Together in Prayer:
The Art and Gift of Group Spiritual Direction

By Susan S. Phillips

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Abstract: For nearly ten years—one-fourth of our institutional life—New College Berkeley has devoted itself to fostering spiritual formation and soul care among adult Christians, clergy and lay, through spiritual direction groups placed throughout the Greater Bay Area and, for the past three years, also facilitating spiritual direction groups for undergraduate and graduate students. Our constituency of primarily Protestant, Gospel-committed, church-going, biblically literate Christians expressed increasing hunger for spiritual nourishment, and the spiritual direction groups have been a core component of our response to them. This article describes this ministry as experienced by the directees, the directors, and by the author who has supervised the directors and overseen the program. This spiritual discipline is recommended for students in all levels of theological education, including those in MDiv, DMin, and PhD programs.

As each academic year ends at New College Berkeley, participants in our nine-month spiritual direction groups write to us about the experience. One wrote:

> This was my first experience with anything that was so introspective. I was searching for a place where I could step back and re-learn how to be open to God. I was so tired of going through the motions. I yearned to be still and see how God could be known to me in new ways…. Having been a Christian my whole conscious life—I don't remember when I wasn't—I was in a rut. The group helped me to be open to the mysteries of God in a more silent, experiential, listening way.[i]

Since 2009 New College Berkeley, a school for the Christian laity and affiliate of Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union where I serve as executive director, has been offering a two-semester, monthly spiritual direction course in small, director-led, covenanted groups of four to six directees. With the gift of a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., beginning in 2015 we expanded the program to include groups for U. C. Berkeley graduate and undergraduate students. This would be a spiritual discipline of great benefit to theological students at all levels of graduate work who wish to nourish their faith and cultivate spiritual formation while undertaking academic study.

In each spiritual direction meeting, there is generous time for silent attention to God and one's own soul, and to God's presence in the lives of others. In each two-hour meeting, the group focuses on two directees. Without interruption and for a few minutes, they share personal stories which seem to have spiritual resonance. Group members devote themselves to listening for God and to others.

Following the prayerful listening, people are welcome to respond briefly to the focal person, possibly with something that was noticed about the person or the person's experience of God. Some share an image or a Scripture passage that came to mind. There is no teaching, judging, interpreting, interrogating, or advising permitted. The directors help everyone maintain the stance of contemplative listening, understanding that God is the ultimate director, the One for whom all are listening.

This protocol allows—in the words of the directee just quoted—openness "to the mysteries of God in a more silent, experiential, listening way." What we have seen over the years of this program is that group spiritual direction cultivates spiritual development by means of prayer and the moral/spiritual goods inherent in the discipline. It is a means of God's grace.

Longing for God

The initiative to start the group spiritual direction program grew from a year-long discernment process New College Berkeley trustees and faculty undertook with invited lay and clergy members of our constituency. For forty years our school has offered courses and seminars which enable Christians, mostly Protestants with evangelical commitments, to discover more about their faith and cultivate deeper theological integration in their lives. We sensed, however, that more was needed. Specifically, we wanted to respond to people who felt they were in a spiritual rut and experienced the deep desire to "step back and re-learn how to be open to God."

Responding to the perception that many Christians suffer from spiritual malnourishment and stagnation, we began to offer more programs explicitly concerned with spiritual formation, prayer, and practicing the presence of God in daily life, a response akin to that being made by theological educators throughout North America.

Growing numbers of Christians report that their spiritual hunger is not satisfied through familiar forms of faith expression. Recently, a Fuller Theological Seminary professor said that young evangelical Christians are reacting against the "churchiness of church" and desire to see how their faith is relevant to their lives.[ii]

Desire for God and for the significance of faith persists, even among people who contribute to the statistics indicating the North American church's decline. Most people of faith on the continent (76% of the respondents to a recent Pew study), including those who don't attend church, say that prayer is important in their lives, though younger people are less apt to say so.[iii]

Millennials (those born between the early 1980s and 2000) say that the top reason for attending church is to be closer to God; sadly, however, many say that their churches are

not helping them know God better. These are statements and trends that signify spiritual yearning.

The directee from one of our direction groups who said she's been "in a rut" in her spiritual life, was yearning. A Baby Boomer and lifelong churchgoer, she has longed to know God better. She desires to experience the relevance of faith in her daily life, and church participation hasn't satisfied that desire. The spiritual direction group, however, has helped her meet it.

