also a major theme in the interviews.

In many cases it was clear that this desire was a response to the unmerited
goodness they had received. Joe speaks of his moral desire to create beauty in
response to the beauty he has received from others:

But anyways, I look at that band saw, and I look at that top wheel
covering and it is beautiful. They didn't need to do it, they could
have just stuck a sheet of steel up there but somebody said no...
this should be... this can be beautiful and I'm morally, in the truest
sense I'm morally obligated to make it beautiful. Why wouldn't
you? Like really why wouldn't you try to make beauty all around
you? And whatever that means to you, right?

Erv speaks of his desire to be more patient with his children. This desire comes in
part out of his awareness of the gift of his family:

And I'm really working on trying to step back from getting too
immersed in the minutia of everyday aggravations and trying to
really be someone who can say wow, look what we have, look
what I have, like why am I mad right now because you spilled your milk?

Tom spoke about his concern for the state of the environment while he reflected on the beauty of his garden. Sid spoke of his desire to be a better person in the context of being grateful for his relationships. Ty spoke about wanting to pass on to his children and students the good values that he had been taught by his family and church community.

In other instances the ethical desire seemed to arise out of an experience of suffering or loss. Bill’s style of teaching changed after his wife passed away:

I don’t think I really thought about it to be honest, until like I said like after my wife’s death. Then I think I became more aware of valuing the goodness that was in every individual student you know what I mean, realizing that they all, even if they don’t appear so, they are all children of God and they are all worthy and they all have something to offer.

Tom decided to give money to an agency that was helping children with disabilities in poorer countries, in part because he had suffered with this same condition himself. Cal explained his desire to refrain from legal action in the midst of a difficult employment issue.

At other times the ethical desire was present without an apparent connection to experiences of goodness or difficulty. It seemed to simply be part of the men's constitution. As a teen, Bill stopped going to church because he saw a gap between the actual lifestyle of so-called Christians and their belief. From early on, he was convinced that being a Christian meant living an ethical life. Mo expressed his ethical understanding of gospel: “...by their fruits shall you know
them and so if people are doing good things then they must have the kind of faith that is a good kind of faith right?” Sid expresses strong ethical values, even though he has given up on orthodox Christian faith:

I guess right now I am living without the fear. I am living without the fear of death or the fear that there is nothing after death which gets back to my point...If this is all there is then I had better make the best of it. I had better live the best life I can, love my neighbour, be patient, be kind, be all those things.

In general the men were uncertain about Christian doctrine, but clear on ethical commitment. Those who did not participate regularly in worship services demonstrated their ethical values by respecting the integrity of the rituals:

R: Well to be... to go through the process of communion I think you have to be identified with and you have to believe in what is being said and if I don’t believe that then I think it’s fake and fraudulent and sinful to go up and participate in something... Some people would do it just because oh I am a nominal Christian and they would go to any church and have communion but I don’t feel that way.

Both Roy and Ty felt strongly that they wouldn’t want to become members without being fully committed. They displayed strong ethical values of truthfulness and integrity. Sid had made a decision not to participate in communion because of the dissonance of his beliefs. Mo, along with some others, felt it inappropriate to ask for personal favours in prayer, due to a sense of justice:

M: I personally am not going to ask God for any favours because that would mean if God would give me a favour what happens to some poor schmuck in Somalia? They’re not getting any favours over there so you know I am already born with all these favours in North America so I am not going to ask for any favours other than maybe and I suppose I do this... is ask for strength to deal with things.
Ty was very committed to making LGBTQ students feel welcome in his classroom and was disillusioned with the church because he felt that it was less progressive on this issue than the public school board. Ike spoke about the crucial need of protecting innocent people in the midst of international conflict.

When asked about Jesus, the men spoke of him almost exclusively as an ethical guide and role model.

SBZ: I wanted to ask you about your impressions or feelings about the person of Jesus. How does he fit in or not? 
R: Or not... (slight chuckle)...um... He’s much more accessible to me than the concept, the theory or the concept or ephemeral concept of God I think because I think historically he lived and that he was a moral teacher and I do think we need moral examples and we do need to think and rethink what morality means.

Erv felt comfortable separating the ethical teachings of Jesus from the beliefs about his death and resurrection. He was committed to Jesus’ ethics, but expressed doubt about his divinity. Ike spoke of his respect for Jesus’ peace teachings, Ty spoke of his respect for the historical Jesus, and his uncertainty about the church’s claims about Christ. Sid had come to a point of rejecting the notion of the resurrection and divinity of Jesus, but nevertheless respected the values that Jesus stood for.

**Awe**

As has already been evident in some of the cases above, when asked about their experience of God, the men told stories of being amazed at the goodness they’ve experienced. Awe was associated with experiencing unexplainable
goodness in their lives. There were no accounts of fear or dread. Nature, unusual experiences, personal blessings, family, the arts and the goodness of other people were all sources of awe.

Bill was overwhelmed with the beauty and complexity of the environment on a trip to Costa Rica. Ty was in awe of the Georgian peaks on a skiing trip. Roy had an out of body experience in a cathedral of trees on the river. Roy also spoke of his awe in a scientific way:

R: The law of probabilities or just the sheer weight of the numbers, now granted you know we look at our present world and could the oceans exist, could life have come out of the oceans if there hadn’t been a moon to create tides or this narrow band of temperatures that we have. There are so many, many tricky things or the fact that we have blue green algae which created oxygen - free oxygen - because a stable system doesn’t have free oxygen.

Ike experienced an upwelling of emotion as he recounted a scene from an African refugee camp. He was in awe of the strength and resilience of the people:

Some of them were still arriving and they were just hacking out an existence out of this bush you know. And they were building little shelters and putting leaves on top, it was just unbelievable. There was a little baby that was born right there and ah - it’s just you know... the same kind of excitement about that as my daughter-in-law and son in Toronto and it’s in the midst of that...

(tears)

Joe was stunned by the sincerity and beauty of his son’s prayers. He was in awe that he could pray like he did without having been taught by his parents. Erv

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was awed by having two healthy children and a good wife. Two men were in awe of being saved from accidents. They had the sense that someone was looking out for them. Two men expressed awe at knowing people with unusual gifts for healing. One was aware of healings occurring through a mother-in-law's special prayers and another had friends who had been helped by an intuitive healing practitioner. This same person also knew people who allegedly had ghosts removed from their house. Both acknowledged realities that could not be explained by science. Cal recounted an awesome experience of being able to see the spirit leaving the body of a relative who had just died.

Several of the men also experienced awe through the arts. Cal, Roy and Mo spoke about the power of music which can transport them to another level. Tom was especially moved by a live theater performance. Joe said the following about his own ability to create art and beauty:

Like there are still times when I’m working and I pick up a tool and I’ll do something and there will be a... and there is a lot of times a “holy shit! I just did that” moment. Like in the sense of genuine surprise and a little bit of awe that somehow I have acquired the skill or knowledge or whatever to do what I’m doing. Like it, it’s astounding.

Joe was also awestruck by the generosity of one of his clients. Awe was experienced in response to good and unexplainable gifts in the men’s lives. It is very closely related to the preceding category of awareness of unmerited goodness. The following category is related as well.
Trust in Non-Malicious Universe

Except for two of the men, participants did not express faith in a personal God in the Biblical sense – a God who calls forth a people, a God who knows us by name, a God who cannot tolerate sin, a God who forgives, blesses, speaks and leads. They all, however, expressed trust in “something more” that holds everything together. They were not willing or able to define it, because it was beyond their rational understanding. Bill says, “Yeah, I don’t sort of view God as personal, in a personal way like God and I talking together or something like that. I think it’s more an overall encompassing feeling or experience.” Mo, like most of the men, expresses faith in an intangible mystery that is beyond words. There is a trust that this “universe” is not a malicious place. The trust expressed is more an experience of faith than a logical conclusion.

Mo: And so I have gotten to the point in my life where I actually don’t want to come up with a definitive experience of God or maybe that is the definitive experience of not wanting...of having this experience that there is an underlying non-maliciousness in the universe and I almost hesitate to say goodness because that implies what do you do then with all the bad suffering and so on?

Sid talks about having learned to live without fear. He can no longer claim belief in Christian doctrine, but he trusts that all will be fine in the end. Roy recounted part of a novel by Wayson Choy in which a young Chinese Canadian suggests to her mother that in addition to practicing their traditional Chinese religion, the family should perhaps join the Baptist church down the street “just in case.” Roy laughed at the notion and said he does not feel any need to do or believe anything “just in
case.” He has experienced goodness in this life and is prepared to face whatever might come after death. If there is a God, he believes that this God would be merciful and would not punish anyone based on what they did or did not believe, especially if they had tried to live a morally good life.

Bill, Joe and Erv all expressed an intuition and trust that there is a benevolent “more” to the universe. In each case, they express trust in a force for good as they reflect on experiences from their own lives. Events have worked out well for Bill, especially in the aftermath of a difficult experience of loss. Reflecting on this he says, “So I think often we see things in our lives and we say that was just a coincidence, but I don’t necessarily think it was a coincidence.” Erv, in a similar vein, reflects on his life and says, “It’s something I feel like, yeah, I don’t know, like again I’ve got this sense of something that’s not just well random chance...” He understands spirituality as this sense of trust in something more and says he feels content to have this trust without “having to define it any specific way.” Joe says, “There is you know... there is something else...there is something else at work... another force at work and again inherent to all of us despite all the horrible things that happen to people and people do to each other...” He believes that this “something else” is present with all peoples and cultures no matter what their belief and doctrine. Cal and Tom express their trust in God more directly and speak with Biblical assumptions. They did not raise the same sorts of questions or express the same uncertainty as the other men. Cal expressed his trust in God by deciding not to follow the advice of a lawyer who wanted to sue on their behalf. He trusted that
God’s justice would prevail in the end. For the majority of the men, an “experience of God” was a sense of trust that the universe is not a malicious place. It is a contentment with mystery and as Mo says, “that sense of being comfortable with a kind of radical openness.”

