

STRENGTHENING THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE WILSON'S MILLS
CHRISTIAN CHURCH CONGREGATION BY EXPLORING THE ONGOING
PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
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Dedication

To my husband, Joe, whose support and encouragement have made all the difference in
the world;
and to the good people of Wilson's Mills Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) whose
openness to the Spirit has been a welcome source of surprise and affirmation.

ABSTRACT

STRENGTHENING THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE WILSON'S MILLS CHRISTIAN CHURCH CONGREGATION BY EXPLORING THE ONGOING PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

By: Eleanor Pardue Slaton

The Wilson's Mills Christian Church (WMCC) congregation in Wilson's Mills, North Carolina has historically defined its spiritual formation in terms of its own tradition, personalities, and practicality rather than reliance upon and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The purpose of this project was to use small groups to further develop a congregational context in which the Holy Spirit could be the recognized center of spiritual formation. The desired outcome was that participants would actively seek and more instinctively rely upon the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in their church. They would begin to develop the intentional habit of noticing the Holy Spirit's reality and guidance.

The implementation of the project was a five week small group experience during Lent entitled "Seeing Red for Lent." The title makes reference to red as the liturgical color for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Adult members of the Wilson's Mills Christian Church were recruited to participate which resulted in three weekly small spiritual formation groups. I served as group leader.

The project gave me the opportunity to lead the congregation's discussions on the movement of the Holy Spirit in everyday life as well as in church life. In addition, it provided an opportunity for me to better learn how church members recognize their interactions with the Holy Spirit and how we might continue in our spiritual growth in the future.

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CHAPTER 1
SEEING RED OVERVIEW

While working towards my Doctor of Ministry, of all the reading in all of the books that I have completed, the sentence that caught my immediate attention was from Tony Jones' *The New Christians*: "...most American Christians don't really believe in the Holy Spirit."¹ He makes a strong assertion that churches include the Holy Spirit in their doctrine, but they seldom actively work to include the Holy Spirit in their decisions and their routines. Instead, congregations move forward assuming that they have the knowledge and expertise to keep the church moving in the right direction. Jones describes this self-reliance as "dangerous," and asserts that "When a church places undue emphasis on its programs, buildings, staffing, or other human inventions, reliance on the Holy Spirit has likely been lost."²

The framework for Jones' argument provided an uncomfortable mirror to use for reflection in my current ministry. As I pondered the spiritual depth of our life together as a congregation, I realized the statement of opportunity that I wanted to address in this project: Wilson's Mills Christian Church (WMCC) congregation has historically defined its spiritual formation in terms of its own tradition, personalities, and practicality rather than reliance upon and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 201.

² *Ibid.*, 203.

As I will explain further, the context of WMCC left little room for the unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of my project was to use small groups to further develop a congregational context in which the Holy Spirit could be the recognized center of spiritual formation. The desired outcome was that participants would actively seek and more instinctively rely upon the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in their church. They would begin to develop the intentional habit of noticing the Holy Spirit's reality and guidance.

My hope was that the project would be a springboard for increasing the awareness of the Holy Spirit's movement in lives today. The project had three phases. For the first phase, the Lay Advisory Committee (LAC) assisted me in developing the format for a five-week small spiritual formation group centered on the Holy Spirit as it manifests itself in relationships, worship, and service. The team created group discussion guides based on the biblical story of the Holy Spirit. These discussion guides were the basis for exploring how that story extends into current life, individually and congregationally. Adult members of the congregation were then recruited to participate.

During the second phase, the goal was to have three small spiritual formation groups meeting during Lent of 2013 on a weekly basis for five weeks. We called these spiritual formation groups *Seeing Red for Lent*, making reference to red as the liturgical color for Pentecost when we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The groups were to be led by me. In a small church like WMCC, pastoral leadership is desired and expected.

For the third phase, the groups came together for one large meeting to celebrate the completion of the spiritual formation groups, to begin evaluating the effectiveness of the process, and to identify next steps.

WMCC had not previously engaged in groups or studies specifically for the purpose of spiritual formation. This would be a new experience for us, and I was unsure how it would be received. That said, I was pleasantly surprised. The remainder of this paper is the story of *Seeing Red for Lent* and how our congregation began to move from a surface belief in the Holy Spirit to intentionally opening themselves up to the “real live” movement of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 2

SEEING RED IN CONTEXT

I have served as pastor of Wilson's Mills Christian Church (WMCC) since 2005. During this time, WMCC has undergone challenging and important shifts in its congregational culture. In order to appreciate the significance of the congregation's willingness to participate in my Doctor of Ministry project, *Seeing Red*, a discussion of its spiritual health in recent years is necessary.

WMCC is a small church. We have forty-five active households listed in our church directory, and we average 55 worshipers each Sunday. Although WMCC was founded in 1875, the congregation is young with eleven babies having been born in the last five years. Our oldest member is homebound and ninety-one years of age, and our youngest member is one month old. We have a long congregational history and we still worship in the original sanctuary. On average, WMCC has changed pastors every two years. I have served as pastor for over eight years.

We are a congregationally led church with a General Board responsible for the administration of all church ministries. The Board is comprised of representatives from standing committees, auxiliary groups, deacons, elders, and the congregation at-large. We have one Sunday school class for adults and one Sunday school class for children. Neither Sunday school class is well attended. Throughout the year, we offer adult Bible studies led by the pastor. For children, we offer a weekly ministry during the school year called L

LOGOS which consists of Bible Study, worship, activity time, and a family-style dinner. LOGOS is a non-denominational ministry sponsored by GenOn that is dedicated to building relationships within congregations and teaching discipleship skills to children.¹ LOGOS was implemented in 2003 as an alternative to Sunday school, because the children were not attending Sunday school. To their credit, WMCC recognized the importance of encouraging spiritual development in the children and began the LOGOS ministry. We average 50 adults and children in attendance each week.

We are located in a rural community called Wilson's Mills in Johnston County, North Carolina. Wilson's Mills has nine churches for its population of 1500. It is a tight-knit bedroom community within thirty miles of North Carolina's capital city of Raleigh. Many hog farmers and tobacco farmers call this area home. In the immediate surrounding community of Wilson's Mills, three pharmaceutical companies do business. Traditionally, Johnston County residents have been conservative both politically and theologically. It is still somewhat of a novelty for WMCC to have a female pastor. Yet, WMCC is a part of the denomination of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with Dr. Sharon Watkins serving as its General Minister and President. While Disciples' churches are autonomous, the denomination as a whole is considered to be theologically and socially progressive.

In 1975, Wilson's Mills Christian Church (WMCC) celebrated its 100th anniversary and a small booklet of church history was produced for church members. In this historical sketch, two points are clear. First, the church venerates the family names of its founding twenty-three members. The church building was built by these families on property donated by these founding families for the purpose of serving these founding

¹ GenOn Ministries "What Is LOGOS?" <http://www.genonministries.org/genon-church/logos-weekly-intergenerational-experience/> (accessed October 4, 2013).

families. Second, the church's vision and mission have been centered on this beautiful building. The strongest vision statement can be found in historical church expenditures that clearly prioritize capital improvements and furnishings.

These points are important because they provide a framework for understanding this church's culture and developing a vision for the coming years. As is common in smaller churches, WMCC has been soundly rooted in its history and nervous about its future.² The church building has been the congregation's measuring stick for success with the mission being one of survival. Consider the following description from the church history. "For one hundred years, the Wilson's Mills Christian Church has been loyally supported by its members and friends. They have given time and funds willingly to help keep the church alive."³ That choice of words is telling. "To help keep the church alive" implies a mission grounded in survival. Indeed, the survival of the building and family names were priorities for the first 100 years and they continued to drive church mission when I was called as pastor in 2005.

The church had dwindled down to twenty-two regularly attending members. WMCC would have been considered a "family centered" church because membership was under fifty active members, and the church functioned like a family complete with a matriarch and patriarch.⁴ When I began my pastorate, I was part-time. I worked 40 hours a week as a social worker for the State of North Carolina, and I worked 20 hours a

² David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 92.

³Centennial Celebration of Wilson's Mills Christian Church (n.p.: 1975), 8.

⁴ Roy Oswald, "How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate Size Churches," 77-91. In Alice Mann's *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1998).

week as the pastor of WMCC. The primary expectations for me as pastor were sermons on Sunday and pastoral care during crisis situations. However, having just graduated from seminary, I had naïve enthusiasm and optimism for the purpose and future of WMCC. I made the mistake of assuming that I also had some authority. Unbeknownst to me, that mistake put me immediately in conflict with the congregation's family centered culture, because "the key role of the patriarch or matriarch is to see that clergy do not take the congregation off on a new direction of ministry."⁵

While that observation may sound especially critical, the family centered mode of operation had actually been a source of long-term stability in the face of high pastoral turnover. Pastors came and went, but the matriarch and patriarch remained in place. Indeed, everyone remained in place. The same people served in the same positions for years and years, and the church continued on its path of survival.

My ministry became a stressor for the usual church routine, when after the average two year pastorate, I did not leave. Not only did I not leave, the church had grown enough to call me as a full-time pastor. I moved into the community and spent time at the church every day. We began to experience a little growth in membership. That growth not only brought new members, but these new members had new opinions, new ideas, and new energy. They also made significant financial contributions to the ministries of the church. Because of their commitment and involvement, these new members began to express interest in leadership and in decision-making. Their enthusiasm and influence threatened the established lay leadership. The traditional stability of the church that had been in place for years was now stressed. The stress was particularly sharp because leadership had verbally supported growth, but when it actually

⁵ Ibid., 78.

occurred, it was threatening to their power and their history. They knew that growth was desirable, “but their emotional loyalty lay with the memory of a wonderful past.”⁶ This emotional loyalty was difficult to address. Indeed, “feelings in the church can be as intense as feelings in the family.”⁷ For that reason, sometimes outside help is necessary.

As the disgruntled feelings intensified and the stress grew, I consulted with our regional office. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, all churches are part of a region. Each region has a regional minister who serves as a resource for pastors and churches. Knowing the history of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church, our regional minister suggested that the church seek common ground in our purpose by engaging in a Faithful Planning process. Faithful Planning is a planning method developed by our Home Missions Office to guide congregations in answering three questions: 1) Where are we now? 2) Where is God calling us to go? and 3) How do we get there?

Faithful planning follows a workbook which outlines planning procedures based on the Biblical image of the church as the body of Christ. Christ, as the head of the church, directs the body, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and theological reflection are supposed to be a central part of this 6-month undertaking led by a small team of key leaders appointed by the pastor and Board Chair.