In creating the spiritual direction groups, it has been NCB's hope that the blessings she and others receive will flow into their whole lives—their relationships, work lives, and every day experiences. We trust that the blessings from this discipline will be a gift to churches as well.

This essay addresses the undergirding theological convictions for group spiritual direction, describes the practice as we engage in it, and illustrates what we've witnessed through this ministry as it forms disciples. The data on which I draw are the directees' annual written evaluations of the program and my own notes from the monthly supervision sessions with the directors.

Christian Spirituality and Disciplines

The human longing to know God and see how faith is relevant is part of Christian spirituality, a field which concerns itself with how we understand and live our faith. Relationships, knowledge, and practices address those longings.

Spiritual disciplines are regular practices that shape and sustain our faith, helping us turn toward God, follow Jesus, and attend to the Holy Spirit so that we may bear love into the world. Some of us have recognizable disciplines, like morning prayer and church attendance. Some of us have idiosyncratic spiritual disciplines, like praying a kind of rosary as we drive over speed bumps to and from work every day. Group spiritual direction is a Christian spiritual discipline, less familiar than weekly worship, but more common among Christians than speed bump rosaries.

Group spiritual direction is rooted in group prayer of various kinds, and also in the ancient tradition of spiritual direction in which one person helps another pay attention to his or her relationship with God and how that relationship informs and infuses all of life. An influential contemporary writer on the subject of group spiritual direction has been Rose Mary Dougherty, who wrote: "In spiritual direction two or more people gather in the power of love and for the sake of love. In the arena of love, one is brought face-to-face with the primary discernment of spiritual community: 'Do you seek God?' And then, 'What does this seeking mean for your life?'"[iv]

These are questions for clergy and spiritual formation educators as well, questions they can engage through participating in spiritual direction groups, and questions they can ask the people to whom they minister. At New College Berkeley we have also facilitated groups of clergy in spiritual direction. They have been a place of honest spiritual reflection and community for the participants. A number of those participants have gone on to cultivate group spiritual direction ministries in their churches.

The Nature of Group Spiritual Direction as a Spiritual Discipline

Guided by Scripture and responding to the needs our culture sets up, group spiritual direction at New College Berkeley is a communal, Christian practice of contemplative prayer.

1. Prayer

Christians long to be closer to God, and Paul's instruction to us via the Thessalonian church is to "[p]ray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is a way that we seek God, and it's focal in spiritual direction.

One directee wrote: "Participation in the group made me aware of God in all of life (every bush!)"[v] In the spiritual direction groups no area of life is considered off-limits to prayerful reflection. The burning bush in one person's life may be in the workplace, as it was for Moses. For another person it may appear during a conversation with a friend, or a moment of silent prayer before going to sleep. Our understanding of what's possible is stretched by others' experiences of God, possibly happening in areas of life in which we have neglected to look for God. This may be a comfort, a challenge, and a corrective in our lives, and we see all those possibilities in the groups as each person's prayers are informed by the experience and prayers of others.

Sometimes we're doing our best to persevere as good disciples, when another person whose night vision is a bit better yells out, "It's the Lord!" Then we suddenly see for ourselves that grace is present, even in darkness.

Each member of the direction groups signs a covenant promising "consistent prayer" and that they will "hold each other's self-revelation in ongoing prayer and with complete confidentiality."[vi] The two-hour meetings are sandwiched by and also saturated with prayer. The meetings begin and end with prayer that is sometimes silent and sometimes includes prayerful reflection on a biblical passage. After each person shares, the group prays silently.

Contemplation and Silence

We listen in prayer. This is the contemplative nature of the groups. Contemplation is the orientation and opening of the soul toward God, like the movement of the tree toward the sunlight. It is a gentle yet robust process of listening and turning

Søren Kierkegaard wrote: "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end, he realized that prayer is listening."[vii] This is so in private prayer, and it's especially so when we pray contemplatively together.

A directee wrote: "Group silent prayer was new, and as I grew accustomed to silence, I found that I needed more of it in other parts of my life. I found a growing confidence in hearing and listening to that still quiet voice. I found I could trust that God could speak in the quietness. The new experiences have led to the discovery of hibernating gifts within [me]."[viii]

In our monthly supervision groups which follow the same contemplative protocol the groups use, the directors comment on how silence suffuses the direction meetings and also our supervision time. Some groups spend up to one quarter of their time together in silence.