**Awareness of Need**

In reflecting on their experiences of God, the men’s awareness of their own need came up as well as awareness of the needs of others. None of them spoke of sin in the traditional sense of the word. In general the men talked more about their own vulnerability or the vulnerability of others. Tom was aware of his age and declining health. He spoke of becoming emotional while singing familiar hymns in church. Tom also spoke about being bullied when he was young due to a disability. He was especially conscious of the suffering of others with this same disability and decided to make a contribution to a charity based on seeing a TV program. Ike became aware of his need for meaningful community when he moved to the city and began to socialize with his work colleagues: “and I participated socially in the accounting business world and it just wasn’t... It ended up being a big disappointment and so then I came back to the church.” Bill became aware of his limited perspective and his need to reach out to others:

> And I thought OK maybe I am missing something in my life. Maybe I am too focused on you know making money and getting ahead in life and all those kind of things. Maybe I need to look at the bigger picture here, maybe that’s not the most important thing. You know, maybe I need to change my priorities a bit.
Erv recognized how he gets wrapped up in the frenetic pace of life. He values coming to church as a way to slow down and reflect. He also talked about his need and desire to have more patience with his young children. Roy spoke of being able to share the “less savoury” parts of himself with a close friend. Sid spoke about sharing his struggles with his group of friends at the church.

The men were also aware of the needs of others. Ty was concerned about the teens in his class and their lack of belief and grounding. In a humourous way, he was surprised at his response:

but there is definitely I guess sort of an atheistic overtone of a lot of teenagers in some of my classes which I can definitely identify with. But you know, I find myself kind of taking the devil’s advocate which is ironic that I am using this for the fact that I am sort of arguing for God and why would God exist.

Ike was also very conscious of social inequities and suffering and had spent his career working to make the world a better place. Joe sensed the need of all people to be able to connect with nature, use their hands and express themselves through making things. Mo recognized the need of all people for non-judgmental support and acceptance and valued the church community as a place where this can happen.

Reverence

The final main category that I identified was an action or attitude of reverence. This was very much connected to an awareness of unmerited goodness. Joe spoke of camping with a group of friends and catching a fish. He invited all of the children to gather around as he prepared it for cooking. He experienced it as a sacred moment:
It just eliminates all the bullshit it does. There is a very pure interaction you know and there is a sense of reverence that I am taking the life of something so that I can keep going.

Roy had a mystical experience in a canoe and expresses reverence for what he witnessed:

and I went through the first arch of trees and oh - well this is a cathedral! And then a cardinal flew by and a blue jay came the other way and then another 100 yards a Baltimore oriole went across and OK. Almost like that was a message to me that this was my experience of the holy, or the supreme or.. it was an almost out of body thing too which was so into my face...

Ty decides to pause while skiing to take in the beauty of nature:

like Lake Huron is right here you know you are going to fall into it and you are way up and it is amazing right? And you see things like that. And I do, like I definitely sat down. I was by myself, like no one else was there. I sat down and just looked at it and I was kind of very much in the moment and thought yeah this is like really amazing.

Tom kneels down to take in the beauty of a flower at the cottage:

and you look at that flower and just a little bud on it and you literally stand there and watch it or even I knelt down to watch it close, and by the time five minutes, ten minutes at the longest, that flower comes from a little bud and you will see a complete and beautiful open flower. It opens up, unreal, one time.

Mo speaks of walking the Bruce Trail and stopping on the top of a cliff to survey the beauty of the land. Joe, who doesn't attend church worship regularly spoke of worshipping in a different way:

I hand cut all the drawers are all hand made and all the joints are all hand cut dove tails and I did that every Sunday morning for about 16 weeks I did a drawer every Sunday morning. And I joked with her you know "I am going to woodworking church"
and it was you know she laughed and you know there was an element to that that was very truthful.

In one way or another all of the men expressed respect or reverence for the goodness of nature, other people and gifts they had received.

3. Theoretical Analysis

How do these men say they experience God? What do the data reveal? For 80% of the men, “God” was an undefined concept. They spoke in an exploratory and indirect fashion. The core element of their response to the question was an awareness of unmerited goodness in their lives. God for them was associated with “grace” although they did not use that theological term. Positive awareness of nature, personal abilities, work, supportive community, family, the arts and the generosity of others was the cornerstone of the men’s “experience of God.” They all exhibited a spiritual sensitivity to the gifts in their lives. All other categories emanate in some way from this basic awareness.

God is associated with goodness that is neither deserved nor explainable. The awareness of undeserved gifts or goodness appears to be at the root of their ethical desire to a great degree. In some cases, however, where ethical desire is evident, there is no direct indication of causation. It can arise out of an awareness of suffering as much as from an awareness of blessing. Tom decides to send money to a charity because he has suffered with a similar condition. Bill decides to treat his students in a different way as a result of his own experience of loss. Erv’s desire to slow down and be more patient with his children is as much related to his own
failures as to his positive experiences. At other times the ethical desire appears to arise independently. Ty expresses a strong desire to welcome and protect LGBTQ students at his school. Ike shows a profound interest in protecting victims of conflict and working for peace. Ty, Roy and Sid all exhibit a strong desire for ethical integrity in issues of membership, communion and baptism. From the data, this cannot necessarily be explained with reference to the awareness of unmerited goodness in their lives. Mo expresses the ethical conviction, “by their fruits you shall know them” which appears to arise from his own convictions and faith tradition and not from any experience in particular.

These observations lead to the conclusion that ethical desire stands apart as a perceived experience of God. The men did not identify ethical desire as an “experience of God” in the same way that they identified awareness of goodness. Nevertheless, since it came up with such frequency and was not always directly connected to awareness of unmerited goodness, it stands alongside AUG as a foundational element of what I’m interpreting as the men’s experience of God. The following diagram shows the basic theoretical relationship of the seven major categories outlined above.

(Please see Table 3 on the following page.)

*Explanation of Categorical Relationships*

In the following section, the numbered connections emanating from the two foundational categories will be discussed in turn. The numbers on the connecting arrows are utilized for reference only.
Awareness of Unmerited Goodness

1) In many instances, it is the AUG that appears to give rise to ED. Awareness of the goodness of life inspires the men to want to care and contribute. The support that the men have received through community and friendships provides the impetus to be supportive and helpful to others. Had Cal not experienced the goodness of a welcoming church community in his childhood and young adult years, he may not have been willing to step out in faith to serve when there was a need in the church. It was most probably Ty's experience of a solid and supportive family and church community that enabled him to notice the lack of this resource in the lives of his high school students. Sid wants to be more patient and kind because of the kindness he has experienced from his friends and church community. Joe’s awareness of the gift and beauty of wood leads him to work hard to preserve this beauty in his craft:

You know I remember this board that I used to make this table and you know it was a crappy looking board and it was a tree...It was a living thing at one point and it is no longer a living thing and it is now in my possession and it is my I feel a moral sense of responsibility to not screw it up!

Erv’s awareness of the gift of family leads him to want to be more patient with his children.

2) AUG and SC are mutually related because the awareness of goodness is often experienced as a sense of connection. The men spoke repeatedly about the goodness of being “connected” to nature, family, meaningful work and friendships. They also experienced a mysterious and benevolent “connection” between various
Table 3. Diagram of Relationships Amongst Categories
events in their lives, such as meeting a spouse, being saved from an accident or finding meaningful work. They described a sense of "someone looking out for them" or "something holding everything together."

3) Experiences of awe and amazement were in direct relation to AUG. It was the awareness of beauty or generosity or personal opportunity that caused feelings of genuine amazement. Cal is amazed at the beauty of the singing in his college years. Joe is surprised and overwhelmed by his ability to use tools. Bill is amazed by ecosystems in nature and the wonderful interconnectedness of community life.

It is interesting to note that there were no experiences of the divine that caused feelings of fear. In the Bible, encounters with God are often accompanied with the assurance, “Do not fear.” The question arises as to why this was not reflected in this study. Perhaps the men are not expecting to meet a personal presence that addresses them directly. It is clear that most of the men in this study have been deeply influenced by the evidence-based epistemology of science. While believing in some form of a spiritual dimension, the majority do not express belief in personal spirits, be they God, angels or demons that can meet us directly. The men hardly have room within their worldview for an encounter with a personal divine being or presence.

4) AUG also leads directly to attitudes and actions which ascribe respect and worth. Tom kneels down to observe the beauty of a flower. Ty stops skiing to sit and contemplate the beauty of the scenery. Roy stops canoeing to merge with the
moment and uses the word “cathedral” to describe the scene on the river. Joe “worships” in his shop through working with the gift of beautiful wood.

5) Trust can also be understood as a response to the AUG. It is the awareness of good gifts in their lives that gives rise to the sense that “there is something holding everything together.” It is interesting to note that the men do not directly express trust in God. Most of them have unresolved questions about the nature of God. Since God is an undefined concept for most of the men, trust is expressed not in a personal being, but in a “non-malicious universe.”

6) AUG together with SC is also of at the root of an awareness of need in many instances. It is often a prior awareness of goodness that contributes to their consciousness of their own need or that of others. The men have experienced being connected to nature, friends and community and they recognize their ongoing need for this connection. Ike looks for meaningful community as a young adult in the city because he has already experienced it in his childhood and youth. Erv senses his own need for more patience in the context of his awareness of the blessing of his family. Ty is aware of the needs of his students due to his own experience of having a positive grounding in community as a young person. Sid and Roy are able to name struggles and unsavoury parts of themselves because of the experience of trust and support that they have with close friends.

Ethical Desire

7) Ethical desire is mutually connected to SC just as AUG and SC are mutually connected. It is most often the experience of being connected, that gives rise to the
desire to foster connection with others. It was due to his own connection with nature that Joe wanted to teach the children about taking the life of a fish. It was this same root experience that leads him to be an advocate for recycling and environmental stewardship. It is Ike’s sense of connection to a long communal history that leads him to want to build healthy connections with others. There are several instances, however, where the ethical desire appears independently and is expressed as a desire to build or seek connection with or for others. Erv describes a desire to “connect” with his students. This impulse seems to arise as much from a sense of vocation as it does from any personal benefit he has received. It was the crisis of his wife’s death that inspires Bill to want to connect with his students and with other people in a deeper way.

8) The men were aware of their own personal needs and the needs of others and the environment. Like ethical desire, AN arises sometimes as a response to unmerited goodness and sometimes as a response to suffering or something else. Often an awareness of need leads to an ethical desire to do something about it. Bill became aware of his desire to “wake up” and pay more attention to other people because of the crisis of his wife’s death. Tom responds to a charity based on his own experience of need in the past. Erv, Bill and Tom were really the only ones who specifically mentioned their own flaws or shortcomings. The awareness of their flaws was connected to an ethical desire to improve themselves.