Our team certainly included the unofficial ‘matriarch and patriarch’ of the church, the board chair, and three other active members of varying ages. The first step was a full congregational survey evaluating the areas of worship, mission, spiritual growth,

⁶ Fred Romanuk and Alan Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass), 91.

⁷ David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 89.

congregational dynamics, leadership, and ministries and programs. After completion, the surveys were sent to the Disciples Home Missions office, where they were scored, summarized, and returned to us. We outlined the ministries of the church, and we analyzed the local community by census data in addition to interviews with other churches. We presented this data with our survey findings to the congregation, and although the verbal feedback was minimal, the written feedback affirmed our findings and supported our direction. We then worked to develop a vision statement, goals, and a detailed one-year plan for achieving them.

For the next two years, this planning process had visible results, particularly in increases in attendance and in giving. However, tension also increased. We were not prepared spiritually to navigate the organizational changes that come with growth. The lay leadership at that time was entrenched and did not want to share leadership with newer members. As we reached out into the community and particularly to churches of other ethnic origins, the blistering prejudices of some members erupted. There were power struggles led by a small disgruntled contingency that worked diligently to get rid of the pastor! The plans that had been so carefully developed in the beginning became busy work for the committees. The congregation was falling back into a pattern of spiritual bankruptcy.

At this time, very little trust existed among members. Hurtful communication took place indirectly through emails, letters, and a petition. Face to face conversation was either non-existent or uncomfortably loud. Discussions that began with good intentions quickly disintegrated. The traditional lay leadership had a sense of being under attack, because their voices were no longer the only influential voices in WMCC.

The longer I stayed, the more my longevity put stress on the congregation's emotional system. The more new members joined our church, the more their influence stressed the congregation's emotional system and created an environment that was constantly tense. A tense environment and "a poorly functioning emotional system will derail the most rational planning efforts."⁸ Clearly, our planning efforts were completely derailed by the breakdown in our congregation's emotional system, and leadership fell prey to fear in that some leaders feared that I would leave, and some leaders feared that I would stay.

Apparently, this kind of anxious crisis is not uncommon in family-centered churches. When a pastor does not leave at the anticipated time, congregations may find themselves questioning the pastor's abilities because she is staying in place rather than moving to larger church. On the other hand, congregations begin to ask if they can really trust the pastor to stay when others have quickly left. Their willingness to invest in a pastor may be compromised because previous pastors have not invested in them. "Basically these people have learned not to trust clergy who repeatedly abandon ship when they see no evidence of church growth."⁹ We seemed to be in a downward spiral.

The "game changer" for me was two-fold. First, I was invested in WMCC. I did not want to leave in a huff. I did not want my ministry there to be defined by conflict. To some degree, my tenacity and stubbornness served me well during this time. However, the defining moment came when WMCC's unofficial patriarch publicly

⁸ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 28.

⁹ Roy Oswald, "How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate Size Churches," 80. In Alice Mann's *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1998).

opposed the matriarch in support of my ministry. This was a first. As much as I would like to take credit for the turnaround, the patriarch was actually the change agent for the system. Without his support, my ministry would not have survived much longer. His break from the traditional “way we’ve always done it” prepared the way for something new to be born.

At first, the tensions and anxiety during this time felt very disorienting. In 2009 at the height of our unrest, we experienced a significant exodus of members. The disgruntled members – even the long-term matriarch– left the church. They have not returned. While the congregation was devoid of enthusiasm and good will for a period of time, our leaders began to grow spiritually. This growth was significant. Sometimes, in churches, leaders are not amenable to the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit and to the direction that comes from spiritual endeavors. So, when conflicts such as ours arise, the response tends to be reactive and panicked and rarely inspired by the Holy Spirit. Many times, congregations fall back into the “way we’ve always done it.”¹⁰ Historically, that had been true for us.

However, at this point, the Holy Spirit was on the move at WMCC, and WMCC was ready for something different. Those who stayed began to find their confidence and their voice. The survivors of the conflict became the early leaders of somewhat of a spiritual revolution. Marjorie Thompson says that “Suffering and tragedy seem to be powerful catalysts for moving people toward spiritual perspectives on life.”¹¹ This assertion proved to be true for us. After our congregational suffering, we knew we

¹⁰ N. Graham Standish, *Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007), 126.

¹¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 4.

needed something larger than individual personalities to give our church purpose. We needed to rely on a power greater than ourselves.

Our leaders came together as they prayed for healing and strength. They shared their hopes and experiences with each other and rebuilt their relationships. These are the leaders who continue to serve and lead within the church today. Having come through this crisis, they are very protective of the good will that is now present in the congregation. The congregation is healthier today than it has ever been. We are free from the malicious drive for power that held the Spirit hostage for so many years. Although I did not recognize it during the struggle, God's congregational 'pruning' was a part of my call to this church. Until that took place, we were stuck in a spiritual rut. After that took place, we began to move towards, what I hope will be, a full-blown spiritual awakening for our congregation. Three events happened that spiritually motivated us for this awakening and for the experience of *Seeing Red*.

First, in December of 2010, WMCC hosted a community open house to celebrate its 135th anniversary. The building of WMCC is most beautiful during Advent and Christmas. All of our members ordered bright red commemorative t-shirts which contributed to the camaraderie of the day. We advertised the event in newspapers and hung a large sign on our front lawn. We opened up our sanctuary with candles and flowers and live piano music. In our fellowship hall, we had refreshments and tables set to encourage conversation. In our classrooms, we had activities for children. It was a day of celebration.

Yet, because of the exodus in 2009, this celebration of our history happened without many of our long-term members. However, we were hopeful about our future,

and this hope was reflected in our theme for the day: “Wilson’s Mills Christian Church: where our history meets God’s future.” We recognized that even with significant loss, we were able to honor our history and look to the future. We were able to host beautiful, festive experiences with the congregation that we had. Towards the end of the day, when most of our visitors had gone home, we gathered in the sanctuary for a spontaneous singing of Christmas carols. As our children sang and our adults sang, we enjoyed quite a bit of heartfelt laughter. The fellowship and the pure joy that were felt in those moments could only have been Spirit-given. Those Spirit-soaked moments marked the time that we began to make new memories for the future. That day served as an unexpected ritual that helped us to honor the past, bid farewell to the hurt, and move towards the future.

Second, our five elders sponsored a mission project. It began during the summer of 2010 and found its “groove” in the summer of 2012. After the conflict of 2009, the elders provided a brief survey for the congregation to express its hopes for our ministries. The survey results showed a strong interest in outreach to our surrounding community. In response to that, the elders made the decision to coordinate and implement a local summer mission project. It began as a monthly meal at the church for needy students in the local elementary school. However, this group proved to be difficult to serve because their addresses and phone numbers often changed, and we had no way to contact them. Yet, even after two summers of unsuccessfully trying to serve this group, the elders were still committed to sponsoring a mission. They determined that instead of inviting people into the church for a meal, we should take meals out of the church to those in our community who are in need. They contacted the local senior center and began delivering

meals twice a month to low-income housing for seniors. Approximately, fifty meals go out every two weeks.

This ministry has been pivotal for the spiritual life of WMCC for several reasons. First, it involves people of all ages. Children help their parents deliver meals. Older members bake desserts for meals. Younger members assist with clean-up. It has been an opportunity for hands-on ministry, and it has allowed our members to work together on a positive, common project. Second, as members have interacted with the senior residents, they have enjoyed seeing the difference that our church is making in the community. Third, members have begun to initiate other ministries within this housing community. For example, the deacons recognized that many of the residents were out of perishable food items by the end of the month, so they have started delivering perishables. Another group of members wanted to make the residents feel special on holidays, so they now deliver gift bags. As people have served in this ministry, they have been inspired to serve more. It has moved us out of our small church doors and into the world. We believe that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, in April of 2011, the congregation experienced a powerful intrusion by the Holy Spirit at the close of the worship service. I always give an invitation prior to the final hymn for anyone present who might wish to officially join our fellowship. That particular day, worshipers in attendance were already part of our fellowship, and half-jokingly, I said, “We are already all members, but if you’d like to come stand with me during this last hymn, come on down!” As we sang, “I Love to Tell the Story,” the entire congregation walked to the front of the church. We stood around the communion table and we sang, “I love to tell the story for those who know it best seem hungering and

thirsting to hear it like the rest.” I cannot adequately put into words what happened that day, but it seemed to be a Spirit driven congregational renewal, and a time when we recommitted to each other, to the work of the church, and to God. At that moment, everyone present felt the power of the Holy Spirit, and we knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the same Spirit who breathed into the early church wind and fire was indeed breathing new life into us.

These pieces of history at WMCC set the stage for the *Seeing Red* experience. Until recently, the congregation had little interest in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit because we simply wanted to survive. Even if spiritual interest had been there, the trust required for group spiritual formation was not present. As we have moved out of a controlled, predictable routine, we have opened up to new spiritual experiences in worship and in service. Not only that, we have become much more eager to share our spiritual endeavors with each other. As will be evident, in *Seeing Red*, as the small group leader, I never had to pull conversation out of any of the groups. They were ready to share. They were “hungering and thirsting” to share their experiences and to hear the experiences of others.

At present, I am encouraged that survival is no longer our primary mission. As the pastor, I can get on with the mission that ignited my zeal for the church in the first place which was to be a passionate witness to the hope of the Gospel and the movement of the Spirit so that the people of WMCC are challenged and prepared to faithfully and instinctively share that same Spirit with others and make disciples along the way. I want to do whatever I can to help the people of WMCC to ‘catch’ the Spirit so that sharing the Spirit is second nature.

That leads us right into the *Seeing Red* experience. Our history has defined WMCC's spiritual formation in terms of its own tradition, personalities, and practicality rather than reliance upon and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. With recent changes and the building up of trust, WMCC was ready for a small group experience. WMCC was ready to take seriously the development of a congregational context in which the Holy Spirit can be the recognized center of spiritual formation. My hope was that the participants would actively seek and more instinctively rely upon the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in their church and would begin to develop the intentional habit of noticing the Holy Spirit's reality and guidance. We were at a point in our congregational life to truly be the place where "our history meets God's future." Come, Holy Spirit, come.

CHAPTER 3

SEEING RED THROUGH A BIBLICAL AND PASTORAL LENS

In his book, *The New Christians*, Tony Jones asserts that most American churches do not really believe in the Holy Spirit.¹ If asked, these churches would certainly say that they believe in the Holy Spirit and the power of the Holy Spirit, but their actions express an oversized belief in their own power. Jones' argument gains traction when he considers questions that get batted around in church meetings such as "How can we get more people to come to church? Should we change our style of worship? Should we hire a praise band? What can we do to get people through our doors?" These questions suggest a heavy reliance on human power to inspire divine power in the church.