A distinctive practice in our groups and in the supervision meetings is that of holding silent prayer after a focal person has spoken. Following the silence, the director asks the person if anything more has come to mind in the silence. Often people come to greater awareness of God during the silence, and that sheds light on the stories they've shared. The silence is rich with communication, and we preserve space to attend to it.

This receptive stance is contemplative. The presence of the word "temple" in "contemplative," conjures the image of stepping into an enclosed, spacious structure, like a temple or cathedral. As Psalm 100:4 declares, we "[e]nter [God's] gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise." There we remember that God is God, and has made us. We belong to God.

Direction

Each year when the directees write about their experiences in the groups, most mention how the directors hold the contemplative space for prayer and listening to God, Scripture, and one another's lives. They appreciate the directors facilitating structure, responsive flexibility, and a deep trust that God is present and loving.

A directee wrote that the director led the group with a "loving, calm and centered presence," gently redirected when the group got "off course," and "tangibly reflected the love of Christ in our midst."[ix] Another wrote that the director "led us through silent

prayer and each exercise with great care and nurturing…" bringing "scripture readings that seemed appropriate to the group."[x]

In a supervision meeting a director spoke of the "beauty of silence and structure."[xi] As directors and directees recognize, the director helps choreograph the patterns of silence and speech, hoping to increase our awareness of the Holy Spirit. Another director said that the silence "allows space for desire."

A director also spoke about her experience of desire while working with a group that was having difficulty gelling after several months of meeting. She mentioned the tardiness of a particular member of the group and the advice-giving proclivities of another person, saying she felt irritated and like "muscling" them into order. But as she held the direction group in silence, she got in touch with what she really wanted to do, and that was to lead them back into contemplative listening to one another and to God.

In the supervision session when this was discussed, directors offered various reflections: "The center held in the midst of the chaos." "You were given delight." "You [the director] were like a vase containing the group." "It's like Leonard Cohen's song about how the light gets in through our cracks." "First [the director] cared for and shaped the clay pot or vase, by God's grace. Then it experienced cracks, and now it's evident that the Light is coming in through the cracks." "I feel inspired and blessed in hearing this."[xii]

Over the first half of the year, this director shaped the container, as it were, molding the clay bowl in which contemplative listening could take place. Once it was in place, she and the directees began to relax in the silence. The people in the group began to call one another to contemplative listening and silence. They were able to listen to the desire beneath the surface of the person who was chronically tardy. They did so in love. Accountability was cultivated in a context of altruistic care.

The tardy person's longing to slow down and pray became stronger and was heard in the group. There continued to be breaches of the ideal protocol, but the director had molded and held the contemplative space, and then, through its cracks, they saw the light of God's grace shining. The clay vessel didn't shatter or become something else. It persisted as a sanctuary of prayerful formation.

There were times in the supervision meetings when we saw a similar movement in this director. She would begin by talking about her frustration with the group members who impeded the contemplative listening. She would have questions about what she ought to be doing. We would listen. Then, as supervisor, I would invite the group into a few minutes in silent prayer. Coming out of the silence, the director would then say something like, "I rediscovered my delight in the people in the group." Or, "I felt God's

encouragement to lighten up and allow grace to do the work." In the silence, she encounters God.

Holding

"Holding" is the word most often used by the directors for what they give to the people in the groups. They hold the contemplative space, often in their homes; hold attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit; hold the pace and content of the conversation, ensuring that it remains contemplative and that silence is observed; and they hold the group members and the group as a whole in prayer, when they are with them and apart from them.

The directors sometimes talk in supervision about the direction session as like a swimming pool. Because the space is contained, as with a pool, it's possible for water (read "grace") to fill it, and for the directees to swim in it.

A director said in supervision: "I love it that the directee is willing to be honest about God's absence, to experience it, to dive to that depth. She is experiencing her longing….I want to honor that. Another person dog paddles on the surface and won't go to the bottom of the pool….I feel resistant to that, and some anger and sadness. I long for the group to sink in and dive deep, and I feel that one of the directees is preventing that."[xiii] In our supervision group, we held the director and the group in silent prayer.

Coming out of the silence, the director had the insight that the way the "dog paddler" uses theology might be what keeps her from going to the depths. The other directors reflected on what they heard during the director's sharing and during the silence.

One director said: "The pool can hold all the differences: new and mature swimmers, divers and floaters, those who throw up in the pool, and those who splash and play."

The director who had been sharing said, "I can't hold all that."

Another said: "You may be the lifeguard. Not the pool itself."

Another said, "You're modeling God's grace by being in the pool with people who are different from one another."