Sometimes the ethical desire leads to the awareness of need. Ty is sensitive to the lack of community and grounding in the lives of his students and he wants to
help them. He is intentionally aware of the LGBT students who may feel marginalized. Roy, Mo, Ike and others display an ethical sensitivity that makes them aware of the needs in the wider world. Mo and Ike, Erv, Ty and Bill have chosen particular careers that allow them to contribute directly to the needs of others.

**Experience of God in the Congregational Setting**

The majority of experiences shared had to do with life beyond the congregation. In most cases, the men did not talk about experience of God within the congregation without first being asked. They commented most often on the following aspects of congregational life:

*Sense of Community*

For the majority of the men, communal support and relationship was an important dimension of church life. This is related directly to the category of Sense of Connection described above. Erv says,

> there is a lot of different things going on, ... if I separate the theological aspect of the church from the social aspect of the church, and I just look at the social aspect, that has been wonderful. I feel very attached to the community here and I’ve made a lot of friends and it is a very supportive place to be and that is just purely from and not related to God or the theology of the place at all, it is just kind of connecting with people.

Sid enjoys going to church for the discussion and the sense of community. “...it’s the environment, the people and the discussion right, that generally speaking, create a positive experience and a warmth, a feeling of community for sure.” Others described this feeling as well in relation to singing hymns together and discussing ideas in the adult education class. Ike finds it meaningful to feel part of a
community that continues to reflect on what it means to carry on a Judeo Christian moral tradition. Mo says, “sometimes the sense of church is just being with people who care about each other and who care about these questions.” He feels a depth of community when people are able to express their doubts within a worship context:

that’s a worship experience for me, because what that tells me is that this person is reflecting a sense of safety and openness. I can ask these questions here because I didn’t grow up with that. When I grew up a public prayer was not a way to articulate our deepest feelings. It was a way to have a 10 minute sermon without calling it a sermon...

Several of the men commented on the communal experience of singing hymns together. The most meaningful aspect was doing this in a group. It was interesting to note that the ritual of communion was not mentioned in the context of an appreciation for the communal aspect of church. It was mentioned by one man as a meaningful time of reflection on Jesus and what he stands for.

*Sermon and Adult Education*

Appreciation was expressed for the freedom of thought and the variety expressed in sermons and adult classes. The majority of men are energized by the invitation to think and consider various points of view. They experience God in an open process of discussion. Mo says, “it’s one of the few places where I think we can safely articulate those things; questions about God and about our understanding of our place in the world and what does this mean, without... and it’s best to do that fearlessly.” Joe says, “...to be honest I really don’t enjoy the formal part of church. I enjoy adult Sunday School when it is a thought provoking discussion.” Erv
especially enjoys sermons that deal with current issues in the world and in his own life. Cal and Tom both mentioned sermons as places where they think about and experience God. Cal enjoys watching a preacher on TV and prefers sermons that are practical as opposed to speculative. In general, the men spoke more about the value of engaging in dialogue than listening to teachings.

*MUSIC AND HYMNS*

Music and hymns were mentioned by the majority of men as being meaningful aspects of church life. Many described the experience of singing as emotional or contemplative; a different mode of perception than the sermons and discussions. Bill calls it a “release” and says, “the music can be contemplative like if its during the offertory or at the beginning you know and you can just relax and let your mind go again and clear and sense God around you.” Mo says hymn singing gives him the sense that “we are collectively doing something that is transcendent and it doesn’t matter how we articulate our belief in God, at that point we are all singing from the same page in the hymn book if you want literally.” Tom values the older hymns that create a feeling of comfort. They raise issues of mortality for him and sometimes he is overcome with emotion.

The most salient feature of congregational life for the men is their sense of connection with other people who care about similar values in life. They find it meaningful to engage their minds in exploratory discussion and they speak of an enjoyment of transcendence and communion through music and singing hymns together.
Validity Check

All of the men responded positively to the idea of a follow up meeting to hear about the research results and provide feedback. Five men were able to attend. The purpose of the meeting was to test my data interpretation with them to make sure they could recognize themselves in what I was saying. I spent the first twenty minutes describing my method of analysis and the resulting categories and theoretical understanding. I handed out the theoretical diagram (Table 3) and explained the categories, relationships and other general observations as was done above. One man made the observation that all of the men’s experiences were positive. Difficult things occurred in their lives, but God was always experienced in the good things or in the resolution of difficulties. He wondered about the Bible where there is lots of talk about the wrath and judgment of God. “Why didn’t this dark side show up in the experiences of the men?” he wondered. Another reflected on the disconnect between Christian language and the men’s reflections and also on the fact that the men spoke more readily of experiences of God outside of the congregational setting. This person then said that this confirmed his own experience. One man mentioned how the idea of connection was important for all of the men. “Yes,” agreed another. “Men come to church to connect with other people more than to meet God directly.” Another commented that it’s very “Mennonite” for community and connection to figure so prominently.

I asked the men if they could see themselves in the data and interpretations I was presenting. Without hesitation they responded affirmatively. One asked if
there is any literature on this topic. Are men different than women? I mentioned the Lutheran study on the faith and spirituality of younger men and noted some similar themes, one of which is the disconnect with theological and Biblical language. This lead to an interesting discussion about the issue of language in describing experiences of God. One man commented that language itself is a problem. It is always difficult to find words to express an intense and personal experience. He referred to how poetry attempts, but rarely succeeds, in capturing moments of transcendence. He then said that religious language is particularly problematic because of all the baggage it carries.

I spoke of my pastoral interest to seek connections between men’s experience and the language of the Bible and Christian theology. “Is the language gap too big?” I wondered. One man responded with a comment on Pentecostal preachers. Sometimes the language and content is beside the point. The Pentecostal preacher seeks to create an emotional experience of God with rhythm, cadence and drama. The actual content is less important. The question was raised, “Do we come to church to reflect on our experiences of God or to actually have experiences of God?” All men agreed that they were not interested in being manipulated into some sort of spiritual experience.

The conversation was enjoyable. One man said, “I think you’ve captured it well from my sense of things. I can see pieces of myself floating around in there.” I asked: “What was it like for you to talk about this topic?” Three of the men responded as follows:
I didn't find it threatening...For me it was actually good because it got me thinking. It kind of put me on pause long enough to think about this stuff. It was a good exercise for me to articulate this. Even if you weren't going to do anything with it, it still would have been a good experience.

It was just like you mentioned...difficult to put into words.

The more I talked, the more things came out and then after you were gone, I thought yeah, there's still more!

I then asked if they talk about their experiences of God with other people. Most of the men said no, and two said "occasionally and probably when we've had something to drink." The one said "only with a few specific people and usually after two or three glasses of wine."

The meeting confirmed the effectiveness of the interview methodology. Without being asked, one man raised a question about whether such a conversation could have worked in a group setting. Without exception, they all said no. One said, "It's a personal topic and you want the other guys to like you." The meeting served as a positive confirmation of the methodology and of my reading of the data.

**Summary of Theory**

The observations thus far have led to a theory with the following points:

- The men have a tangible spirituality. When asked about their "experience of God" they reflected on concrete encounters with nature, events and other people. They tend to respond to what they can observe, touch and experience in the world beyond them.
• The men are sensitive to the everyday goodness that surrounds them. They associate that goodness with God.

• The men value being connected to the earth and to others. They do not want to be isolated and alone.

• The men are very hesitant to trust what they cannot see and understand. They value intellectual integrity. They want to be able to explain what they believe in ways that will be respected by the broader culture.

• The men do not understand God as a personal being with whom they can maintain an intimate relationship. They find this concept very difficult to understand. This is especially true for the men under 70 years of age.

• The men do not have an active inner life\textsuperscript{145}, or if they do, they did not speak about it in relation to an experience of God.

• The men are ethically oriented. They believe that actions are more important than words. This is part of their outward orientation.

• The men are hesitant to speak about their own sin, problems, addictions, weaknesses. It is important for them to be seen as competent and in control.

• The men “experience God” at church through music, singing, community support, honest sharing and open discussion of ideas. Sermons are less helpful than discussions. There was little reference to the significance of communion and baptism.

\textsuperscript{145} By inner life I mean an ongoing dialogue with personal emotions, images, dreams, temptations and fears. Inner life includes conflict between different voices or callings sometimes referred to as true self and false self. An active inner life would include the desire to make regular times for reflection, journalling and perhaps conversation with a spiritual mentor, guide or friend.
The theory of how men experience God can be succinctly stated as follows:

*Men experience God through tangible signs of unmerited goodness in their lives and through their desire for ethical responsibility.*

### 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the research participants were introduced, data was presented and the process of analysis was explained in detail. A theory of how men experience God was presented with clear indications as to how the theory is grounded in the data. Further reflections on the theory including implications for ministry will be discussed in the next chapter.

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146 As noted earlier (note 31) this could also be stated as “The theory of the religious dimension of men’s experience...”
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

5.1 Introduction

The men interviewed for this study describe their experience of God (the religious dimension of their life experience) through tangible encounters with nature, people and events. They are sensitive to natural, unmerited goodness and experience the mystery of God in the midst of this goodness. They are also ethically oriented, demonstrating a desire to be good and to do good. They tend not to experience God as personal, and they are not inclined to describe their experience with reference to Jesus Christ or in Biblical terms such as forgiveness from sin, conversion, calling, discipleship or faithfulness to God's mission in the world. They exhibit a desire for rational understanding and a reluctance to embrace that which they cannot explain. They do not readily speak of personal sin or an inner life. 147 They describe a “natural spirituality”148 more than an explicitly Christian spirituality.

5.2 Reflection on Theory

The stated theory that men experience God through tangible signs of unmerited goodness in their lives and through their desire for ethical responsibility has been constructed from my observation of the data and is not to be considered

147 Paul’s struggle with sin in Romans chapter 7 is an example of the inner life to which I refer. 148 By natural spirituality, I mean a general desire for meaning, purpose and self-transcendence shared by all people regardless of religious tradition. See Benner and discussion in chapter 2.
definitive for all men or contexts. On the basis of the sample, the results are considered relevant for similar settings, namely urban Mennonite congregations of European ancestry within MCEC. The theory can further be illuminated with reference to the following social, cultural and theological factors:

**Canadian Culture**

The last three to four decades have brought enormous change to our society. During this time there has been increased focus on individual rights, diversity and inclusion. The adoption of the Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms in 1982 has been a significant part of this development. Individual freedom and choice have further been promoted and facilitated by the development of the internet and hand-held communication devices. Middle class Canadians have become more mobile and independent. Increased individual power and choice has corresponded with a growing distrust of institutions, both political and religious. Regular church attendance has decreased dramatically from the 1960s to the present day. In general, people are less involved in civic groups than they were in the past.