The term that Jones coins for Christian faith that discounts the Holy Spirit is "binitarian." It's a faith that says, "Yes, we believe in God as our creator, and we certainly believe in Jesus as our Savior. And, it is up to us to do everything to make sure everybody else believes, too." Jones provocatively suggests that this kind of faith is idolatry. When a church relies primarily on its buildings or special ministries or budgets or other human efforts for its growth and vitality, reliance on the Holy Spirit has likely been lost. Carol Howard Merritt asks, "Why are our congregations known for more fighting over ordination standards than for being places where we can learn to open

¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 201.

ourselves to the still, small voice of God? In our churches, why are our members more likely to learn how to put together a meeting agenda than they are to learn how to sense the Holy Spirit's movement?"²

Tony Jones answers these questions by asserting that churches do not believe in the Holy Spirit. We think it is up to us. We spend our time chasing the outcome that we want. For instance, we want more people. So, we spend our time scheduling "Bring a Friend" Sundays and buying up advertising in the local papers and radio stations and leaving fliers on people's doorsteps. While I do not discount church efforts and energy, I agree with Jones that it needs to be effort and energy that is chasing after God and not new members. It needs to be effort and energy poured into discipleship and living faithfully. It needs to be effort and energy freely given to increasing our awareness of the movement of the Holy Spirit who is present, whether we feel it or not. Jones argues that, in the emerging church, believers are not binitarian. They know that God's Spirit is alive and well and active, and we ought to join in the work that the Spirit has already begun.³

As I began to plan the *Seeing Red* project, I wondered how the church, specifically Wilson's Mills Christian Church, could encourage and teach its members to "open ourselves to the still, small voice of God, and to "sense the movement of the Holy Spirit." How could we protect ourselves from harboring and promoting a binitarian faith?

The Bible is a powerful starting point, because the movement of the Spirit is not uncommon in the scriptures. In fact, the context of the Old Testament is an ancient

² Carol Howard Merritt, *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation* (Herndon, VA.: The Alban Institute, 2010), 115.

³ Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 201.

culture that readily accepted and expected that people's lives were impacted by many spirits. These spirits may not always be visible, but they have real powers to influence real people. So, the notion of our one God having a powerful Spirit that acted in influential ways would not have been alien to our ancestors in the faith.⁴ It would have been eagerly anticipated.

In the Old Testament, the word that is most often translated as "Spirit" is *ruach*, which means "wind" or "breath."⁵ *Ruach* describes how God's power is breathed into the world. In Genesis 1:2, *ruach* is presented in the creation story as God's "wind" sweeping over the face of the waters, or God's "Spirit" hovering over the waters. Whether or not *ruach* is best translated as "wind" or "Spirit" is not the main issue in the creation story. The main issue is that *ruach* was from God, and that God, through *ruach*, was creatively active in the world. God has been present and active through *ruach* since the beginning of time.⁶

Psalms 104:29-30 further develops the notion of *ruach*. It is "breath" in verse 29 and "spirit" in verse 30. "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their *breath*, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your *spirit*, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground."⁷ Either way, "the verse concerns the

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: a Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 199.

⁵ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, Ltd., 1997), 29.

⁶ Terence Fretheim, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, et. al., Vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 343.

⁷ Ps. 104:29-30 (New Revised Standard Version).

capacity to inhale and exhale, the most elemental activity of being alive.”⁸ In this most elemental activity, God is present. This divine breath is how close God moves to us and how God is part of each heartbeat. This divine breath is a gift that keeps on giving, as they say. In fact, Rob Bell argues that “We all, the Hebrews insisted – before we do or say or create or accomplish anything – have been given a gift, as close as our breath as real as life itself.”⁹ One can hear the longing for this breath in the words of an old church hymn: “Breathe on me, breath of God. Fill me with life anew, that I may love what Thou dost love and do what Thou wouldst do.”¹⁰

These images suggest a gentle Spirit and one that is as intimate as the breaths we take. However, other images of the Holy Spirit jump out of Old Testament texts. In Exodus 14:21 and 15:8, ruach refers to a God acting in nature as a wind powerful enough to drive back the waters as the Israelites escape from Egypt. In I Samuel 10:10, the Spirit “possessed” Saul, and he fell into a “prophetic frenzy.” The frenzy was so out of character for Saul that people asked “What has come over him?”

The Old Testament is indeed filled with numerous stories of the Spirit influencing and empowering individuals. For example, in Judges 6:34, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon,” and people followed him to battle. In I Samuel 16:13, the Spirit of the Lord came “mightily” upon David. In Judges 14:6 and 15:14, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson and endowed him with incredible physical strength. The Spirit of the Lord came upon multiple prophets such as Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:12,14), Azariah (2 Chron. 15:1),

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, 199.

⁹ Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 107.

¹⁰ Edwin Hatch, “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” (No. 295) in *The Worshiping Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990).

and Micah (Micah 3:8). In Isaiah 61:1, not only does the Spirit of the Lord come upon the prophet, the Spirit comes to empower the prophet to do wonderful things such as “bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, and comforting all who mourn.” Jesus himself believed that Isaiah’s words were fulfilled in his own ministry, as Luke 4:18-19 shows.¹¹ The Spirit is an empowering presence for ministry and service.

The Spirit of God is an invasive power in the world that has the strength to change, transform, and redeem all people. The words of Joel 2:28-29 attest to this fact. In this passage, a future is imagined when the Spirit is poured out on “all people” making everyone a vessel to be filled with the Spirit. God’s promises come through that Spirit poured out on “all flesh” your “sons and your daughters...” The living breathing Spirit is the hope of the world for Israel.¹² Notice that in this passage, the Spirit is promised to not just one person like a king or a warrior. The Spirit is promised to the entire community. In God’s time, the Spirit will be in everyone and in every place.

For as many kinds of references that are made to God’s Spirit in the Old Testament, the salient point for this project is very simple: the Holy Spirit is alive and well. The biblical story tells of the Spirit that has been moving throughout our faith history. Although we are not given a clear point by point definition of the Spirit in the Bible, nor are we given a specific process to acquire the Spirit, “we are shown the Spirit

¹¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: the Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 30.

¹² Rob Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk About God*, 199.

at work...The Spirit is at work in the world always conjointly with the Word.”¹³ The Spirit is always present. The Old Testament repeatedly tells us of the presence of God through the Spirit that is everywhere in all places, in all times, and with all beings. Perhaps nowhere is this more poignantly recorded than in Psalm 139. The Psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your Spirit, where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” The Spirit is moving everywhere and “is the source of the very going-on-ness of the universe, like electricity that powers the whole house and everything in it.”¹⁴

In the New Testament, that Spirit continues to power up its work in the world through Jesus Christ. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke each present the story of Jesus’ baptism. (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22). Certain elements to the story are common to each Gospel, mainly that after Jesus was baptized by John, the “Spirit descended like a dove” on him, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The Spirit is associated with Jesus being God’s son, and his Sonship ties back to Luke 1:35 when Gabriel visits Mary and tells her that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and her child will be the Son of God.¹⁵

John knew this identity when he baptized Jesus. He said, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 3:11 and Mark 1:8). This promise begins when Jesus himself is baptized and anointed with the Spirit. Brian Blount says, “This is no quiet, gentle breeze, this God that comes free and loose when Jesus

¹³ Boris Bobrinsky “The Holy Spirit in the Bible and the Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 49, no. 3 (July 1, 1989): 357-62, ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost.

¹⁴ Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, 122-123.

¹⁵ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology*, 49.

comes up from the waters of the Jordan. This is a wild, untamed God who breaks in on Israel the way a tiger in a zoo would, if he could, crash open his cage door just as you were walking complacently by it.”¹⁶ He goes on to describe a Spirit that runs loose inside of Jesus making Jesus have a “tiger in his tank.” That “tiger” allows Jesus to touch lepers, eat with tax collectors, break Sabbath laws, and associate with women. In other words, the Spirit that descended on Jesus is a good tiger who gives Jesus the power to do the redeeming work of God. Thus, Jesus ushers in a new age and becomes a model for a Spirit-filled life.¹⁷

This Spirit-filled life was not one of serious, somber religious rules and regulations that fit neatly into a box. “Rather, it was the life of a person who went to parties, ate and drank, had a good time.”¹⁸ The Spirit-filled life connected him with others, particularly the oppressed, the marginalized, and those rejected by traditional religious entities. The Spirit even connected Jesus to his enemies, allowing him to pray for them and to teach others to do the same. He prayed even when he lost everything and even when he felt forsaken by God. That is the Spirit-filled life of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

That powerful Spirit that drove Jesus is the same Spirit that he promised to his followers. As Jesus is bidding farewell to his disciples in John 14-15, he refers to the Holy Spirit as an “Advocate” and he promises that this Spirit will serve as a reminder of all the lessons that he has taught them. Further, he promises that this Spirit will teach

¹⁶ Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 70.

¹⁸ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 295.

¹⁹ Ibid.

them new things, so they will continue to grow and learn. It is important to note that these promises are not made to the individual disciples. They are made within the context of the community of disciples. The Spirit is not promised to one special person, or even a carefully screened few. The Spirit is promised to the entire community. The experience of the Holy Spirit is a communal gift.

In John 20:19-23, Jesus appears to his disciples after the Resurrection and officially imparts the gift of the Holy Spirit by breathing on them and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” I have heard this story referred to as the Pentecost for introverts because it seems to be much lower key than the Pentecost story found in Acts. While we do not get details about how this gift of Spirit-breath happened, it was likely a tender and quiet gift. I cannot imagine that Jesus used his breath to blow the Spirit into his disciples as one would blow out candles on a cake. I picture him feeling such love for his disciples that with every breath, his Spirit and his love hovers in the air around them ready to be breathed in.

This “Pentecost for introverts” may have more depth than its face value. It is possible that this description “...deliberately evokes the creation of humankind in Genesis: just as God breathed the breath of life into humankind, so now Jesus ‘breathes’ the divine breath of life into the disciples, representative of God’s renewed people.”²⁰ Jesus ushers in a new age and a new life for his disciples. Although Jesus’ feet will be leaving the earth, the disciples have breathed in his Holy Spirit. They are now hosts for his Spirit. It is a part of their identity. They are fully capable of living the new Spirit-

²⁰ Marianne Meye Thompson, “The Breath of Life: John 20:22-23 Once More,” in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honor of D.G. Dunn*, ed. Graham N. Stanton, Bruce W. Longnecker, and Stephen C. Barton (Grand Rapids, Mich.): William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 71.

filled life that Jesus has modeled for them. This Spirit-filled life is as close as their next breath.