And yet another director said: "All in the pool are so impacted by one another. It's like the molecules moving in the pool. I trust that God is moving the molecules." God is the ultimate director.

At the next supervision session, the director who had shared the concern about not being able to hold all the different people in the pool, spoke of "basking" in the experience of the last group direction meeting. There was "peace about the space and connection….The space holds them. God provides. The process is changing them. Two are new to contemplative prayer. It's a blessing to see God working. One woman is experiencing a huge transformation. It seems clear that God put her in the right group."[xiv]

In the response time another director said, "This is making me think about the pool from last time."

The focal director then said: "The one who'd been on the surface acknowledged depth this time."

Another said, "I'm not hearing the contrast between surface and depth now. It's more about meeting across differences and all being part of the holy dance."

At the next meeting, the same director said to our supervision group: "Now in my fourth year of engaging in this practice and meeting with all of you, I'm starting to experience the blessing of silence in the group that I've heard all of you talk about. It's beautiful. Trust allows it. We really sink in—bask in—God's grace, and then the connections happen."

Then, following the silence, the director said: "The people in the group are talking about the meaning of the group for them. Ways that the group is shaping how they are in the world. All we can do is contribute what we can. God does the rest."[xv]

2. Community

One year as the spiritual direction groups began again, a director who has worked with some of the same people for a few years said:

> There's a re-membering that takes place as we come together again. One person is new to faith, new to recognizing God in her life. Over the summer she experienced "spiritual forgetting," forgetting that God is always present. Coming together in the group reminded her, and we were re-membered as a little community with God in our midst.[xvi]

> The assurance of God's presence is a foundational aspect of praying without ceasing, and praying in community helps us remember that Holy presence. One directee wrote: "I really am keeping my connection with God through my participation in [the spiritual direction group]."[xvii]

Each group is true Christian community, not preferential friendship or strategic networking. A directee wrote: "Learning to listen to the Holy Spirit was wonderful. Praying for others gets my mind off of myself. Sharing a common prayer experience, I feel, is something we can all use to strengthen the Christian community."[xviii]

A spiritual director who works with our groups has said that the experience is a "banquet of listening."[xix] Listening to the Spirit and each other nourishes us in abundance, and we partake of the feast together. Indeed, the Latin *communitas* (Latin: *com* = together; *munus* = gift) has to do with sharing a gift together. Such communion is an increasingly rare gift in our culture of self-sufficiency and concern about scarcity.

Covenant

Spiritual direction groups are prayerful communities, and core components of community are trust and story. The participants in the New College Berkeley groups agree to meet monthly for nine months, and commit to an honest relationship with God, to participate wholeheartedly in the group process through prayerful listening and response (including prayer between meetings), and to tell about their spiritual journeys while guarding their privacy and maintaining confidentiality.[xx]

In most cases in the groups, Christian identity is deepened in a God-directed intertwining of the individual and the community. The group is the kind of "sheltering enclave" Peter Berger described as necessary to the embedding of religious consciousness in everyday life.[xxi] Such embedding can happen over the dinner table as families reflect on the day in the light of spiritual consideration and in Sunday School fellowships at churches. The embedding of religious consciousness in everyday life also happens in the spiritual direction groups where it is the primary impetus for coming together. The covenant, the directees, and the director hold focus on that.

The covenant also allows the refining that takes place in Christian community. Henri Nouwen wrote:

> Community isn't easy. Someone once said, "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." In Jesus' community of twelve apostles, the last name was that of someone who was going to betray him. That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.[xxii]

As in all Christian communities, in our direction groups we've encountered tensions, disruptions, and, occasionally, breakdown. People come to the groups as Christian brothers and sisters who do not know each other, yet are choosing to pray together for the better part of a year. This is a courageous act. Not only is spiritual conversation rare

in our culture, engaging in it with strangers can be intimidating, even though liberating. One group came to an early end at least in part because openness to God and others was too difficult for some of the participants. They would have preferred a seminar or a Bible study, other means of God's grace.

Story as a Vessel of Grace

Spiritual stories are communal vessels of grace, and people tell their stories of faith in the direction groups, and, for many of the participants, the group is the only place where they do so. But it is not just story-telling that happens. The stories are forged and shaped in the telling.

A directee wrote: "I have learned a new way of listening to others; not to 'fix' their problems, but to discern what God could be doing in them and to reflect on that to them. I have also learned to listen to God's work [and] invitations in me in a new way."[xxiii]

I, too, direct some groups and am a directee in a group, though not under the umbrella of a larger ministry. We often enter the prayerful shelter of spiritual direction not knowing what we will speak about, and recently I came to the group where I'm a directee and spoke about my broken foot, simply because it was in a walking cast and needed explanation.