Greater access to information and travel has led to a more multi-cultural society. As one example, options in grocery stores and restaurants over the past

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149 MCEC stands for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, one of the area churches of Mennonite Church Canada. I say of European ancestry, because the culture of new congregations of Ethiopian, Hmong and Laotian immigrants is quite different.


thirty years have multiplied exponentially. Growing up in the 1970s we basically ate meat, potatoes and vegetables in our home. My mother considered rice to be a foreign food. Now we prepare Thai food one week and Indian food the next. More people are experiencing friendships with neighbours and colleagues of other religious and cultural backgrounds. Our awareness of diversity has expanded and this has been a positive development in many ways. One of the effects, however, has been a much greater uncertainty as to the truth of one’s own religious heritage and personal faith. How can we be sure about our own understanding of God when there are so many different traditions? Why would a person want to limit themselves to one community or to one way of looking at things? With the expansion of diversity and technology, the notion of limits and accountability to one particular community has become less desirable.\footnote{Robert Wuthnow describes the evolution of American spirituality since the 1950s as a movement from “dwelling” to “seeking.” He says, “People have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom.” Robert Wuthow, After Heaven (Berkely: University of California Press, 1998), 3.}

In the realm of popular psychology, there has been a proliferation of programs and books in the self-help field. As a society, we have been schooled in the notions of positive thinking and personal fulfillment. From the 1970s until the 1990s there was a large emphasis on promoting self-esteem among children in schools. Since the 1960s years we have been encouraged to think highly of ourselves. Attention to failure and limitation is discouraged. This has contributed to a growing unwillingness to speak of personal sin. It is interesting to note that the
men in this study consistently look on the positive side of life when reflecting on experiences of God. They do not speak of personal failure but rather project an image of wanting to be good people.

**Contemporary Mennonite Culture**

Since the publication of the Anabaptist Vision in 1943, Mennonites in North America have become much more willing to engage in the surrounding culture. This shift has also been facilitated by a migration to urban centres and an acceptance of higher education. The primary means of church engagement have been through agencies of relief and service. Since the 1960s the work of the Mennonite Central Committee has shifted to include efforts of political advocacy on issues of international conflict, victims’ rights and immigration. Among urban, educated Mennonites of European ancestry, there is a great desire to be seen as relevant contributors to Canadian society. Professional Mennonites are eager to leave behind their separatist heritage. Mennonite culture has changed significantly in relation to political participation. Over the span of a few generations, Mennonites have moved from being ambivalent about voting in general elections to running for public office. Prominent Mennonites have been involved in government consultations on peacemaking and in the promotion of the R2P doctrine, which allows the use of lethal force when necessary. Mennonites have

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153 Bill Andres, a Mennonite from the Niagara peninsula was elected as a Liberal MP in 1974 and Frank Epp ran as a Liberal in Kitchener-Waterloo in the early 1980s.
become well known in the field of Canadian arts and literature in addition to social service and advocacy.

The men in this study appear to understand their Christian faith primarily in terms of ethical values. In the current urban and professional milieu, it is more socially acceptable to describe one's faith in terms of ethical values than in terms of personal spiritual experience, or commitment to a particular theological understanding or worshipping community.

**Male Identity**

There is currently much debate in our society on the nature of gender identity. Is gender biologically inherent or is it a social construct? There have been influential studies on the similarities and/or differences in the male and female brains. It is beyond the scope of this study to probe the murky waters of the nature-nurture debate. Suffice it to say that men in general display some tendencies and characteristics that are different from women. In typical social and family gatherings of middle class Caucasians, it is consistently observed that men tend to talk about things, ideas and issues while women tend to talk about relationships. Those in spiritual direction ministry tell us that men tend to talk more about ideas than they do about feelings. Women are generally more sensitive to intra and inter-relational dynamics. Men tend to be oriented outwardly toward problems and tasks. This is not a comment on inherent nature, simply an observation on

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generalized behaviour. Richard Rohr links a lack of “inner awareness” in men to the biological fact that they do not give birth or menstruate. They are naturally less connected with their bodies and offspring than women. Being muscally stronger than women, they have been conditioned for millennia to go out from the home to collect resources. With major societal changes underway, these traditional roles are changing. Nevertheless, the outward orientation and the preference for discussing ideas and things rather than feelings and relationships seems to prevail.

The men in this study displayed a strong outward orientation when describing experiences of God. They refer to nature, concrete events and tangible encounters with others when describing spiritual experience. They exhibit a tendency to think about God rather than to relate to God as a personal being. They demonstrate an uncomplicated and practical spirituality which can be summed up as follows: “I have received many good things in life and I would like to do my best to honour these gifts and be of service to others.”

Theological Uncertainty

For 8 out of the 10 men, God is a mystery beyond human understanding. It is clear that the majority of the men have not been able to claim and integrate a Biblical and Trinitarian notion of God and the corresponding spirituality outlined in

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our Mennonite Confession of Faith.\textsuperscript{156} There were only two men who did not express significant doubts about the possibility of relating to God in a personal way. These men happened to be among the oldest of those interviewed. These two had not studied at University which may be a partial explanation for their lack of doubt about a personal God. University often exposes one to intellectual critiques of religious worldviews. Secondly, these men have been retired for the longest time in the sample and were of the generation that did not need to engage the information revolution of the internet in the same way as the other men. They represent the end of an era in many ways – an era where husbands worked and wives stayed home and where most people attended a Christian church on a Sunday. They have undoubtedly been influenced by the massive changes in our society, but perhaps not to the same degree as the other younger men.

The majority of the men wrestle with the very notion of God. Is there a God? Or is this “mysterious dimension of life” some sort of yet-to-be-discovered physical energy that holds the cosmos together? Can God communicate to us, or is God an impersonal, inner dimension of nature? While the Bible makes the claim of a personal God who has intentionally created the world and who seeks to redeem it through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, the men are not able to fully embrace

\textsuperscript{156} The confession is clear on a Triune God who creates, sustains and redeems. This God is known most clearly in Jesus Christ whose ongoing power and presence is known through the Holy Spirit. Article 18 states: “As individual Christians and as the church, we are called to be in relationship with God, reflecting the way of Christ, being filled with the Holy Spirit. We are to grow up in every way into Christ, who is the head of the church, through whom it is built up in love. We draw the life of the Spirit from Jesus Christ, just as a branch draws life from the vine. Severed from the vine, the power of the Spirit cannot fill us. But as we make our home in Christ and Christ abides in us, we bear fruit and become his disciples.” \textit{Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 69.}
this worldview. They prefer to describe God as a “transcendent mystery” or “indefinable reality”. While the Christian and Mennonite tradition upholds the Trinitarian understanding of God, the men did not speak of God in this way. One must ask: What is distinctively Christian about their spiritual experience? They express an awareness of goodness in nature and in the events and people in their lives. They want to be good people and act responsibly. These experiences would seem to be common to those of other faiths or no religious faith. Muslims are instructed to be grateful to Allah for his blessings and to lead an upright and moral life. In Islam, Jesus is revered as a moral example. My neighbour down the street, who has a nominal Christian background and who does not attend church nor profess a religious faith, would describe his worldview in a similar way. He is a sensitive person who appreciates the good things of life and who seeks to be a good person. Many spiritually inclined people in our society would say the same, regardless of their religious affiliation.

**Question of Christian Revelation**

There appears to be very little that is explicitly Christian in these men’s experience of God. What would classify as specifically Christian experience? By definition, it would involve some awareness of the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is at the heart of the New Testament witness. A Christian spirituality experiences and incorporates the Christ event – the paschal mystery – as the centrepoint of understanding and orientation. This of course happens differently
for different people\textsuperscript{157}; however, it would be difficult to argue that Christian
spirituality does not involve a relationship with Christ at some level. The majority
of men did not speak about Jesus Christ until asked about their experience or
thoughts about him. With the exception of three men, all spoke of Jesus in historical
terms and expressed skepticism about the church’s claims of resurrection and
divinity. Two of the three who did refer to Jesus as the Son of God did not speak
about the significance or meaning of Jesus’ death or resurrection. One man said he
found Jesus’ passion and resurrection to be very meaningful as he recounted seeing
it portrayed in a live theatre performance.

The results of this research call to mind the account in Acts 17 where Paul
preaches a sermon at the Areopagus in Athens. He was speaking to people who had
an interest in spiritual realities. Paul referred to an altar in the city with the
inscription, “To an Unknown God.” He then proceeded to tell them the specific
identity of this God. Paul was not satisfied that they remain in a state of uncertainty.
Paul’s passion, and the thrust of the entire New Testament, is to reveal the nature
and identity of this mysterious God through the history of Israel and the life, death
and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul called on the Athenians to trust in Jesus
as risen Lord. In some ways, the men of this study seem to share the same condition
as those in Athens. They express a deep uncertainty when it comes to naming God
specifically or to claiming hope and meaning in the resurrection of Christ. Certainly

\textsuperscript{157} For some it is primarily an intellectual understanding, for others a heartfelt trust. There are as
many ways of being in relationship with Christ as there are personalities and temperaments.
the current situation is much different than that of Athens since the men under study have all been influenced by a Christian culture and heritage which has been problematic in many ways. Nevertheless the pastoral task is similar in the sense of needing to find ways of communicating the concrete, revelatory content of the gospel.

Comparison With A Lutheran Study

The findings of this study are very similar to results from a 2006 study on the identity and spirituality of younger Lutheran men in the United States. The research was carried out by the Young Male Spirituality Project, a joint effort of Lutheran Men in Mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Eighty-eight young men between the ages of 18 and 35 were interviewed regarding their spirituality and practice of faith. The group of participants included men from four ethnic groups and six regions of the U.S. The responses were grouped into eleven major categories. Under the theme of “Spiritual Hunger” the authors comment on the lack of Biblical language and worldview in the spiritual reflections of these young men. Findings were presented according to the following quadrilateral, commonly used in theological reflection:

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158 I am referring to the way in which the mission of the church has been carried out with arrogance and disrespect for other cultures and religions. I also refer to how the church has allied itself with institutions of earthly power throughout the centuries, failing to embody the nonviolent ethic of Jesus.