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit again comes as a gift to the community of believers, but it comes with much more drama. Acts 1 describes Jesus' ascension into heaven. Afterwards, the believers returned together in Jerusalem, and they waited to receive the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised in Acts 1:8. As they waited, they were "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). On the day of Pentecost, they were still all together, and Acts 2 tells us that the Spirit came with a "sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." The wind and the fire were the signs that the Holy Spirit was breaking in.

Three thousand people converted that day, but the signs of the wind and fire, as wonderfully impressive as they were, were not what brought people to faith. The signs did, however, bring people to a place of astonishment and confusion (Acts 2:12) and "Faith begins, at least sometimes, with a disorientation that must precede a new orientation."²¹ Faith grows when disorientation gets our attention and awakens us to the spiritual realm that is all around us. Sometimes confusion and bewilderment lead to a new way of understanding and living in the world around us.

For example, in Acts 2, believers understood, as well as they could, that the wind and the fire ushered in the Spirit that had been promised by Jesus. However, non-believers did not understand what they were witnessing. They were disoriented. They

²¹ Anthony B. Robinson & Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: the Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 62.

had never experienced anything quite like what they were seeing and hearing from the believers. So, they immediately discounted the spiritual power that had just been released into the world. When they heard the believers speaking in other languages, they attributed it to the only thing they knew would cause such gibberish: drunkenness. When they witnessed behavior that was different from the usual routine, they were confused and said, “They are filled with new wine.” (Acts 2:13) This allegation became the moment that the Holy Spirit continued to move into the world through Peter.

Peter was perceptive enough to understand the accusations, and he knew the speculation that was circulating about the disciples, so he addressed the crowds in order to clarify what they had witnessed. In particular, he referred the listeners back to the prophecy from Joel 2:28-29 and 3:1. Peter explained that the languages of prayer and praise that they heard were evidence of the Spirit baptism.²² He surprised them by claiming that the Spirit baptism that had just happened was indeed the “Day of the Lord” that Joel predicted. Certainly, this interpretation of the “Day of the Lord” would have shocked the devout Jewish audience who were waiting for a day when God would vindicate them over their national enemies, such as Rome. They would have been looking for an outpouring of the Spirit, perhaps an outpouring of force that would result in their national deliverance.²³

Peter reframed their expectations of deliverance in light of Jesus’ resurrection. Israel’s deliverance was not dependent on a future of national and military freedom. Deliverance was available right then in Christ. Now, the “tiger” that Jesus had in his tank had gone on the prowl into the tanks of all the believers. Throughout the rest of the book

²² Craig S. Keener, *The Spirit in the Gospel and Acts*, 195.

²³ Anthony B. Robinson & Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 55.

of Acts, that tiger, the outpouring of the Spirit, seems to take place with visible evidence. In Acts 4, the believers pray together, and the earth shakes, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit to speak the Word of God with boldness. That is just the beginning. There are healings (Acts 3:1-10; 5:12-15; 9:32-35), conversions (Acts 2:37-42; 9:1-19; 10:44-48; 16:11-15), and people have power to preach and teach in circumstances they never would have thought possible (Acts 2:14-36; 4:1-22; 7:1-53; 11:1-18; 13:4-52). In Acts, evidence of the Spirit pours out of every chapter enabling people to preach the Gospel, make disciples, and serve God.

The Holy Spirit was a non-negotiable staple of the early Christian church. The Holy Spirit was an abiding presence and a gift that would not be taken away from those early Christians. Like the people of the Old Testament, they expected that the Holy Spirit would act upon their lives and their ministries. They believed that the Holy Spirit powerfully invaded their days and guided their mission and their leadership with visible signs.²⁴

As an aside, the continuing existence and power of those “visible signs” were central to *Seeing Red for Lent*. I wanted to help the congregation of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church to intentionally experience the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. I wanted them to increase their awareness of the Holy Spirit’s movement in their own lives and in the life of our community. I wanted them to practice identifying the visible signs of the Spirit. I wanted them to begin to develop the deliberate habit of noticing the Holy Spirit’s reality and guidance. However, those goals assume that the Holy Spirit moves in ways that can be observed and objectively experienced and shared. Based on the biblical

²⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: the Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*, 32.

story and the traditions of the Holy Spirit that have been discussed so far, this assumption is true. The gift of the Holy Spirit is as visible today as it was in biblical times.

Certainly, the Wilson's Mills' congregation does not routinely experience the Spirit as wind and fire, but thankfully, this is not the only manifestation of the Spirit that the New Testament describes. The Holy Spirit may also come in the form of many spiritual gifts. These gifts may be skills such as prophecy, healing, teaching, and leadership, or these gifts may be personal characteristics such as generosity, wisdom, kindness and compassion. These and many other gifts are mentioned in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 12:28; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11). These gifts have behavioral and ethical implications that guide our actions and provide directions as surely as the Spirit guided the actions and directions of the early church.

However, these "gift lists" are not meant to be exhaustive and to limit or box in the ways that the Spirit may come. They are meant to showcase the diversity of the Spirit's manifestations.²⁵ Therefore, the Spirit may come as an emotional outburst. The Spirit may come by empowering some people to work miracles. The Spirit may come by strengthening people for specific tasks of service. The Spirit may come in moral transformation. "...the presence of the Spirit means a new relationship with God that is expressed in a new kind of relationship with other people."²⁶ The Holy Spirit enables us to be in relationships with each other that build up the community and that strengthen our bond with God. Really, that was almost a litmus test for Paul as to whether or not a

²⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Paternoster, 2001), 160.

²⁶ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, 303.

particular gift was from the Holy Spirit. Does the gift contribute to the common good and build up relationships?²⁷

Paul spells out the nature of these relationships clearly in Galatians 5:13-6:10 when he exhorts his readers to “live by the Spirit.” He first describes a life not of the Spirit, and in 5:22-23, he uses words such as “jealousy, strife, anger, and idolatry.” Then, he describes life in the Spirit. He uses words such as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.” Paul was clear that the Spirit’s presence would result in changed behavior for the community, and ultimately, eternal life.²⁸ After all, human beings were created in God’s image, and while we do not always perfectly reflect that image, the Holy Spirit continues to restore all things to God in Christ. The goal for the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Christ.²⁹ That is most likely to happen when we make the effort to “live by the Spirit.” When the Spirit is in believers’ lives, there are visible signs.

That holds true for us even today. When the Spirit is present in our lives, evidence abounds. However, we cannot create or manufacture the evidence ourselves. We cannot give ourselves the gifts of the Spirit. We cannot force ourselves to feel the Spirit. We cannot cajole the Spirit come to us and offer us what we want when we want it. There is nothing we can do to manipulate the Spirit to move dramatically in our lives. That said, the premise of *Seeing Red* is that the Holy Spirit does not need to be cajoled into showing up, because the Holy Spirit is already here and wants to be accessible to us.

²⁷ Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: a Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 159.

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 879.

²⁹ Philip D. Kenneson, *Life On the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 1999), 32.

“Do you not know,” Paul asks, “that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:9, 16). The Holy Spirit is already dwelling in us. Therefore, we can put ourselves in better positions to be open to the Spirit’s movement. We can train ourselves to be on “red alert” for the Spirit. We can put ourselves into situations, conversations, and experiences that have the potential to open our hearts to the Spirit. Then, we wait expectantly for this Spirit that will come when, where, and how the Spirit chooses.³⁰

As we have seen, the Bible gives us a variety of descriptions of dramatic and personally powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit. However, the Spirit may come in other ways that, at first glance, may seem quite ordinary and conventional. These unexpected moments are often called “religious experiences.” For instance, moments filled with Spirit may arrive when we notice the great beauty of a single flower, or a sunset, or the blueness of the ocean water. The Spirit may arrive in a moment of trusting friendship or in the smile of a newborn baby. The Spirit may arrive in times of creativity in music, in gardening, in woodworking, or any number of activities that inspire our imagination. Sometimes, the Spirit comes in moments of grief or pain when we lose someone or something that gives our lives meaning, and yet, we find ourselves upheld and nourished. These can be considered moments of transcendence.³¹ They can be beautiful or painful, but in the ordinary moments of life, the Holy Spirit comes. In the ordinary moments, our faith is formed. Our daily practices can lead us to “walk with Spirit” or to “walk from the Spirit.” Either way, we have the ability and responsibility to

³⁰ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, 304.

³¹ Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 54.

set the intent of our hearts by what we do.³² The spiritual mystic, Evelyn Underhill, said, “That means trying to see things, persons and choices from the angle of eternity; and dealing with them as part of the material in which the Spirit works.”³³

In light of that, *Seeing Red*, was a way to encourage the people of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church to set their heart’s intent to notice the Spirit, share the Spirit, and walk in the Spirit through small groups. While experiences with the Holy Spirit may often be understood as individual experiences, we cannot discount the importance of sharing these experiences with others. Sharing builds relationships and community, and community is a gift to believers from Jesus. His own ministry modeled the importance of community. He brought people into community around the Table. He sent his disciples out to do the work of ministry with each other and not alone. After the Resurrection, he approached two of them on the road. He appeared to the disciples gathered together in a locked room. He drew people together. When his promise of the Holy Spirit came, that Spirit came upon the community of believers. When we gather in groups to engage the Holy Spirit, we are upholding a tradition set by Jesus himself.³⁴

This tradition is planted deep in our souls and first takes root at the moment of baptism. For my denomination, the Disciples of Christ, baptism is both a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and a communal commitment to the whole people of God

³² Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Joseph D. Driskill, “Spirituality and the Disciples of Christ: Sanctifying the Ordinary,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples’ Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: MO: Chalice Press 2008), 235-236.

³³ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Great Spiritual Truths for Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 62.

³⁴ Stephen V. Doughty, *Discovering Community* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), 28-29.

through a specific congregation.³⁵ Baptism takes place in a corporate worship service. “...our immersion in the Christian community begins at the moment of baptism. The lives of others surround us. Water washes and marks us with the love of God. The Holy Spirit claims us to the very depths of our being. The community prays for us.”³⁶ We are bound to each other through Christ as his Holy Spirit begins to settle into us.

This Holy Spirit makes the community relationship sacred. We are connecting with each other in a way that surpasses secular gatherings. We are bonding with each other through prayer and spiritual commitment and caring. That spiritual component connects us without regard to our individual personalities, characteristics, or interests. The spiritual component moves us more deeply into our relationships. It is “more than a feeling of warmth and comfort that comes in knowing that there are people with whom we can share our lives.”³⁷ It is a connection with each other that grows out of our connection with God. Sometimes, the strength of such a connection lies in people who will not only listen to us, but people who will pray for us, encourage us, and hold us accountable so that we are better able to receive the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

This kind of connection is one for which people hunger. “In today’s world people can live disconnected from others even while attending and serving in church.”³⁹ There are many reasons for this. Electronic communication and technology create faceless

³⁵ Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice: Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1987), 61-68.