As I sat in prayerful silence aware of the other people's listening presence, I discovered how I was experiencing God's communication to me through my injury. I received a bracing message: "Slow down!" And I sensed God's care for me in the suffering.

Prior to the spiritual direction time, I had spoken mostly about the data points related to my foot—when, how, how long. After the time in communal prayer, I had a story that incorporated aspects of my childhood as well as my present day experience. The story was about God and me, and was part of the bigger story about God's care for each of us in our suffering. The way my story interacted with the stories others told, helped me discover and embrace my story more fully, and also gain some reflective distance on it.

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman wrote that "[s]piritual narratives are produced in interaction, carried by conversants from one place to another, and redeployed and reworked in each new telling."[xxiv] We see this in spiritual direction groups. People discover God's presence in their lives by telling about ordinary experiences in a communal context where the lens of faith is brought to bear.

This communal, contemplative practice sharpens each person's attentiveness to the Holy. At the end of a several year, in-depth study of ninety-five religiously committed Americans, Ammerman concluded: "[T]he people with the most robust sense of sacred

presence in everyday life are those who participate in religious activities that allow for conversation and relationship."[xxv]

This dynamic was articulated by one of our directees: "The group empowered me to deal with a difficult season in my work schedule. The changes, cutbacks, increased workload and added stresses of my job would have overwhelmed me if it had not been for the support of this group….I found a growing confidence in hearing and listening to [God's] still quiet voice."[xxvi] This person's everyday experience was held in the light of grace by the direction community, and, in turn, the grace experienced in group direction flowed into the workplace. The community helped the directee persevere through an ordeal.

In a spiritual direction group that I lead apart from New College Berkeley, a woman told about caring for her aging mother. It's hard and frustrating. Her mother is incontinent, so it also seems humiliating. Where is God in that? As she spoke, she recognized the privilege of the intimacy. She saw grace in the story in large part because she saw how her listeners' faces responded. We smiled with tears in our eyes when she spoke of caring for her mother's physical needs and for her dignity. The directee moved from the irritation of the experience to seeing its beauty. In conversation and communal silence, "the robust sense of sacred presence in everyday life"[xxvii] is received. The community helped this woman see light in the darkness, beauty from the ashes.

3. Practice

Group spiritual direction is a Christian practice of communal prayer. Christian sociologist Robert Wuthnow wrote that "[s]piritual practices have been largely ignored in recent scholarship, especially in the social sciences, or they have been reduced to simplistic studies of prayer and of religious experience."[xxviii] He claimed that the absence of an understanding of spiritual practice left scholars directing attention toward completely privatized spirituality, on the one hand, and religious congregational life, on the other.

Graced Relationships

A focus on spiritual practices allows us to see how we are shaped spiritually through our regular engagement in deliberate, committed, long lasting relationships in which love of God and neighbor are affirmed. We receive grace from our loving God, and that grace flows through us to the world. Wise people from Plato to St. Francis have expressed the same idea by saying that goodness is diffusive.[xxix]

In the spiritual direction groups we see the rippling forth of grace. One directee who had been in a group for several years wrote: "[Among other things, through the contemplative prayer with the others] I noticed a sense of legacy with and connection to the past and to the future generations of seekers, people of faith."[xxx] People are changed through the practice.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntrye defined a practice as a set of coherent, complex activities aimed at achieving excellence through ways of living that are shaped by goods internal to the practice.[xxxi] The goods internal to the practice are cultivated, refined, and maintained communally. For example, a physician's or nurse's bedside manner is a socially informed practice with goods internal to the practice, meaning a shared sense of what's a good, worse, or better bedside manner. Medical professionals are socialized into the practice, often in apprentice fashion rather than through pedagogy. The goods are practical—what sort of behavior facilitates healing?—as well as moral—how is the dignity of the patient preserved?