159 Anderson, Hill and Martinson describe the eleven categories as containing “a mix of faith and life that shape their emerging identity and spirituality.” The major categories are: Relationships, Male Mentors, Crisis, Life Management, Work, Life-Changing Experiences, Nature, Sports, Service, Avocation and Worldly Spiritual Hunger. Coming of Age, 11.
Table 4: Interpretive Quadrilateral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCRIPTURE</th>
<th>CHRISTIAN TRADITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-very limited use of Biblical</td>
<td>-negligible use or understanding of Christian doctrine including Christology,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language, story, or teachings</td>
<td>Trinity, sin, forgiveness, repentance, sacraments; role of service as a Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>practice is a significant value for some</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONAL EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>NORMATIVE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-highly individualized</td>
<td>(Science, reason and philosophy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understandings and articulation</td>
<td>-lives are clearly influenced by a cultural and philosophical climate that focuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of what is valued and true “for</td>
<td>on the self, work, sports, consumerism, sense of honor and parochial concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me.” Significant influence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from personal relationships,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contact with nature, crises,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defining “nodal” experiences</td>
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The similarities of these findings to my own are quite striking. In terms of Jesus, the authors report that he is most often perceived as a moral role model. Most men had “little comprehension of Jesus as a transcendent or incarnate being - the Son of the living God.” The authors were surprised that this was the case regardless of whether the young man was active in a church or not. They described the spiritual orientation of the men as expressing the “cultural norms of being a good person and getting along with others without the critique of one's own sinfulness or guilt in relation to others or God.” In terms of Christian tradition, the young men were most aware of the command to be of service to others. This corresponds to the emphasis on ethical desire in the current study. It appears that many men in our

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160 Ibid., 167.
161 Ibid., 180.
162 Ibid., 166.
churches, likely of most Christian denominations, are more influenced by culturally approved generalizations of Christian faith than by Biblical Christian faith itself. 163

Anderson et al. conclude:

Whatever the final analysis, it is clear that the traditional language of the Christian church has not formed our 88 young men.... Their spiritual journeys and personal identities are, at the most basic levels, shaped less by Scripture and Christian tradition and more by personal reasoning and an assortment of personal, relational, and cultural experiences.164

In my interviews, I discovered that 80% of the men are conflicted or ambivalent about the specific theological and doctrinal content of Christian religion and spirituality. There was very little evidence of any personal relationship with God. Only 20% of the men reported any sort of regular spiritual practice and only one man understood this as a time to commune with a personal God. Six out of 10 attend worship once a month or less. Only one out of ten spends time in reflection and prayer with a personal God. Their spirituality seems to reflect a more general, humanistic paradigm. What are the implications of these findings for pastoral ministry? How might the proposed theory shed light on a pastoral practice that seeks to nurture a specifically Christian and Mennonite spirituality? It is to these issues that we now turn.

163 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers suggest that traditional Christianity is being “colonized” by another religion which they refer to as “moralistic therapeutic deism” as quoted in Anderson, Hill and Martinson, Coming of Age, 162.
164 Coming of Age, 164.
5.3 Implications for Ministry

The intention here is not to disparage the experience of the participants of this study in any way. It is simply to be clear in describing what appears to be a major disconnect between the Biblical and theological convictions outlined in our Mennonite Confession of Faith and the current spiritual experience of the men – both younger and older. What are the implications for ministry? How does a pastor work with men to nurture a specifically Christian spirituality? Do these findings tell us that we need to re-imagine or re-define the content of Christian spirituality so that it fits more comfortably with the apparent preferences of the men? Or do they suggest the need for a renewed effort toward interpreting our experiences of God through the lens of Biblical and theological tradition?

Two Approaches to the Crisis of Christian Faith

Broadly speaking, there are two major theological approaches to the crisis of Christian faith faced by the church today.\textsuperscript{165} One approach, the anthropocentric, places highest priority on the relevance of Christian faith to perceived human needs and questions. The other approach, the theocentric, places highest priority on the revealed truth of the Biblical witness and historic, orthodox creeds. The anthropocentric approach takes human culture and experience as the starting point when reflecting on God’s activity and will. It could be likened to a mirror – faith and

\textsuperscript{165} Stephen Bevans outlines six models of contextual theology which he entitles Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental and Counter-Cultural. Stephen Bevans, \textit{Models of Contextual Theology} (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998). They are determined by the amount of authority they give to Scripture, Christian Theology/Tradition, Personal Experience and Cultural Context. I suggest that they can be broadly summarized into two basic streams.
theology need to reflect humanity’s situation and concerns. Good theology is measured by its relevance to the pressing issues and questions of the day. The theocentric approach begins with what has been handed down in the scriptural and creedal traditions of the church. This approach could be likened to a window. The revelation of the Christian tradition provides a way of looking at the world and ourselves. It informs the questions we ask about our situation. Good theology always involves a combination of both perspectives. Theologians and pastors live with this tension, and usually tend toward one or the other of the approaches.

In the Mennonite world, the theology of Gordon Kaufman leans heavily toward the anthropocentric approach whereas the theology of A. James Reimer is theocentric in nature.166 In light of science and reason, Kaufman rejects the notion of a supernatural realm and the possibility of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He claims that traditional theological categories need to be completely reconstructed for the scientific age.167 Reimer on the other hand, argues for the relevance and wisdom of the ancient tradition and seeks to communicate orthodox truths in creative ways.168 In popular theology, Marcus Borg would be recognized as an

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166 Kaufman names his theology “historicist” since he begins with the assumption that God does not exist outside of human history. On the basis of science and philosophy Kaufman rejects the notion of a supernatural God and the divinity of Christ in the traditional sense. Reimer on the other hand begins his theology with classical orthodox assumptions and seeks to read the issues of the day through this lens.

167 Starting with the assumption that bodies cannot be raised from the dead, Kaufman re-interprets Jesus’ resurrection to mean, “a consciousness of the continuing activity of ‘the God and Father of Jesus Christ’ in their historical existence, not the resuscitation of their former friend and leader.” Gordon Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 429.

168 Reimer: “I do not believe, as Kaufman apparently does, that one needs to choose between the two views of time he identifies – the “ontological-eternal” and the “evolutionary-historical.” It is
anthropocentric “progressive” whereas N. T. Wright would be seen as a theocentric “traditionalist.”

Henri de Lubac, a Roman Catholic in the ressourcement tradition, expresses the theocentric view:

> the Christian who does not trust the fruitfulness of revealed truth, who consents to interest himself in it only to the degree to which he perceives the benefit in advance, who does not consent to let himself be grasped and modeled by it, such a Christian does not realize of what light and power he has deprived himself. Sometimes he even reaches the point of imagining he can no longer find any meaning in a hackneyed, “out-of-date” concept, when in fact he is dealing with a mystery he has not yet glimpsed.

As will be clear by now, I perceive the pastoral challenge to be a fresh appropriation of orthodox theology as the framework for interpreting spiritual experience. In line with de Lubac, I believe it is all too easy to become so pre-occupied with relevance and respectability that we risk closing ourselves off to the mystery of divine truth and presence. One must meet the men where they are; however, this cannot mean changing the content of the gospel to make it more acceptable. Just because it is difficult to logically conceive of Jesus’ resurrection precisely the Trinitarian doctrine of God that allows us to hold these together...” A. James Reimer, “Time History and Ethics in Gordon Kaufman” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatics Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 153. Reimer accuses Kaufman of taking the modern historicist mindset as the supreme truth to which all other truths must conform.


170 The ressourcement movement of the mid 20th C involved a return to the sources of Christian faith, primarily scripture and the early church fathers, in an attempt to modernize the faith and open dialogue with other religions and intellectual traditions. De Lubac was instrumental in the movement. The movement perceived the need for relevance and engagement with society, but trusted the orthodox sources as the means of engagement.

from the dead does not mean that theology should simply reduce it to a
“metaphor.” The pastoral path ahead is one of tension rather than
accommodation. One must give appropriate weight to personal experience and
culture, but recognize that their ultimate meaning and goal is found in relation to
scripture and the creeds.

Much of the emphasis on “experience” in our day is a reflection of culture
more than a reflection of the gospel. It needs to be valued, but from a particular
grounding of faith. While I argue for the importance of experience in the life of
faith, I am arguing for experience interpreted through the lens of God’s revelation in
Israel and Christ.

An Anabaptist, Trinitarian Lens

The doctrine of the Trinity has often been considered a speculative and arcane
concept of interest only to theologians. However, the approach of theologians such
as A. James Reimer and Catherine LaCugna, shows that the Trinity can provide an
eminently practical and dynamic framework for the understanding and practice of
Christian spirituality. It carries within it the paradox of historical and eternal time
as well as the existential tension of unity and diversity. It expresses the core
Anabaptist convictions of bearing the fruit of a transformed life through an inner
relation and participation in the divine life. Instead of minimizing the importance of
Trinitarian doctrine for spirituality, the pastoral task is to pay closer attention to

\[172 \text{ Understanding the resurrection only metaphorically underscores the orthodox conviction that in}

\text{Jesus' resurrection God demonstrated a definitive victory over evil and confirmed the promised}

\text{restoration of the physical, material world.} \]
how it helps to shape our questions and responses. LaCugna displays an openness to the questions of culture, but refuses on principle to alter the content of the revealed faith for the sake of an easier fit. She says:

In order to formulate an ethics that is authentically Christian, and ecclesiology and sacramental theology that are Christological and pneumatological, a spirituality that is not generic but is shaped by the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, we must adhere to the form of God’s self-revelation, God’s concrete existence as Christ and Spirit.

Rather than re-visioning God, her commitment is to adhere to the revelation that we have in Scripture and the classic Trinitarian creeds and let that be the window through which we come to understand ourselves and our world.

In order to work effectively with men in the congregation, one must seek points of connection and also address points of challenge. It is best to begin with points of connection and seek to build on these.

**Points of Theological Contact With Men in the Study**

The men display a sensitivity to the dynamics of immanence and transcendence, concepts that are central to the doctrine of the Trinity. They have a tangible spirituality. They speak about immanent, concrete things that they can touch and see. They are especially sensitive to the presence of goodness in nature and other human beings. This awareness must be valued and the pastoral challenge is to help them interpret their own experience through the Trinitarian lens of Christian faith. LaCugna stresses that God cannot be properly perceived “apart from

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173 See the discussion in Chapter 2 on a Trinitarian and Ecclesial Framework.
God’s works in the economy of redemption, or apart from God’s presence in other human beings and in creation itself.”