³⁶ Stephen V. Doughty, *Discovering Community*, 21.

³⁷ Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ Bill Easum and John Atkinson, *Go Big with Small Groups: Eleven Steps to an Explosive Small Groups Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 2.

social communities. In some ways, technology allows us to interact with others easily and without having to exert much effort. But, technology also significantly cuts down on face to face contact when we can hear inflection, and see body language, and tend to the nuances of the conversation.

Technology has also given us easy access to information from other cultures and to practices and opinions that may be unfamiliar to us. While that is not necessarily a scary thing, it does foster a constant re-examination of our knowledge and practices and of our understanding of the world. In response, we are more apt to change and our long-held traditions are challenged or abandoned altogether because we have such access to new choices and new ideas and new opinions. While hardly anyone would be willing to give up any choices that are available to us today, the price we pay is this: “radical and unpredictable change yields crisis at every level of our common existence.”⁴⁰

In WMCC, people’s lives are so overscheduled with soccer games, work, dance recitals, football practices, grocery shopping and doctor’s appointments that there is little time for strengthening our connections to each other and to God. I often hear remarks such as, “I am so tired that when I sit down to be quiet, I fall asleep.” Or, “I do not have a single moment for myself.” Or, “I just do not have the time to pray like I want to.” There is the sense that the schedule of life is spinning out of control, and the first casualty often seems to be the spiritual domain. The first things to be sacrificed for the sake of busy-ness are the practices that have traditionally kept people in relationship with God.

Yet, people still believe that life has a larger meaning and they search for a deeper connection. However, in recent years, the church has not been the avenue of choice for

⁴⁰ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 12-17.

people searching for spiritual meaning and community. The church is considered more of a religious museum than a vital community filled with the life and breath of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ Sometimes I wonder if the church's reputation has moved from a place of spiritual learning and relationships to yet another volunteer agency that is actively seeking people's time and money.

At first glance, that may seem discouraging. However, we can find encouragement in the truth that people want their lives to have meaning and purpose. As individuals search for this connection to something greater than their own lives, they still have an interest, perhaps even an enchantment, with mystical and spiritual things. Therefore, the church finds itself existing in a unique time that is ripe for spiritual awakening. The church can provide a hospitable place for sharing spiritual experiences.⁴² The church can provide a place that invites people not just into membership but invites them to a relationship with God, a relationship that is directed and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Relationships comprise the heart of Christian spiritual formation. God's own essence is the relationships found in the Trinity, the connections between and within the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because God is comprised of relationships, we are too. Our lives and our spirits are shaped by our relationships.⁴³

Small groups are one way to build these relationships with God, each other, and the rest of the world, and small groups are one way to deepen these relationships with

⁴¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: the End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 258.

⁴² Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 26-27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 153.

God, each other, and the rest of the world. Small groups can usher in a new awareness of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we find that this awareness is not a one day a week commitment but one that shapes every day of our lives.⁴⁴ Small groups provide the opportunity to make that commitment and to live out that commitment with others. Small groups are a viable solution for churches trying to reconnect what is disconnected.⁴⁵

The term “koinonia” is often used to describe these sacred relationships. Koinonia relationships are relationships with each other and with the world that grow out of our union with God. Koinonia can grow out of the small group experience. Small groups striving for koinonia relationships are begun in the Holy Spirit. As in biblical times, that Spirit is not very discerning. The Spirit pulls all kinds of people from all walks of life into koinonia. Small groups provide an opportunity for churches to grow in their ability to listen to different voices from different people. As they listen, relationships are built and nurtured, and trust grows and seeps out into the entire community. Small groups allow people to widen their circles from simply their core group of friends to many more of their brothers and sisters in Christ.⁴⁶

When that happens, these groups then become a path to spiritual formation through nurture and mutual accountability. By nurture and accountability, I mean the encouragement that groups can provide for members to pay closer attention to the Holy Spirit moving in their lives. This encouragement begins in the practice of various

⁴⁴Jeffrey D. Jones, *Traveling Together: A Guide for Disciple-Forming Congregations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 56.

⁴⁵ Bill Easum and John Atkinson, *Go Big with Small Groups*, 3.

⁴⁶ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community*, 104-105.

spiritual disciplines such as prayer or scriptural reflection. But, the relationships that are formed when we share our experiences with these practices in small groups become the backbone of spiritual formation.⁴⁷ Healthy churches nurture these relationships because they understand that as individual relationships with God grow and as individuals learn to recognize the Holy Spirit moving in their lives and to share these experiences with each other, relationships within the wider congregation grow deeper and richer.

Within the Disciples of Christ, we believe that the Holy Spirit is constantly renewing the church as well as the individual people of God. If we are not being challenged and transformed by the Holy Spirit as manifested in our relationships to each other and to God, something is wrong. “The mark of a holy congregation is its putting each member in touch with the living God.”⁴⁸ Small groups help members to do that. Small groups are concerned about the spiritual formation of their members, and they enable them to incorporate spiritual practices in their own lives and to share the experience of those practices with each other.

Seeing Red was an effort to incorporate all of these truths. First, we began with the assumption rooted in our biblical story that the Holy Spirit is very active in human life and has been from the very beginning. The Holy Spirit is a creative, loving force that moves in nature and moves in people. In fact, the Holy Spirit moved in the person of Jesus and then became his gift to his followers. He breathed the Spirit into his small community, and after he ascended into heaven, the Spirit dramatically swooped in with fire and wind empowering the disciples to minister in strong ways. As time went on, the Spirit manifested itself in various gifts such as generosity and kindness. In the biblical

⁴⁷ Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community*, 155.

⁴⁸ Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice*, 36.

story, the gift of the Holy Spirit was bound to the health of the community. The Spirit seldom showed up to just one individual. Rather, the Spirit was given to a community.

This biblical communal aspect was the inspiration for this project aimed at strengthening the community of the Wilson's Mills Christian Church congregation. I believe that many of our members experience 'disconnects' like those experienced in the outside world. Any number of things from over-scheduling to technology can be identified as reasons for the disconnect, but the disconnect occurs nevertheless. When that happens, people become impatient with spiritual things. They want their stressors to be alleviated immediately. So, they began to seek their truth and their meaning from inside themselves because they have control over that. When spiritual things become individualized, the church community can easily become a battle of personality and wills with very little regard for the power and movement of the Holy Spirit.

However, small groups that have the intent of spiritual formation can begin to transform the individuality that has seeped into the church into a community that nurtures each other, helps each other to recognize the Holy Spirit in their lives, and holds each other accountable. *Seeing Red* was a ministry designed to do just that. It was rooted in our biblical story and implemented in our modern world. I believe that it brought forth ancient truths of the Holy Spirit's presence and validated the benefits of small groups as identified in current research and studies.

Most importantly, *Seeing Red* helped us begin to move away from a binitarian faith and towards a faith that anticipated full cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Participants grew comfortable identifying places in their own lives where the Holy Spirit was on the loose, and they became eager to share their experiences. "When we

participate in intentional spiritual practices...our lives are a bit more like the life of Jesus, the One into whose image we are being transformed.”⁴⁹ That happened in *Seeing Red*. The groups themselves were visible signs that the Holy Spirit is directly involved in the life of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church.

⁴⁹ Lynne M. Baab, *Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 191.

CHAPTER 4

SEEING RED: THE PROJECT

Seeing Red for Lent began in September 2012 when I selected my Lay Advisory Committee (LAC). My goal was for the committee to be representative of the church in terms of age and gender while also considering particular skills and gifts that would be helpful in designing and implementing the project. In addition, I wanted to appoint committee members who would fulfill their responsibilities. My experiences in my tenure as pastor led me to select six church members and one minister from another local Disciples of Christ church. Five women were selected to serve. These women included the chairperson of our elders whose practice of faith exemplifies a deep commitment to spiritual growth within our church; the chairperson for our deacons whose background as a teacher was expected to be helpful with session planning and evaluation; and the chairperson for our General Board whose practicality and commitment to the church is well-respected. These women are in their 50's. Another woman, also a teacher, was selected because of her creativity. Although she is not currently working as teacher, her creativity is constantly on display in her role as mother of two children, aged four and two. Finally, a local minister was selected to serve because of her twenty year history of ministering in Johnston County, North Carolina. Two men were selected, one for his lifelong membership and service to the church. His presence was intended to bring

credibility for the project with our older members. The other man joined the church in 2012 with his wife and two children. He has expressed an interest in spiritual formation and he brings a fresh perspective to our work as a church.

On September 10, 2012, the LAC met for the first time. In order to “sweeten” the deal of their service, I provided coffee, lemonade, and a homemade dessert. Because the project was intended to encourage conversation about spiritual matters, I asked members to describe a moment or a time when the Holy Spirit was especially present to them in the church. The following three themes emerged: 1) The Holy Spirit is especially present in relationships; 2) The Holy Spirit is especially present in worship when the congregation, including children, spontaneously responds to the message or the music; and 3) The Holy Spirit is especially present in community service and mission, particularly the HOPE (Helping Other People Eat) meals ministry.

I then shared a PowerPoint presentation that detailed the responsibilities of the committee and my responsibilities as the minister (See Appendix 1). I explained that while the project would partially fulfill the requirements for my doctoral degree, it would also be a ministry to enhance our congregation’s spiritual life. The LAC’s job would be to join me in responsibility for planning the ministry, implementing the ministry (during Lent of 2013), and evaluating the ministry. The ministry would be a small group ministry designed to address the following characteristic of congregational life: “The WMCC congregation has historically defined its spiritual formation in terms of its own tradition, personalities, and practicality rather than reliance upon and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.”

I explained that the project would use small groups to further develop a congregational context in which the Holy Spirit would be the recognized center of spiritual formation. I provided a tentative action plan for the project, a description of the project, and a draft copy of potential definitions to be used as the project was discussed (See Appendix 2). In addition, I shared four questions that I wanted small group participants to be able to answer at the project's completion. 1) Where have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in your lives? 2) What was your participation during that experience? 3) What are you called to do or be in response? And, 4) how can we better engage the Holy Spirit in our congregational life?

In preparation for our next meeting, LAC members were asked to spend time with the following biblical passages and to jot down any questions or thoughts that these passages evoke: Genesis 2:7; John 20:22, and Acts 8:15-17. LAC members were also asked to consider the format for these small spiritual formation groups which would include such things as meeting space, the "order of service" for the meeting, reflection questions, and whether or not the group participants will be asked to take part in a daily practice between group sessions.