Moral and Spiritual Goods

In Christian group spiritual direction, the goods inherent in the practice are shaped by Scripture and tradition, as well as the contemplative traditions of prayer and spiritual guidance. North American Christianity, perhaps especially the evangelical tradition in which New College Berkeley has participated, has suffered from what scholars call the "sanctification gap," a focus on conversion leading to life after death, with too little attention paid to growing in love of God and neighbor while here on earth.[xxxii]

In that gap, attention to daily discipleship has foundered and, with it, engagement in spiritual practices and guidance. Through the first centuries of the United States, spiritual guidance diminished in priority in the life of American clergy, and many Christians were left without intentional spiritual guidance. Evangelical Christians, in particular, have been slow to acknowledge the need for soul care, and have also been wary of the burgeoning secular psychotherapeutic professions. Indeed, Wesley Tracy wrote: "One of the problems with evangelical spirituality is that Christians have no one to talk to."[xxxiii]

In supervising the spiritual direction groups now for more than five years, I have seen the ways they foster spiritual health and growth, enabling people to open their hearts to God and be transformed by grace. The groups are communal practices that shape character and affect how people live in accordance with faith. At their best, the groups bridge the sanctification gap, fostering holiness through love of God and others.

In an end-of-year program evaluation a directee wrote:

The monthly meetings provided focus for me to look more closely at my spiritual development, be aware of God's presence in my life, and listen and learn from the questions of others. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to be assured of confidentiality, surrounded by the love of others in the group, and to feel the presence of God. The group helped me understand myself and others, accept myself and others, and praise God.[xxxiv]

Small Group Spiritual Disciplines:
Accountability, Altruism, and Empathy in 12-Step and Spiritual Direction Groups

Spiritual direction groups are one type of faith-based small group. In the early 1990s the Gallup Institute (on behalf of the Lilly Endowment and under the direction of Robert Wuthnow) conducted a survey of American participation in small groups, finding that "40% of Americans said they were involved in some kind of small group that met regularly, including 12-step programs and hobby-based groups. Sixty percent (60%) of those groups were related to faith communities."[xxxv]

Over the past twenty years, participation in small groups has declined as work has demanded more and more of people's time and civil society has eroded.[xxxvi] There is concern that the moral and social goods found in such groups are in jeopardy, a loss to person, the church, and society. At least three of those goods and their preservation are evident in group spiritual direction and also in 12-Step programs.

1. Accountability

Researchers have expressed concern that even those who participate in Christian small groups are not being molded as disciples. In 2010, Barna reported that "22% of church-going Americans are in small groups, and only 7% of those felt the groups held them accountable for integrating their faith in their lives."[xxxvii]

A theological assumption undergirding small group spiritual direction—indeed, Christian spirituality—is the call to obey the two greatest commandments: love God, and love neighbour as oneself. Does participation in a group help its members live more and more in keeping with the love God commands? This is Christian accountability, and there are indications it is weakening.[xxxviii]

Some large-scale studies of small group participation include 12-Step groups, in many ways our culture's flagship form of small group spiritual practice. These groups are familiar to many people and bridge continents, social strata, and religious affiliations. Twelve-Step groups cultivate some of the spiritual and moral goods that Christians

would look for in a small, communal spiritual practice; specifically, accountability, altruism, and empathy.

Alcoholics Anonymous is the mustard seed organization from which the 12-Step movement grew in the early twentieth century and now includes "two million members who participate in some 115,000 groups worldwide, about half of them in the U.S."[xxxix] Alcoholics Anonymous contains definite Christian statements and practices: "Seven of A.A.'s famous 12 steps refer either to a deity—'God,' 'Him' or 'a Power greater than ourselves'—or to religious practices such as prayer. The ultimate goal of sobriety, as the final step states, is to achieve a 'spiritual awakening.' Besides the Lord's Prayer, the Serenity Prayer is a staple of A.A. meetings."[xl]

Though there is a recent humanist form of the groups that is growing in popularity, the 12-Step movement is a contemporary exemplar of Christian community which considers faith of focal, life-changing importance. It affirms that maturity and health are only possible through involvement in a practice-focused community which regularly gathers, prays, and cares. Members are loved and held morally and spiritually accountable, and spiritual growth and health are intentionally cultivated. This contrasts with the low accountability figures for church-based small groups.

Many Christians—lay and clergy—say their "real" church is their 12-Step group, usually Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Alon. Lives have been turned around and marriages saved by 12-Step groups that focus on substance addictions and also on sex or work addictions. These groups offer a spiritual lens through which to see oneself, one's relationships, and one's everyday life in a social context throughout which spiritual narratives are woven. Accountability is cultivated in an environment of prayer and rememering.