It is the life of God, given for the world, that they sense in nature, in community and in the events of their lives. God is not only a transcendent mystery, but also an embodied presence in the world. The concrete, embodied nature of God is seen in the person of the Son. While the men do not necessarily embrace Jesus as the incarnate son, they do show great receptivity to the notion of embodiment.

Their desire to live moral lives is also in line with the person of the Son. They all understand Jesus to be an inspirational moral teacher. They all expressed the conviction that beliefs need to be fleshed out into actual actions that benefit the world and other people. Anabaptist Trinitarianism asserts that God is not content to remain in the abstract realms of “heaven” but desires to become part of history in actions for healing and justice. The men display a deep affinity for this notion.

They also refer repeatedly to the sense of mystery and inability to explain their experience of God. They do not want to put God in a box. Mo says that anytime you seek to define God, the definition becomes too small:

It’s an experiential sense of God without having to say I am going to reduce that to the constraints of language because for me language is already a metaphor for something that we are trying to describe and that comes from my writing poetry and so there is a fundamental experience and you try to put it into words and some people can do it better than others but the words are themselves already a reduction of that experience.

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175 Ibid., 409.
He, like the majority of other men, sense the inscrutability of the divine reality. This, along with the immanent dimension, is a fundamental Trinitarian characteristic of God. The Father by nature is unknowable mystery. He has been known in the Son; however, since the Father retains his personhood, he still possesses an identity that can never be contained, revealed or known.\footnote{Reimer describes the Father as transcendent creator and mystery, "wholly free of our own moral systems including our own Mennonite view of nonviolence..." \textit{Mennonites and Classical Theology}, 287.}

The person of the Holy Spirit contains elements of the transcendent and the immanent. The presence of the Spirit is felt within, but it is also elusive, beyond explanation and control. The Spirit blows where it wills.\footnote{John 3:8} The men describe this awareness in their reflections. Erv has this sense that someone may be watching out for him. He senses a vocational call and wonders if he was spared from an accident in order to fulfill this calling. Joe has this gut feeling that there is something that holds everything together, but he cannot explain it. Cal and Bill marvel at how events came together to enable them to meet their spouses. Without referring to the Holy Spirit per se, the men speak in ways that can be identified with the tangible, yet unexplainable work of the Spirit.

\textit{Challenges}

Christology appears to be one of the main obstacles the men face in embracing a Christian, Trinitarian spirituality. The majority of men do not perceive Jesus as divine, as the living and resurrected Lord, the specific person through whom they can be drawn into the life of God through the Holy Spirit. The Son
brings a particularity which the men consider problematic. In Trinitarian theology, the Son reveals the nature of evil through the cross and offers a particular way of redemption through the suffering love of God. The Son also demands an allegiance as Lord which the men are hesitant to give. The men’s respect for other religious traditions, their difficulty in reconciling Jesus’ resurrection and divinity with scientific sensibilities and their general preference for “keeping things open” make Christological confession difficult.

I suspect that some of their reticence to name Christ as risen Lord may be due to overly personalized and literalistic understandings of spirituality from the churches of their youth. One man said he could not understand how God could decide at one particular point in time to “send his son down here to earth.” He seemed to think that Christian theology described Jesus as a pre-existent human being, waiting up in heaven for the signal to come down. He was rejecting a primitive notion of salvation without understanding the nuances of classic theological thought. Other men grew up in evangelical environments where it was taught that all who did not confess Jesus as Lord would spend eternity in hell. The men, while educated in business and science, did not seem to display a corresponding education in theology. For the most part they seemed to be reacting to the rather narrow formulations of their youth.

Another challenge for the men is the intimacy that Trinitarian theology assumes between God, the created world and human beings. We do not and cannot exist as autonomous individuals. We are radically dependent on God, nature and
others. The Trinity calls for a constant flow of giving and receiving. It invites constant submission to a larger reality. It involves yielding to a dynamic and living relationship of persons that can never to controlled. This is especially difficult for men to accept. LaCugna says,

> The *arche* of God is understood to be personal life; person, not substance is the root of all reality. The idea of a person out of whose womb the son is begotten, the fecund, ecstatic God who is matrix of all, moves us away from the idea of person as self-sufficient, self-possessing individual, which is perhaps the ultimate male fantasy.”178

Men, as LaCugna observes, often find it challenging to be inter-dependent and vulnerable. They seem most comfortable when they can understand something clearly and when they can do concrete things. Early Anabaptism stressed the importance of the inner and personal relationship with the living God.179 A key element of their spirituality was “Gelassenheit,” best translated as “yieldedness.”180 The early Anabaptists were very aware of the need to give themselves to God, through Christ and the Spirit in order to be of service. It is this vulnerable, relational self-giving that remains a significant challenge for men.

In summary, the Trinitarian framework is a dynamic and viable framework with which to engage the experiences shared by the men in this study. There are, however, significant challenges to address.

178 Ibid., 398.
179 See discussion of Anabaptism in Chapter 2.
180 Snyder describes the spiritual dynamic: “The disciples of Jesus will live lives that remind the world of Jesus, not because they are superhuman rule keepers, but because they have yielded to the power of the risen Christ in their lives. It is this spirit of Gelassenheit, of yieldedness, that corresponds to a nonviolent life, a life that refuses to insist on the forceful imposition of one's will in the world.” *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 186.
Ignatian Contributions

In addition to the theological framework described above, the Ignatian approach to spirituality also offers resources for engaging men in spiritual discernment and growth. The men interviewed did not describe “experiences of God” in the context of personal prayer or worship. They talked about experiences in nature, with other people and through life events. Ignatian spirituality is well suited to the men since it promotes the observation of everyday life. It avoids the nature/grace dualism that is all too prevalent in many Protestant approaches to spirituality. God and grace are active outside of the church and organized times of prayer. Grace is active in the whole of our personality and senses, drawing us toward greater awareness and intimacy with God. While the basic orientation of finding God in all things makes for a good fit, the disciplined intentionality and the invitation to direct relationship with Christ will present more of a challenge to the men.

In light of the research findings and the interpretation based on my theology of ministry, I have provided some practical suggestions toward future pastoral action with men in the appendices of this thesis. I have not included them in the body of the thesis since they would need to be tested and refined through further cycles of action and reflection. I offer them as hypotheses for future exploration.
5.4 Conclusion

The men in this study exhibit the classic elements of natural religious experience: gratitude for the goodness of life and the desire to be good people. They are largely focused outwardly on experiences they’ve had in nature and with other people. They display a spiritual openness and sensitivity to the world around them. They think deeply about life and value intellectual and ethical integrity. They seek to integrate the truths of science with their intuition of “something more” that holds everything together. Throughout the interviews there was very little reference to introspective reflection. There was little evidence of having experienced God in the context of struggles with inner burdens such as depression, addiction, anxiety and relational alienation. One might reasonably expect such personal struggles not to be raised in an initial interview. However, if the men had integrated an experience of God in the context of an inner personal struggle, one could expect them to make some reference to this. For these men, the question of experience of God generally brought positive, outward events to mind.

In this thesis I have sought to reflect critically on these research results in relation to my own theology of ministry. I have attempted to show points of contact and possible ways of addressing the challenges that exist. It is clear that there is no easy or obvious method for forming men in Christian spirituality. One must patiently seek opportunities for listening and for reflecting with men on their

\[\text{181 By religious, I mean traditional and ritualized ways of relating to the divine throughout human history. Most religions include some means for expression of gratitude and some type of moral expectation.}\]
experience in the context of a Biblical and Trinitarian framework. One must also be ready to suggest opportunities for engaging men directly in Christian spiritual practices and disciplines, though for many men, this may come later. Christian faith in the triune God is ultimately a gift of grace. It is not received through teaching and ideas alone. As pastors, we seek to do our part, but the growth and activity comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to be faithful to the Scripture and traditions of the church, to the people we serve and to our current context as we seek to witness to the gospel.

This study has changed my theological outlook in some ways. My general critique of Mennonite spirituality has been that it tends to by-pass the experience of grace by moving too quickly to the realm of ethics. Ethical values can become the substitute for a living relationship with the Spirit of God. Although my concern still exists, this study has helped me to see that the ethical desire is also a gift of grace. In the data, this desire seemed to be planted within the men and was not always attributable to a prior experience of grace.\textsuperscript{182} So instead of continuing to see it as symptomatic of a spiritual problem, I am now more aware that ethical desire provides a solid place to begin in spiritual reflection with men. This desire is planted within the men by the Spirit of God and reflects the character of God as exemplified in the Son, who came not to be served but to serve.

The men have expressed their experience in largely naturalistic spiritual categories, nevertheless there are clear points of connection with the Trinitarian

\textsuperscript{182} See discussion in Chapter 4 under Focused Coding point 3.
doctrine of God. It is the ongoing challenge of pastors and the church to embrace our Christian theology for interpreting our experience in the world. It is not enough for Christian spirituality to remain vague and undefined. We live within a story that offers good news to the world and it is our challenge in this time in history to continue to read our reality in light of this story and to live it with integrity and courage. The Trinity reminds us that spirituality is ultimately not about us and our experience. Our purpose on this earth is not only personal fulfillment and happiness. While the culture of autonomy says otherwise, the God of the Bible invites us to die to ourselves so that we can be reborn into a larger reality that exists for the reconciliation of all things. God invites all people, men included, to divine communion and to participation in the work of healing and redemption. God invites men to know Jesus Christ in a personal way through the power of the Spirit, not in order to become narrow and provincial, but to become authentically human in the way of Jesus. If as Christian men we do not consciously abide in Christ, this transformation cannot fully occur. Abiding in the Vine does not ultimately require logical understanding. It is more about tasting and seeing; participating with all that we are in the unfathomable mystery of God’s grace and redemption.
Appendix A

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TOWARD A RENEWED PASTORAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF MEN

A) INTRODUCTION

All of the men in this study expressed a sense of enjoyment in being able to talk about their experience of God in a safe setting. An initial goal for pastoral engagement, therefore, would be to seek ongoing opportunities for this type of reflection within the congregational setting. The atmosphere will need be one where questions and uncertainty are welcome. Attempting to teach doctrinal ideas in a direct fashion will likely meet with limited success. As a result of this study, I would seek to continue to reflect with the men on their experience, primarily in relation to the major themes that emerged: awareness of unmerited goodness and their desire to be ethical. A willingness to ponder uncertainties will be essential, as will a spirit of good humour. Trinitarian interpretive categories could hopefully be introduced informally and in an exploratory fashion. I would attempt to help men reflect on how God may be present in their experience as Transcendent Mystery (Father) Embodied, Concrete Presence (Son) and as Inner Awareness and Movement (Spirit). It will be the responsibility of the pastor or leader to raise points of spiritual reflection in a subtle and inviting way. There is an art to doing this well. In addition to ideas for small group settings I will also make some comments on worship, since this is an occasion where men are gathered for spiritual reflection.