When the LAC met for its second meeting on October 15, 2012, we decided that the areas previously identified as places where the Holy Spirit was especially present in their lives (relationships, worship, and service) could easily be built into themes for each of the five small group sessions. Specifically, the planned themes were 1) How the Holy Spirit comes to us and abides in us; 2) The nature of the relationships that the Holy Spirit calls forth; 3) Opening ourselves and our relationships to the Holy Spirit; 4) How the Holy Spirit is present in worship; and 5) Response to the Holy Spirit through mission and

service. I suggested using specific scripture as starting points for addressing each session's theme.

The LAC then split into two groups. One group was charged with addressing the theme of how the Holy Spirit comes to us and abides us in us using Genesis 2:7, John 20:22, and Acts 8:15-17. The other group was charged with addressing the theme of the nature of relationships that the Holy Spirit calls forth using Ephesians 4:1-5 and Matthew 18:20. Both groups were asked to address the following questions in their discussions:

How do we want people to feel/respond when they enter the space for the small group? What needs to happen for the participants to center themselves for the task at hand? What helps you center? How will the topic be introduced? What do we want to happen in this particular group meeting? (If we could wave a magic wand over the participants and initiate a new insight or a change, what would that be?) How can we shape the conversation to get there? How can we strengthen the connection to the Spirit in between meetings? Is there anything we can ask group members to do? Is there anything the facilitator can do?

After their discussions as two smaller groups, the LAC joined back together to share their insights. All agreed that the first session should encourage participants to feel at ease and open to the small group experience. To this end, suggestions included soft music, candles, warm lighting (no overheads) and breathing exercises. Given that the suggested scripture closely related the Holy Spirit to breath, I suggested using a breath prayer as an opening exercise. "A breath prayer is one that moves in and out on the wind of your breath, as the Spirit of God intermingles with your own Spirit."¹ While this kind

¹ Teresa A. Blythe, *50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 86.

of prayer would be new to most participants, the LAC agreed that it would set a relaxed and more contemplative tone for the session.

It was also suggested that the session's theme be introduced with a scripture reading and a reflection question. This suggestion grew out of the LAC's experience of meeting together for the first time. At that meeting, LAC members began to thoughtfully share with each other in response to a reflection question. The more they spoke at that first meeting, the more willing others were to speak. The sharing that took place in response to a specific question helped everyone feel more at ease.

The LAC suggested a simple starter question such as "When have you felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in your own life?" The desired outcome of the first small group meeting would be twofold. First, the LAC hoped that participants would recognize when and how the Holy Spirit is already moving in their lives, and second, participants would be willing to talk about it. Suggestions for activities during the week following the first session included asking participants to take a few minutes each day to reflect on how the Holy Spirit might have been moving that day. Then, the participants would be asked to report back to at least one other person. They can do that through email, written notes, telephone calls, or personal conversation.

To address the nature of relationships that the Holy Spirit calls forth, the LAC suggested reading Marlys Boddy's children's book called *The Glassmakers of Gurven*² as an opening activity. They noted that children's books can often be used to address adult issues in a non-threatening way. They stated that the desired outcome of the second

² Marlys Boddy, *The Glassmakers of Gurven* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

session meeting was simply stronger personal connections and relationships. They suggested reading the scripture (Matthew 18:20 and Ephesians 4:1-5) and engaging in discussion using questions such as “How are church relationships different from social/work/family relationships? What significant events in our lives are formed by church? What expectations do we have of church family? How does church family sometimes let us down? What is our responsibility to others in our church family? How do we sense the Holy Spirit in each other?”

The LAC then suggested that any activities planned during the time between sessions should be very specific. For example, if participants were expected to reflect on a passage of scripture, the passage itself should be sent to participants early with specific reflection questions and specific reflection tasks such as writing down a verse of scripture and putting it on the dashboard or mirror. They agreed that “the more specific, the better.” Indeed, our congregation is full of concrete thinkers who will be more likely to respond to specific instructions.

I agreed to take this feedback from the LAC meeting and formulate session plans based on their suggestions and discussion. These plans will be provided to the LAC for comment and editing prior to the November meeting.

On November 19, 2012, the LAC met for the third time. The first two session plans were approved without changes. Because the LAC would not meet in December, we discussed how we would advertise *Seeing Red for Lent* for our congregation in the New Year. I agreed to write an article for the January church newsletter (See Appendix 3) and to order posters with matching bulletin inserts (See Appendix 4). We then discussed meeting times for the small groups. The LAC recommended scheduling one

small group with childcare for Wednesday mornings at 10:00 a.m. This has traditionally been a time that our young mothers have participated in past studies. The LAC then suggested a meeting time of Sunday afternoon at 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., if needed. The LAC was cognizant of the fact that many potential participants were already at the church for scheduled events on two other evenings of the week. They wanted to suggest times that would impose the least on everyone's schedules.

As in the previous meeting, the LAC split into two groups to address session themes. One group was charged with addressing the theme of "Opening ourselves and our relationships to the Holy Spirit using Acts 2:1-13, 43-47. The second group was charged with addressing the theme of how the Holy Spirit is present in worship using John 4:23-24 and Romans 12:1-2.

Both groups were asked to address the same questions as mentioned above for their assigned themes. After meeting separately, the two groups came back together for a joint discussion. They agreed that the most important thing for the third session was for the participants to have open minds and open hearts to what the Holy Spirit can do for you, in you, and to you. They suggested that participants be asked to bring in a photograph of someone who has been influential to their spiritual lives. The LAC thought that participants might be a little hesitant to share about a personal relationship, so they suggested that participants complete one sentence about their photograph. Examples included the following: "This person enriched my spiritual understanding by _____. I could see the Holy Spirit working in this person by _____. The Holy Spirit was present in this relationship through _____. The Holy Spirit was present in

this person through _____. I was aware of the Holy Spirit working in my life through this person by_____.”

The LAC stated that they wanted this session to result in greater unity and community. They suggested that the participants reflect on the following questions as part of the session. How can we as members of WMCC work to create space for the Holy Spirit to work? How can we foster an awareness of the Holy Spirit at work in the church? How do we as a church family point out the Holy Spirit in each other’s lives? How do we become aware of the Holy Spirit working in the church?

I asked if it would be helpful to mail a red postcard to participants once a week reiterating something from the small group session. The LAC agreed that this would be useful.

To address how the Holy Spirit is present in worship, the LAC suggested concentrating on the use of scripture in worship. Their rationale was that the entire worship service is built around a particular passage of scripture, so engaging the scripture might well result in a deeper experience with the Holy Spirit in worship. The LAC suggested using a variation of the contemplative method of scriptural reading called *Lectio Divina*. In this method, scripture is read four times. The first reading would be done together as a group. The second reading would be done by the leader, who would emphasize particular words or phrases. The third reading would be done silently as individuals. The individuals would then be encouraged to respond by sketching something on a piece of paper illustrating words or phrases from the scripture that were particularly meaningful to them. The sketch, of course, would be drawn with a red

pencil! The fourth reading would again be done together. After this reading, participants would be invited to share their sketches and reflections.

The LAC recognized that this activity would likely be an unfamiliar exercise and suggested that the facilitator demonstrate how this process works by doing lectio divina with the first scripture selection and showing the response to the group. For the second scripture selection, the group would follow the same method for themselves. The LAC hoped that this activity would allow participants to experience how the Holy Spirit may move through individuals first, and then allow the individuals to bring something to worship as a group. They also suggested that the scripture for the following week's worship service be given to participants so that they could 'try out' the lectio divina method of reading to determine if delving into scripture prior to Sunday would enhance the worship experience.

I agreed to take the feedback and suggestions from this meeting and put it into two session plans. These plans would be provided to the LAC for comment prior to the January meeting. As I worked on the session plan for the worship theme, I wondered if we should include a movie clip that would demonstrate the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in worship. Via email, I suggested to the committee that we consider using a clip from the *Color Purple* of a particularly boisterous worship service. They agreed.

At our meeting on January 7, 2013, the committee confirmed meeting times for church members to participate in *Seeing Red for Lent*. Times were scheduled for Sundays from February 17 – March 17 at 2:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m, or on Wednesdays from February 20 – March 20 at 10:00 a.m. As we discussed recruiting participants, one member suggested that the LAC personally invite church members to participate. Other

members agreed, and one member coordinated the contacts so that the same people would not get multiple invitations.

We then discussed the final theme in our series: Response to the Holy Spirit through mission and service. Because only one theme was being discussed, the committee did not split into groups. They were charged with addressing the theme using John 13:12-20 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. The committee discussed the importance of using our gifts when we serve, and they noted that in some cases, our gifts are more readily identified by others. The committee decided to use a gift identification exercise as a way to demonstrate to participants the gifts that others saw in them. Specifically, the committee asked that everyone's name be written on separate sheets of paper. Each name would be passed around the group for each participant to write down a gift they have seen in that person. In addition, I suggested that we ask our deacons and elders to name the top three needs in our church. These needs would be written on a white board for this final session in order to identify where our gifts could faithfully be put to use.

I agreed to take their feedback and suggestions and to put it into the final session plan. Although we did not have time at this meeting to adequately address evaluation, I reminded the committee of the questions that were identified in the beginning as questions we hoped participants would be able to answer: 1) Where have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in your lives? 2) How would you describe your participation in that experience? 3) What are you called to do or be in response? And, 4) How can we better engage the Holy Spirit in our congregational life, including our worship, meetings, service to the community and in determining how we further the mission of Christ in this particular church? I also provided a list of all goals identified in

the first four session plans. The committee is to think about evaluation in terms of these questions and goals. (All Session Plans can be found in Appendix 5).

On February 5, 2013 the committee met. One member shared a new idea for closing the final session. She stated that the “laying on of hands” is a biblical concept, and she pointed out that while church members often pray for each other, we seldom pray for each other when we are with each other. She proposed ending the *Seeing Red* sessions by offering participants the opportunity to have their group pray for them with a laying on of hands. The prayer would be a ‘sending forth.’ Another member pointed out that some groups may be more comfortable with this closing than others and suggested having an alternate idea to provide the group leader with options if she did not believe that participants would be comfortable with the laying on of hands. The committee suggested that this decision be at the group leader’s discretion.