Twelve-Step groups offer a means of grace akin to that of the spiritual direction groups: a confidential, spiritually-focused community in which one's heart and life are examined lovingly and correctively. They maintain focus on sin and human failings in the all-surrounding light of God's saving grace. Each 12-Step participant also has a kind of spiritual guide—a sponsor—with whom to check in every day, a feature our spiritual direction groups do not offer in an explicit way, though there is a commitment to steadfast prayer for the others in the group and the monthly guidance of the whole group and the group's director.

Alcoholic Anonymous is seldom examined for what it can teach the church about how people's lives are transformed by God's grace, yet its roots lie in the Oxford Group, a Christian movement founded in 1921 in Oxford, England, by the American Lutheran missionary Frank Buchman. It was a small group, para-church movement that flourished

for more than twenty years, and then petered out as the leadership lost focus and the movement became more political than Christian. I wrote to Regent College's founding Principal Dr. James Houston, a former University lecturer at Oxford, and asked his view of the Oxford Group. He affirmed what I'd read elsewhere: It suffered from "theological deterioration" and became "a compromised, eclectic movement."[xli]

But the movement began with people concerned about the "sanctification gap" in the lives of Christians, and bequeathed that legacy to AA. Oxford Groups engaged in personal prayer times (Quiet Times) and met for regular, frequent small gatherings where they studied the Bible for application to their lives, prayed together for God's guidance for themselves and the world, and openly shared their sins with each other, for the sake of confession and also witness. Unlike the experience of many Christians today, those in the Oxford Group were held accountable by their community to the integration of faith in life.

This accountability remains a core component of 12-Step groups, and is also a moral and spiritual good in New College Berkeley's spiritual direction groups.

2. Altruism

The philosophy of the Oxford Group was that "[t]he message one brings to others by speaking of one's own sins, one's own experiences, the power of God in guiding one's life would bring hope to others that a spiritually changed life gives strength to overcome life's difficulties."[xlii] Herein lies the foundation of 12-Step groups: confession and witness in the context of divine grace (Higher Power) and group solidarity.

Founded in 1935 after Bill Wilson was exposed to an Oxford Group that enabled him to recover from alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous focused on achieving sobriety and helping others achieve it as well. In fact, altruism—unselfish concern for or devotion to the welfare of another—is a primary component of AA's effectiveness. Studies have found that helping behaviors extended toward others correlate with personal abstinence.[xliii]

In group spiritual direction people open their hearts to God in the company of others. They also, as one directee said, take their minds off of themselves as they pray for others. Hearts are stretched, and private prayer is enfolded in communal listening.

3. Empathy

Twelve-Step groups cultivate and depend on an empathic connection among participants. This undergirds accountability and motivates altruism. It is my impression

that group spiritual direction, by virtue of its contemplative as well as its communal nature, cultivates accountability and altruism, both of which are crucial for living as Christ's disciples and are aided by the practice's cultivation of empathy. As directees listen to one another's emotion-laden stories while held (by God and the director) in an ethic of love, they grow in their capacity "to care about and share other people's emotional experiences."[xliv]

Sadly, over the past thirty years Americans have declined on measures of empathy. In those same years Americans have become more likely to live alone, less likely to join groups, and fifty percent less likely to read literature for pleasure, all social changes that correlate with decreased empathy[xlv]. In opposition to that trend, group spiritual direction helps us follow the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we pray together, the giving and receiving of empathic attention enable us to love God and others.

In Closing

Over the past number of years as I have supervised the spiritual directors of groups at New College Berkeley (and have also done so at Regent College), an image has formed in my mind of the four directees and one director, and that is of them seated around a campfire. In their time together they are warmed and various aspects of their selves are illuminated. They share their stories. Then each one takes a log from the fire, and it becomes a torch in the world, bringing contemplative warmth and illumination into the fullness of their lives. A month later, each person returns the log, and it serves to rebuild the fire. The grace is diffusive.

The directors reflect on how the process with their groups is a "campfire" experience for them, too. Even though they do not share their own personal stories in the group meetings, they are warmed and revealed by the light of God's grace. One director who is also the minister of a church said, "This work reminds me of why I'm a minister: To see people being transformed by God."[xlvi] Another then said that the blessing of the direction time lingers for days, shedding light on other aspects of life and work, and casting a graceful glow over the home in which the group met.

Listening for God together and then speaking about the experience is rare in most lives. One of our groups had been an ongoing prayer group for fifteen years before becoming one of our groups and working with a New College spiritual director for a year. Surprisingly during the first meeting, the director learned that the members of the group felt "self-conscious" talking about their prayer lives in front of one another. They hadn't done that before.