Small Group Gatherings

Informal
Currently, the only organized gatherings for men in my particular congregation have to do with sports activities. In order to gather men together, one must appeal to natural interests. Could some sort of spiritual reflection take place in the pub following the game? Might it be possible, in a good humoured way, to ask about the spiritual dimension of the evening’s sports activities? What do you enjoy about sports? How do such activities nourish your life? Such conversation would only work with an appropriate level of trust and tact. Pastors, however, must make the effort to go where men naturally meet, rather than expecting them to gather at church for programmed reflection.183

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183 Watching a movie together and talking afterwards could also be a natural forum for spiritual reflection. There are many resources available for Christian reflection on film. For example see: Monty Williams & John Pungente, Finding God in the Dark II: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St.
Since the men express a practical desire to be good people and since they value action more than belief, organizing occasional service or social justice projects could be a good idea. A group of men could be encouraged to volunteer for a shift at a homeless shelter, do repairs at a local social service agency or write letters on social or environmental issues. Pastoral initiative could be taken to invite reflection on the experience afterwards. What did you think about the experience? What did you enjoy about it? How does this experience connect to larger social and systemic issues? One could reflect on the notion of service and social issues in relation to Christian faith and theology.

Intentional
While the majority of men may prefer a concrete activity with only indirect personal and spiritual reflection, there may be some who are ready for more intentional group work.

Friendship/Support
Men could perhaps come together to share elements of their daily lives including issues or experiences from the world of work. The pastor or leader could propose a theological reflection question such as: “How is God present in this work, or how does your work contribute to God’s work?” In line with a Trinitarian dynamic, one could ask about the concrete (immanent) aspects of the work as well as the more abstract, visionary (transcendent) purposes and ideas. How is God present in these different dimensions? How would you describe the “spirit” of your workplace? The intention would be to build a sense of community and to foster the idea that the mysterious triune God is present within their lives and workplaces.

Spiritual Reflection On Unmerited Goodness and Ethical Concerns
If the context permits, one could propose a small group setting with the explicit purpose of engaging in a spiritual practice and reflection. Whether men would be open to this type of gathering remains an open question. It may become more viable after experiencing the more indirect approaches. If a group were to develop, An excellent resource for this type of reflection is Kathleen McAlpin’s Ministry That Transforms (Toronto: Novalis, 2009). She suggests that it is “through the process of ministering itself that we are converted in an ongoing way.” Kathleen McAlpin, Ministry That Transforms, 1. She employs methods of contemplative theological reflection with those doing the hands-on work of supporting refugees in Toronto.

185 A group of this type exists in a local Mennonite church. Several men have been meeting together for support and friendship as “displaced” men. All of them have either recently moved to the area or have made significant transitions. Each man takes turns leading the group reflection.
one idea would be to ask the men to prepare a “graced history” for sharing and reflection. A graced history is part of Week 1 of the Ignatian exercises. The purpose is to become more aware of the presence of God’s goodness in one’s life. Since the men seem naturally attuned to this through their awareness of unmerited goodness, this would be a good place to start. For the group sessions, one man would present his history in each session. This would provide a non-threatening way of getting to know one another on a deeper level.

Following this initial phase, one could enter into subsequent sessions of reflection on the challenges facing the men and the world or society at large. This would attempt to engage the other major finding of this study: men experience God through ethical desire. I would recommend avoiding prolonged, speculative discussions on the nature of God or ethical issues. The men could be asked for the sake of the exercise to reflect according to generally accepted notions of God as taught by the church. For example: “Jesus has revealed that God is present in the suffering of the world.” Have you noticed or experienced this in any way? A sample format for such a group is provided in part B of this appendix.

**Spiritual Reflection on Themes from the Men's Spirituality Movement**

Another possibility would be to form a group that would reflect on archetypes commonly utilized in the men’s spirituality movement. Richard Rohr discusses the major four archetypes in relation to Jesus. Such an approach would be a fruitful way of engaging men both with personal development issues and the person of Jesus. As men become more willing to talk about their issues of inner development and struggle, I would propose working with the archetypes in the context of a larger, Trinitarian and ecclesial vision. One way of working with such images would be to help men see that just as God is one yet three “persons,” so too they are comprised of various voices and images. Within ourselves we meet the “persons” of warrior, king, lover and magician. Rohr reflects on how each of these archetypes is present in redeemed form in the life of Jesus. Men could be encouraged to enter into dialogue with the various images within themselves with the goal of becoming integrated in the way of Jesus. Roles and identities within the family and congregation could also be explored.

Parker Palmer has devised an effective method for spiritual reflection called a “circle of trust” that could be adapted accordingly for such inner reflection.

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187 I refer to the archetypes outlined by Moore and Gillette in *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*. Rohr discusses them in *Adam’s Return*.

188 Palmer is a Quaker who believes that each person has a trustworthy “inner light” or “inner wisdom.” He refers to this inner guide as the “soul.” He believes that we are born without original sin. His view is that we enter life whole and perfect, and then inevitably become tarnished by social forces and conflicts. He shares his own story of becoming estranged from his own inner self as he tried to live up to the expectations of his parents and society. When this separation began to manifest itself as clinical depression, he embarked on a spiritual quest in earnest. His philosophy is based largely on his own personal story. He summarizes as follows: “We arrive in this world undivided, integral, whole. Then sooner or later we erect a wall between our
While not designed exclusively for men, the style and methodology is a good fit based on my observations. The group is lead by a facilitator who sets the tone and presents a reading or poem as a point of reflection. Members of the circle are invited to respond to the poem as they feel led. Other members are permitted only to ask open questions. The idea is to "support the inner journey of each man in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her inner teacher." The facilitator takes care to ensure that the solitudo of each participant is respected. This is not an environment for advice or outright guidance. It is a place of listening and encounter with the soul.

A sample format for a men’s spiritual reflection group adapted from Parker Palmer is provided in part C.

**Imaginative Gospel Contemplation**

One of the challenges in working with men is knowing how to help them accept and integrate the Christological claim of Jesus as risen Lord. Another challenge is the invitation to a relational connection with God, which Trinitarian spirituality implies. The notion of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit does not seem appealing to the men of this study. It is not something that they can explain on a rational level. It is not something they appear to seek or experience. For some, it carries narrow and rigid connotations from the past. This is a significant issue since a personal relationship with Christ at some level is indispensable for the Christian spiritual life – even if specific Christologies may differ. In the Anabaptist tradition, the baptismal decision implies a living knowledge of the one we follow. We are called to abide in the Vine. How can these Christological and relational challenges be engaged in a congregational context?

189 Ibid., 54.

190 I find it interesting that even though Palmer has a Christian background, he avoids Biblical, Trinitarian language in favour of generic terms such as “soul” and “inner teacher.” In a congregational setting I believe it is important to speak specifically of the Holy Spirit who can also be considered a type of inner teacher. Reflective readings or images could be connected to Christian theology either directly or indirectly. It would be important to be clear on the interpretive framework. According to the theological vision I have expressed here, we are seeking to grow in our identities as men in the context of the church’s belief in a Trinitarian God. There are some men, who like Palmer, prefer to have no reference to God, Christ or Spirit. In the context of the church however, I feel it is a pastoral responsibility to speak this language. If the church is to be the church she must abide in the Vine and find ways of speaking about this relationship with reference to the Biblical and theological tradition. This attention to theology and language is largely the responsibility of pastors. In the face of increasing cultural pressure to downplay our distinctives, we must not lose our nerve to speak specifically of our faith.
As the men develop sufficient rapport and comfort from previous group work, it may be possible to propose a method of imaginative gospel contemplation, with the goal of strengthening the personal relationship with Christ. This is a central form of prayer suggested by St. Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* that makes use of the senses and imagination. One prays for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and then reviews one of the narratives from Jesus’ life in the gospels. After several readings, the one praying is invited to imagine the setting and to place him or herself within the scene. It is a visual form of prayer that allows the Spirit to work through the imagination. One lets the situation unfold as it will. One may experience oneself in direct interaction with Jesus, or perhaps on the sidelines as a bystander. Following the imaginative scene, the one praying is invited to approach Jesus for a conversation or “colloquy.” One can say whatever one feels led to say and hear whatever Jesus may say in response. After this time of prayer, one is encouraged to spend a few moments in silent reflection and thanksgiving for the experience.

This form of prayer does not appeal to everyone and therefore will not be helpful for all men. It does, however, contain several elements that may appeal and serve as a beginning point for developing a relational connection with Christ. First of all, it is a concrete and sensory method. One is invited to use all of the senses. It is based on narrative accounts and not on speculative theological texts. Men will be able to relate to the real life nature of the scenes. Jesus is pictured as a real man in a real place and time. The method encourages a sense of exploration. The one praying can feel free to express doubts and questions to Jesus. Each conversation is unique. Men do not have to have their beliefs figured out before trying the exercise. I would encourage them to set aside their reservations and simply experiment with the method. If the Spirit touches them in some way, such an experience could become a reference point for further reflections on Jesus and their relationship with him. Following the session of imaginative prayer, discussion could happen within the group or on a one-to-one basis as the men request. One of the issues that often comes up is that of psychology and spirituality. This could be discussed along with other issues and questions at that time. A sample format for such a gathering is provided in part D.

**Worship**

Many men in the congregation may not be interested in being part of a small group, however, they will still attend worship. How can Sunday worship be more conducive to the formation of Christian spirituality in men? Worship is the one place in church life where men hear the theological and Biblical language of the faith. It will be important to find ways of making this language more real and accessible for them.

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191 One of the obstacles discussed in chapter 2.
Sermon
The sermon is certainly one opportunity for this. Sermons must hold the tension of openly engaging difficult questions while clearly teaching theological and scriptural truths. I was struck with the relatively few comments on sermons in the interviews. It would appear that they are not making a large impact in the lives of the men. I suspect part of the reason for this is the lack of a forum for discussion. Men could most likely benefit from a chance to ask questions and interact with the preacher. It is all too common for preachers and leaders of worship to lapse into a formalized vocabulary and tone that is inaccessible to congregants. In effective preaching and worship, Christian language is explained and illuminated.