The LAC reviewed its recruitment efforts for the group and made final assignments for contacting church members and inviting them to participate. I brought it to the LAC’s attention that some participants have already asked about the interchangeability of the groups. Specifically, participants wanted some assurance that if they were unable to attend their group for a week, they could attend another one. After some discussion, the LAC decided to strongly encourage commitment to a single group and its meeting time. However, if a participant had a scheduling conflict, some flexibility would certainly be permitted.

As we discussed evaluation, I reminded the LAC that the evaluation can be simple. As a committee, what do we want to know? What do we want to have changed? What do we want the participants to have gotten out of the experience? Participant

evaluations would be written, and an opportunity for a group discussion as evaluation would be provided.

The LAC suggested that the evaluation be called “Reflection Questions” (See Appendix 6) to encourage feedback that did not have a punitive feel. Another member suggested that the reflection questions be limited to one side of one page and that any identifying information (such as gender or specific group membership) be optional. Other LAC members agreed.

I suggested that the reflection questions be given to participants at the last session meeting (March 17 and March 20). I also brought forth the idea of hosting a luncheon for *Seeing Red* participants after the worship service on March 24. Their completed reflection questions would be their ticket to lunch, and the meal would be a time to engage participants in a group discussion about the *Seeing Red* experience. This would serve as the group discussion evaluation. The LAC agreed to this idea.

I presented draft session evaluations to be informally completed by me, as the facilitator, at the end of each session. Our intent was to identify any issues to be addressed prior to the next session. The committee reviewed these draft evaluation questions and suggested a few minor changes. Because the LAC members planned to participate in the sessions, they agreed to provide input for each weekly evaluation. I made the suggested changes to the questions and sent them to the LAC members for approval. (See Appendix 7)

On March 11, 2013 the LAC met for its last official meeting. At this point, we were approximately midway through the *Seeing Red* session meetings. Members of the LAC briefly shared their experiences as group participants. They noted that participants

have been very open to listening, sharing, and elaborating on their personal experiences with the Holy Spirit. Participants have been on time for sessions, and for the most part, participants have been faithful in attendance. Further, the LAC pointed out that the mix of participants in each group has provided a welcome opportunity for people who do not normally socialize together to get to know each other better.

The LAC again reviewed the reflection questions to be handed out at the last group meetings and turned in at our luncheon on March 24th. A few changes were made to further clarify our wording. At the luncheon on March 24th, participants will be asked to briefly discuss these questions at their tables and as a larger group.

The LAC recruited twenty-nine church members to participate in the *Seeing Red* groups. Thirteen people signed up for the Sunday, 2:00 p.m. group (3 men and 10 women). Ten people signed up for the Sunday, 4:00 p.m. group (4 men and 7 women). Six people signed up for the Wednesday, 10:00 a.m. group (1 man and 5 women). The week before the sessions began, I sent a letter to each participant (see Appendix 8). In this letter, I highlighted the importance of participating with the same group throughout all sessions, if at all possible. I explained the purpose of the groups, and I also asked that participants make every effort to be on time. This was an important request. I knew that late arrivals would be disruptive to the opening activities for each session. Surprisingly, throughout the five weeks, participants were on time!

Our first sessions were held on February 17 and February 20 of 2013, and they followed the format of Session Plan One. We met in the fellowship hall. I placed chairs for group members in a semi-circle. For each group, I only set out enough chairs for participants because I thought empty chairs would be a visual distraction. I also set up a

worship table that displayed candles, a red stole, and a painting depicting a breath prayer. Eleven participants were present for the 2:00 p.m. group; nine participants were present for the 4:00 p.m. group, and six participants were present for the 10:00 a.m. group. Once participants were seated, we reviewed the purpose of the sessions and the format that they would take. I then read Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22 and noted the importance of breath. In the Genesis passage, God gave life through breath. In the John passage, Jesus gave the Holy Spirit through breath. With soft meditation music playing in the background, we then tried a breath prayer together. I was apprehensive about attempting a group breath prayer because participants would be unfamiliar with this method of prayer. However, I was surprised by their eager participation. One participant stated that “Wow, just slowing down like that puts your attention on God.” Another participant remarked that she wished the entire congregation could experience “prayer like that.”

I then read Acts 8:15-17 and noted that the Holy Spirit is pure gift. I affirmed that we cannot earn the Holy Spirit; we cannot control the Holy Spirit; but we can certainly notice the Holy Spirit (which is a main point of *Seeing Red*). I put a timeline on the whiteboard stretching back fifteen years. I asked participants to put their initials on the timeline indicating an experience when they especially felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. Participants were so vocal and so detailed in their responses that I was not able to get through all of the reflection questions for this exercise. I did not anticipate that such a deep level of sharing would take place, especially at the first session. Although experiences with the Holy Spirit varied from person to person and group to group, one experience came up in all three groups: the Holy Spirit’s presence at the time of a loved one’s death. The presence was described as a sense of deep peace. Many stated that the

Spirit was present in the care and concern of others and that an internal strength was activated. They attributed this strength to the power of the Holy Spirit.

After each participant shared, I asked for any further reflections before we closed. There were none. For the upcoming week, I asked the participants to take a few moments each evening to review their day paying particular attention to any moments when they realized that the Holy Spirit was moving in their own lives or in someone else's life. Part two of this assignment was to share one of those experiences with another person in the group. In addition, I asked participants to bring in one item for the following session that represented the Holy Spirit in their lives.

For the closing prayer, participants thought of a single word that described the Holy Spirit in their lives. I thanked God for the many ways that the Spirit comes to us, and each participant was invited to name their word describing the Spirit in their lives. I jotted each word down as they spoke them. I used each group's words to create a post card printed on red cardstock to mail to participants during the week (See Appendix 9). All sessions lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

Session Two Groups were held on February 24 and February 27. Room set-up was the same, although the worship table changed a little. We continued to include the candles and red stole, but this week, we also included stained glass fragments and a small bowl of red glass stones. Thirteen participants were present for the 2:00 p.m. group; seven participants were present for the 4:00 p.m. group; and five participants were present for the 10:00 a.m. group. As participants arrived, they were asked to place their items representing the Spirit on the worship table. Because all groups had responded so well to the opening breath prayer, we begin Session Two with a breath prayer as well.

One participant remarked that she was “hoping we would do that again,” and another member stated that, “I feel the Holy Spirit when we pray that way.”

When asked about their assignment to notice the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives and to share their insights with another participant, they readily shared their experiences. Some said that they were expecting a dramatic moment but realized that the Spirit came through little joys such as conversations and meaningful work. Others noticed the Spirit in the beauty of nature. Others reported finding the Spirit at work in their families or in other relationships. I was very encouraged by the ease with which the participants talked about these spiritual things. They clearly recognized the Holy Spirit moving in their lives even when their activities were not dramatic or extreme.

The participants had been asked to bring in an object representing the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives. All but one participant remembered to do this assignment. Objects included a wrapped gift, crosses, an angel pin, a hymnal, a drinking cup, a teacher’s pointer, a picture of a dinner table, a smart phone, a child’s toy, a book mark with a prayer, a wind chime, prayer books, a picture of the chalice, a hospital bracelet, a flashlight, smart phones, letters from friends, crosses, a child’s toy, and a can of chicken noodle soup as a reminder that the Holy Spirit is a comforter! Each participant shared their reasoning for choosing their particular items. The sharing was like a spiritual show-and-tell! As we shared, participants recognized that these items were built in ‘markers’ in their lives of the Holy Spirit. In fact, we can borrow each other’s markers as reminders of the Spirit’s presence in our lives.

We then read the scripture (Matthew 18:20 and Ephesians 4:1-5). I pointed out that in Matthew, Jesus promises to be with us when two or three are gathered. His spirit

is living and breathing among us. This spirit calls us to a way of being together as Christians that is characterized by all of the things Paul mentions in Ephesians – humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity. I then read the children’s book, *The Glassmakers of Gurven*³, and I asked participants to listen for the places where the Holy Spirit shows up in the story. They readily identified characters in the story acting as instruments of the Holy Spirit. They also identified spiritual qualities that made it possible for these characters to be used by the Holy Spirit (humility, selflessness, behavioral accountability, and honesty).

We then split into smaller groups, and participants discussed questions specific to church relationships (See Session Plan Two found in Appendix 5). They seemed eager to engage with these discussions, and in fact, I had to ‘call time’ in order for us to finish on time. A primary participant insight about church relationships was that behavioral expectations are higher in the church. We expect members to be polite. We expect members to be respectful. We expect members to give each other the benefit of the doubt. We expect members to have each other’s best interests at heart. When members do not meet these expectations, people’s feelings get hurt.

Participants in each group noted the importance of behavioral accountability. We must be accountable to each other for our behavior. In addition, they noted the importance of worship and fellowship if we hope to encounter the Holy Spirit. Many members recounted specific times in worship when they especially felt the Spirit and they wished that more people had been in attendance.

As we closed, I asked participants to record Matthew 18:20 (“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”) on a sticky note or in their

³ Marlys Boddy, *The Glassmakers of Gurven* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

smart phone or some other place that is easily seen. Throughout the day, they were to intentionally notice their communication with others and to ask God “How can I better honor your presence in this encounter?”

In preparation for Session Three, they were asked to ponder the following questions: Who are the people who bring humility, gentleness, patience, love and unity out of you? Which people bring out your best? Participants were then instructed to bring a photograph of one of these people to our next session. We then closed in prayer, and each participant was invited to take a red glass stone as a reminder of the Holy Spirit that goes with us every day.

Prior to Session Three, I mailed a red postcard to each participant with the suggested Bible verse of Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I also included clip-art of various ways of communicating in 2013 and asked “How do you honor the presence of Christ in your daily interactions?” (See Appendix 9).

Session Three Groups were held on March 3 and March 6. Room set-up was the same, although again, we changed the worship table to accommodate the session theme of “Opening Ourselves and Our Relationships to the Holy Spirit.” We continued to include the candles and red stole, but we left the rest of the table empty. As participants arrived, they placed the photographs that they had been asked to bring on the table. We opened the session with a breath prayer.

Thirteen members were present for the 2:00 p.m. group; eight members were present for the 4:00 p.m. group, and five members were present for the 10:00 a.m. Wednesday group. We began our discussions with reflections on the assignment of

intentionally honoring the presence of Christ in daily interactions. Participants agreed that they had noticed more needs and responded to more needs in the people around them. One participant shared that an elderly stranger had approached her in a parking lot and asked for a ride to local pharmacy. While this participant's first response was to say, "No," she ended up turning around and providing the requested transportation. Participants also stated that remembering the presence of the Holy Spirit made them guard the words that came out of their mouths more closely. Self-control was a result of the assignment. One member stated that she simply did not respond to a group of emails because she knew that her response would not reflect the Holy Spirit. She stated, "Sometimes the Spirit leads you to silence!"