Honest, open conversation about spiritual experience is especially rare among clergy. We find in our groups of clergy persons that they claim they can only be forthright about their spiritual ups and downs in the confidential shelter of the groups. In the groups they experience accountability and compassion. They give and they receive. They experience God's intimate ongoing formation of their souls and lives, free of the isolating mantle they carry as clergy.

In our groups we find that people come to trust the holding that takes place. The director holds the form and movement, and everyone holds the confidentiality. People speak confessionally in the groups about matters they've never spoken of to another person. That allows for healing, growth, and the flow of loving grace beyond the circle of prayer. Since our groups began in 2009, I've seen prayer and spiritual maturing take place in the direction groups, and also in our supervision group as we engage in a parallel process of shared contemplative prayer.

In the "sheltered enclaves" of the groups, the steady practice of communal, contemplative prayer cultivates what Ammerman calls "sacred consciousness." People become more aware of God in their lives and are better able to weave spiritual narratives. They discern the movement of God's grace in the lives of others, even if the shape it takes looks different from their own personal experience. The participants' definitions of prayer broaden, as does their understanding of where God is present in everyday life.

When the New College Berkeley program of group spiritual direction comes to an end each year, I invite the directors to bring to our final gathering something that symbolizes their experience of the year. A year ago one director brought a large, used candle. The director said the candle had been lighted during the final meeting of the group, and as it warmed and people prayed near it, the top of the candle melted and its lip collapsed. The wax poured out onto the saucer on which the candle rested, and, as it did so, the scent was released into the room.

The director said, "In the group there are people with differing theologies and different levels of spiritual maturity, but they all form a circle, as does the wax around the lighted wick. Like this particular candle, the people, too, experience how grace flows from their time in the group, out into the world. The aroma of their prayer goes out. They're grateful, too, for the ways other people in their world hold the time so they can participate in the group."[xlvii] Grace flows to them, and, in turn, flows out through them.

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[iv] *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 14.
[v] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2012.
[vi] Susan S. Phillips, "New College Berkeley Group Spiritual Direction Covenant," 2009-present.
[vii] Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 324.
[viii] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2011.
[ix] Ibid.
[x] Ibid.
[xi] Personal supervision notes, 10 January 2014.
[xii] Personal supervision notes, 24 February 2012.
[xiii] Personal supervision notes, 16 November 2012.
[xiv] Personal supervision notes, 21 December 2012.
[xv] Personal supervision notes, 1 February 2013.
[xvi] Personal supervision notes, 27 September 2013.
[xvii] New College Berkeley, Program Response, April 2014.
[xviii] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2011.
[xix] Personal supervision notes, 11 October 2013.

[xx] Participants sign a New College Berkeley Group Spiritual Direction Covenant (2009 to the present), a modified form of which has been used by Regent College since 2012.

[xxi] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1969).
[xxii] "Moving from solitude to community to ministry," *Leadership* (Spring 1995), 83.
[xxiii] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2011.
[xxiv] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 300.
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[xxvi] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2011.
[xxvii] Ammerman, 302.
[xxviii] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16.
[xxix] See, for example, Terrance W. Klein, "The Good Is Diffusive, *America*, October 26, 2011, http://americamagazine.org/content/good-word/good-diffusive--accessed on March 28, 2014.
[xxx] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2013.

[xxxi] *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
[xxxii] See, for example, Lovelace, Richard F. "The Sanctification Gap." *Theology Today*, *29*(4) (1973), 363-369.

[xxxiii] "Spiritual Direction in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition," in Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner, eds., *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 128.

[xxxiv] New College Berkeley, Program Response, May 2011.
[xxxv] http://www.gallup.com/poll/5713/americans-find-solace-small-groups.aspx--accessed 4.18.14.
[xxxvi] See, for example, Barna, 2001--https://www.barna.org/barna-update/5-barna-update/54-protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity#.U1GeH4ZOXIU—accessed April 18, 2014.
[xxxvii] https://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/454-study-describes-christian-accountability-provided-by-churches—accessed April 18, 2014.
[xxxviii] In 2011 after completing the ten-year Maximum Faith Project, Barna researchers lamented the spiritual stagnation of American Christians, noting "that it becomes easy to substitute laudable religious activity for intentional and simple engagement with God." Connected to this neglect of seeking God is the finding that "[o]nly one out of every five self-identified Christians (21%) believes that spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith. (https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.U1GbxoZOXIU--accessed April 18, 2014).
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