Visuals
The men in this study experienced the presence of God through the goodness of nature, other people and concrete things. It may be that they experience the worship service as too refined or artificial. Joe for one dislikes the formality. Worship services seem like an illusory world to him. Men appear to gravitate toward expressions that are more natural and concrete. What if on the communion table, instead of having a beautifully arranged vase of flowers, one placed something more rough and unfinished? Perhaps a broken clay pot or a rough stone? Might such an image symbolize the reality of life more authentically? It would be interesting to see how men would respond. How many men are involved in the altar guilds of our churches? I suspect one of the reasons men may feel ambivalent about worship is that their world is not reflected there. Worship may feel disconnected from the issues they deal with on a daily basis. Men are generally outward-oriented and seek to understand and make a contribution in the world. As pastors and worship committees, we must ask ourselves how our congregational worship is connecting with those inclinations.

Communal Prayer
In addition to hymn singing, the men commented most often on the meaning of the congregational prayer. They experienced God through being part of a supportive community that is concerned about the needs of others and the world. The men in this study also expressed many unresolved questions about God. It would therefore seem important that the congregational prayer give honest voice to questions and to the issues facing our society. Naming unfinished and unresolved concerns could be a meaningful dimension of the prayer. There are rich resources in the psalms for

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192 In comments on congregational life, the majority of men expressed appreciation for the communal relationships in their church communities and for authentic interaction including the freedom to question.

193 I have heard this comment in various settings such as the men’s institute at the SDI conference in April 2010. This observation is also expressed by David Murrow in his book Why Men Hate Going To Church (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 192.
expressing anguish and lament, nevertheless, such expression is often lacking in worship. The men of this study expressed a strong preference for authenticity and intellectual integrity. Once their attention is engaged, good sermons and prayers, rooted in Trinitarian language may gain more traction and impact.
B) GROUP FORMAT FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION ON THEMES FROM DATA: UNMERITED GOODNESS AND ETHICAL CONCERN

1) **Gathering** (10 min.)
   - friendly banter

2) **Opening Ritual** (5 min.)
   - to communicate welcome, trust and sacred space
   - drumming
   - placing a sculpture on table (the thinker, an icon of the Trinity, etc.)
   - silence

3) **Reflection on Life** (45-60 min)
   - men are asked to share and reflect on life experiences
   - begin with “graced history”
   - (in subsequent sessions, topic may move to ethical and social concerns)
   - ground rules of one man speaking at a time
   - men are to focus only on the one presenting and not go into their own ideas or experience
   - open questions only
   - respondents ask for the “talking stick”

4) **Reflection on God/Spirit** (mixed in with #3)
   - initiated by leader as seems appropriate...
   - what are the concrete and immediate dimensions?
   - what are the mysterious transcendent dimensions?
   - where is the Spirit present?
   - where is Jesus?
   - how is God hidden and/or present?

5) **Silent Prayer** (5 min.)
   - men invited to hold one another in loving respect or pray to God as they feel comfortable

6) **Closing ritual** (5 min.)
   - drumming
   - closing sacred space (removing sculpture and icon)
   - spoken Trinitarian prayer

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194 Drumming has been used extensively in the men’s spirituality movement. In the retreat in 2006, I experienced it as a healthy kinesthetic way to enter a meeting. It allows one to release tension, to use one’s body and senses and to feel the comraderie with other men.
C) GROUP FORMAT FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION ON THEMES FROM MEN’S SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

1) **Gathering** (10 minutes)
   - informal discussion and a beverage

2) **Opening Ritual** (5 minutes)
   - drumming
   - creating a boundary for sacred space
   - getting in touch with body and heart-beat and group

3) **Presentation of Reflective Image or Reading** (3 minutes)
   - archetypes – King, Warrior, Magician, Lover
   - father wound (prodigal son story)
   - grief (David and Absalom)
   - sexuality (David and Bathsheba)
   - inner conflict (Jesus in desert, Jacob wrestling with angel)

4) **Silent Reflection and Meditation** (15-20 minutes)
   - may get up and walk around
   - may lie on floor
   - may journal thoughts
   *Purpose:* to pay attention to what comes up in your own soul
   - thoughts, feelings, desires

5) **Sharing** (60 minutes or less)
   - one at a time people may share what came up for them
   - men may respond only with open questions
   - no fixing or giving advice

195God for us, we call You Father,
God alongside us, we call You Jesus,
God within us, we call You Holy Spirit.
You are the Eternal Mystery
that enables, enfolds, and enlivens all things,
even us, and even me.
Every name falls short of your
Goodness and Greatness.
We can only see who You are in what is.
We ask for such perfect seeing.
As it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be. Amen.
- Richard Rohr (Prayer Card from Centre for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM).
- man must be left “alone” with his reflections
- moment of silence follows each man
- random order
- optional

6) Closing Ritual (3 minutes)
   - drumming
   - closing of sacred space (removing image)
   - spoken Trinitarian prayer

D) GROUP FORMAT FOR IMAGINATIVE GOSPEL CONTEMPLATION

1) Gathering (10 min.)
   - friendly banter

2) Opening Ritual (5 min.)
   - drumming
   - placing a sculpture or an icon on table (a gospel scene)
   - silence

3) Instructions for Gospel Contemplation (10 min.)
   - explanation of method
   - suggested texts
   - responding to questions and objections

4) Individual Gospel Contemplation (20 min.)
   - each man finds his own private space
   - contemplation, reflection and journaling

5) Group or Individual Reflection (20 min.)
   - men invited to reflect on what they experienced if they feel comfortable doing so
   - talking stick used for order and attention
   - other participants respond only with open questions
   - no fixing or problem-solving

6) Closing ritual (5 min.)
   - drumming
   - closing sacred space (removing image)
   - spoken Trinitarian prayer
Appendix B

Listing of All Codes in Categories with Number of Tagged Excerpts Per Code

**Experience of Mystery and Goodness (311)**
nature (29)
  working with wood (10)
  experiencing the outdoors (24)
  connection/disconnection (12)
beyond explanation (48)
encountering God (36)
awareness (21)
sequence of events (14)
sensing something (13)
mysterious experience (11)
difficult to verbalize (10)
beauty (10)
coincidence (8)
transcendence (7)
freedom (6)
good feelings (5)
emotions (5)
visions (5)
guidance (5)
feeling alive (4)
grace (3)
underlying experience (3)
joy (3)
ecstatic experience (2)
inner/outer (2)
connectedness (2)
out of body (1)
swept away (1)
spouse (1)
angels (1)
enlightenment (1)
God within (1)

**Rockway church (181)**
Rockway church (62)
  worship (20)
communion (7)
social (7)
theo1ogical (5)
sermon (4)
congregational prayer (3)
adult education (1)
music (17)
  hymn singing (18)
  choral (4)
  camp songs (1)
Church attendance (23)
  men and women (2)
outsider (7)

**Spiritual Practice (168)**
prayer (40)
gratitude (29)
spiritual practice (22)
contentment with mystery (11)
writing poetry and fiction (10)
affirmation of what is (9)
reading (8)
solitude (8)
Buddhism (6)
being present (6)
silence (4)
time to focus (4)
mindfulness (3)
meditation (2)
communion with God (1)
New Age spirituality (2)
confession (2)
seeking direction (1)

**Values and ethics (158)**
ethical values (66)
Jesus (35)
universal human needs/values (13)
  social leveling (3)
humanistic (7)
vocation (7)
values (6)
relationships (6)
giving life (4)
stewardship (3)
generosity (2)
contributing (2)
pacifism (2)
environmental concern (1)
politics (1)

**Tradition and family (149)**
childhood memories (19)
  church (22)
  family (16)
  school (4)
  prayer (2)
  camp (3)
teenage experience (16)
baptism (14)
father (12)
Mennonites (10)
narrative (10)
parenting (7)
relationship with partner (7)
ethnic heritage (6)
mother (1)

**Growth and development (113)**
change over time (18)
learning process (15)
breaking boundaries (13)
commitment (9)
exploration (8)
personality (8)
openness (7)
revival meetings (7)
bigger perspective (5)
stepping out in faith (5)
another level (4)
conversion (4)
Bible school (3)
self-image (2)
personal influences (2)
inspired to give (1)
waking up (1)
responding to a call (1)

**Tangibility (87)**
- communal experience (35)
  - support in difficulty (10)
  - expectations (3)
  - engagement with world issues (2)
  - strengthening (1)
- friendships (18)
  - intimacy (3)
- tangibility (5)
- practical guidance (5)
- everyday experience (4)
- five senses (1)

**Understanding And Believing in God (173)**
- belief (25)
- agnosticism (25)
- ideas about God (21)
- understanding God (18)
- personal being (12)
- image of God (11)
- marrying theology and spirituality (10)
- providence (7)
- philosophy (7)
- spirit world (7)
- thoughts about God (6)
- God as Creator (4)
- God is love (3)
- place in universe (3)
- challenges to belief (3)
- God as all-inclusive (3)
- human construct (2)
- intuition (1)
- Old Testament God (1)
- metaphor (1)
- pantheism (1)
- Christ (1)
- love (1)

**Organized Religion (158)**
- doctrine (26)
  - Hell (5)
Trinity (4)
Atonement (2)
resurrection (2)
organized religion (26)
hypocrisy (10)
Biblical references (26)
tradition (9)
Catholicism (8)
religion as construct (8)
trans-cultural core (5)
religious language (4)
preaching (4)
life after death (4)
ritual (3)
other religions (3)
sin (2)
dogmatic (2)
transcending religions (1)
God different than church (1)
catechism (1)
worship (1)
indifference (1)

**Intellectual Integrity (146)**
intellectual integrity (32)
questioning (32)
science (27)
interventionist (21)
demythologizing (10)
skepticism (10)
evolution (9)
evidence (4)
power of intellect (1)

**Difficulties (74)**
uncertainty (14)
nebulous (3)
loss (10)
speaking about experience of God (7)
suffering (7)
disillusionment (6)
distant (6)
not sensing God (5)
struggle with integration (4)
tension (2)
  church and society (1)
mortality (2)
problem of busyness (2)
busyness (1)
grief (1)
pluralism (1)
disorientation (1)
death (1)

Miscellaneous Codes (13)
evil presence (3)
atheism (2)
arguing with God (1)
spiritual baffle (1)
attach myself (1)
safety net (1)
ego (1)
positive ego strength (1)
reflection on interview (1)
hope (1)
travel (1)
theater (1)
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