Group members were then shown the following three statements: 1) I know I grew spiritually (became more Christ-like) in this relationship as evidenced by _____; 2) I know the Holy Spirit was present in this relationship because _____; and, 3) I was aware of the Holy Spirit working in my life through this relationship by _____.

Participants were instructed to select one statement and to "fill in the blank" as it related to the photograph they were asked to bring. In all three groups, participants shared quite profusely and emotionally, and they were simply unable to limit themselves to merely filling in a blank. Even when I reminded the groups that this was fill in the blank exercise, each participant wanted to share more extensively about what the person in the photograph meant to them.

Some themes emerged. When thinking about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our relationships, each group emphasized how others set examples for them and how others held them accountable to a faithful way of living. Accountability was a big

discussion point as a doorway for the Spirit. Further, the group pointed out how ordinary people were responsible for opening the door to the Holy Spirit into their lives – no special training required. We then read the passage from Acts (Acts 2:1-13 and 42-47) and talked about ways that we can open ourselves to the Spirit in our relationships in the church. Participants emphasized the importance of being very deliberate in efforts to notice the Holy Spirit. All three groups agreed that intentional awareness was the primary factor in noticing the Holy Spirit's activity each day. Participants also volunteered that since they have been participating in "Seeing Red," they have more readily given the Spirit credit for various things in their lives.

Prior to this session, I wrote participant names on a small slip of red paper and put them in a bowl. As we ended Session Three, I asked each participant to draw out a name. The assignment was to pray for the person whose name they drew. Specifically, they were to pray that God would open the relationships in this person's life to the power of the Holy Spirit. In addition, they were to contact the person (via email, text, phone, facebook, etc.) to say that prayers were ascending on their behalf.

Because the upcoming session's emphasis would be worship, I asked participants to ponder times when they have been deeply moved by worship. They were to consider the following questions: Were you worshiping alone or in a group? What was happening in your life at the time? What was going on in worship?

Prior to Session Four, I mailed a red postcard to each participant naming some of the characteristics they mentioned when describing relationships that are open to the Holy Spirit. (See Appendix 9).

Session Four Groups were held on March 10 and March 13. Attendance was down for the 2:00 p.m. group. In fact, that group started with seven participants in attendance and ended with only five because one person became ill and had to be driven home by another participant. Illness was the primary factor impacting attendance for this particular group. Seven participants attended the 4:00 p.m. group. In addition, one participant in the 2:00 p.m. group was unable to attend at the scheduled time and attended the 10:00 a.m. group instead increasing their participant number to seven.

We opened, as usual, with a breath prayer and soft music. Room set-up was the same as previous meetings. Our worship table included items from our weekly worship service. Specifically, we included candles, a red stole, communion set, a handbell, an offering plate, the Bible, and a hymnal. We then reviewed the previous session's assignment of praying for a specific person in the group. Participants stated that these prayers helped them to feel connected to "their" person during the week. Visible reminders – like the piece of paper with the person's name or like the red postcards that go out each week – helped participants to remember to pray for their assigned person. One participant stated that prayer connected them "spiritually" to each other. She said, "It is a soul connection." One of our older participants commented that she received a call from the person who had drawn her name and that it was someone considerably younger than her. She said, "That just meant a lot – to know that someone was thinking of me." I was pleased with the personal connections that were repeatedly made throughout our sessions.

I read the scripture for the day (John 4:23-24 and Romans 12:1-2) and we watched a worship segment from the movie "The Color Purple" that included the

congregation singing the words, “God is trying to tell you something.” After watching the video clip, the group discussed how the expectation that God is, indeed, trying to tell us something impacts the approach to worship. When worshipers expect to hear God’s voice, they will prepare for it. When worshipers expect to hear God’s voice, they are willing to be vulnerable and open to the Holy Spirit. The preparation, vulnerability and openness enable our spirits to worship fully. Groups recognized that “fully” can mean passionate worship as a full body experience like in the movie clip, or passionate worship as a quiet experience. Openness to God is the key.

As planned, we then tried a variation on lectio divina, a contemplative method of reading scripture. In our variation, participants were asked to sketch out a visible response to the scripture. I used a white board to demonstrate how this task could be approached with John 4:23-24. Participants were then given sketch pads, red pencils, and copies of Romans 12:1-2 to try the exercise for themselves. Many went into the sanctuary or outside on the patio to complete the assignment. When we came back together as a group, they shared their sketches. Some were a little self-conscious about their artistic skills, and most of the drawings were very concrete. Interestingly, the passage mentions “living sacrifice” and many participants drew something to represent a living sacrifice, and the sacrifice had a smiley face! One participant commented on how the words from scripture stuck with him by engaging them in different ways – reading them silently, hearing them read by someone else, reading them out loud, and then responding to them with a drawing. We had some discussion on how our understanding and involvement of scripture is enhanced by approaching it from different angles.

I pointed out that scripture is central to our worship services. The entire service is built around a particular passage of scripture. We can enter into that scripture ahead of time as a way of preparing to hear God's voice. Recognizing that, I said that I would send out via email (or snail mail for those who do not use computers) the scripture that will be used in the following Sunday's worship service. I asked participants to spend some time in prayer asking God to reveal the particular message meant for them in the passage. Throughout the week, I asked them to experiment with different ways of listening to Scripture by reading it silently and out loud. I asked them to consider the following questions: What words stand out for you? Is there a verse that speaks to you?

In preparation for Session Five, I gave each participant a sheet of paper divided into three columns. The first column was labeled "For Me." The second column was labeled, "For Others." The third column was labeled "For God." At the end of each day, participants were to jot down in each column the things they bought or did for themselves, others and God. They were asked to bring the list to the final session.

We closed this session with a palm to palm benediction. Participants stood up, touched hands palm to palm with each person in the room and said these words: "May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this week."

The fifth and final sessions of *Seeing Red* were held on March 17 and March 20. Eleven people attended the 2:00 p.m. group. Nine people attended the 4:00 p.m. group and seven people attended the 10:00 a.m. group. Room set-up was as usual, although this week, in addition to the candles and red stole, I set out several objects that represented gifts and skills in the church. These included cooking utensils, a calculator, sheet music, a hammer, a flash drive, and a children's toy. Also, prior to the session, I asked our eight

deacons and five elders to identify the top three needs in the church. I recorded these on the white board and then covered them up so that they could not be seen until the appropriate time. In addition, I wrote the names of each participant on a card, and as they arrived for their session, I asked them to consider the name on each card and to write down a word or a phrase on each card that describes a gift that the identified person has. I described “gift” as something that “sparkles” about that person. I then took up the cards.

We began the session by discussing their experience with reading/meditating on the scripture during the previous week (John 12: 1-8), the story of Mary washing Jesus’ feet. Participants each had different parts of scripture that stood out to them. For some, it was the words Jesus spoke. For others, it was the description of the smell of the perfume. For others, it was the description of a shared meal. Each person had a different ‘take’ on the scripture, but they all agreed that setting aside the time to read and meditate on the scripture prior to worship enhanced the worship experience. One member struggled to allow the scripture to simply speak – she approached it from a much more academic perspective. But, overall, participants clearly recognized how much more spiritually prepared they were for worship after having spent time with the scripture.

We then briefly discussed the practice of reading scripture and using the imagination to put ourselves into the story. I led a guided meditation of John 13:1-20 which allowed the participants to imagine themselves with the disciples when Jesus washed their feet (See Appendix 5). Participants responded well to the meditation with remarks such as “I could feel the water on my feet.” Or, “I wish I had gotten a pedicure!” One participant was quite tearful after the meditation. All in all, they seemed to have no

trouble finding themselves in the story as I led the meditation. Afterwards, we spent time talking about the overwhelming love that Jesus must have had for his disciples and the overwhelming love that Jesus has for us today. We then talked about our own responses to that love and the absolute necessity of our willingness to serve to the best of our ability as Jesus served.

We then looked at the personal time inventories I asked the participants to complete during the previous week using the columns of “For Me,” “For Others” and “For God.” Those with small children noticed that the “For Others” column was heaviest, while those without small children noticed that the “For Me” column was heaviest. Participants in all groups pointed out that the lines between the columns were “blurry.” For instance, when they served others through our HOPE (Helping Other People Eat) ministry, they were also serving God. Or, times of personal devotion could be labeled as “For Me” and also “For God.” Participants agreed that this exercise was a helpful way to explore the balance (or lack thereof) in their lives.

I then read I Corinthians 12:4-11 which identifies gifts of the Spirit. Like the gifts identified in the scripture, the gifts that we are given today continue to be gifts that communicate the message of the Gospel. I opened the doors to the white board revealing the needs identified by our church’s leadership (See Appendix 10). As the participants reviewed the list, I called out one gift from each of their cards (without specifying who those gifts belong to), and I asked them to tell me which need a particular gift might serve. Each group was surprised by how many of the identified needs could be met by the identified gifts. After the exercise, I gave each participant the card with his/her name on it and the identified gifts.

We closed by a laying on of hands. We placed a chair in the center of the group, and we all stood around it. Participants were each invited to sit in the chair while the rest of us stood around them and placed our hands either on them or on the shoulders of the person in front of us. Every person participated. As they each took a seat, I offered a prayer to God of thanksgiving for them. The prayer was personalized to express gifts that I saw in the person. Then, I prayed that God would fill them with the Holy Spirit so that they could live the life they were called to live. At that point, I stopped speaking and the other participants offered prayers of thanksgiving or intercession. I had been hesitant to try this activity because it was so out of our usual comfort zones, but in each group, this prayer was a powerful moment. Afterwards, one participant stated that she had been a little nervous, “But, when I heard the words that were being said, I thought, ‘I want me some of that!’” Many participants stated how warm and safe the prayer felt. I myself felt the presence of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF SEEING RED

The project, Seeing Red for Lent, was a success. In their written group evaluation (See Appendix 11), the LAC reported that Seeing Red went “exceptionally well.” They specifically highlighted the trust that took root among themselves as they developed the project and among participants as they took part in the project. In addition, based upon their own experience as members of Seeing Red groups, the LAC noted that other participants overwhelmingly expressed a stronger awareness of the Holy Spirit in daily activities. As for the participants themselves, they provided written responses to eight reflection questions, and they, too, praised the level of group trust that grew out of their dialogue about the Holy Spirit’s movement in their lives. They noted a sharper awareness of the Holy Spirit and a greater intentionality in their search for the Holy Spirit.

Of the initial twenty-nine people who signed up to participate in Seeing Red, seven were men, and twenty-two were women. One of the women declined to participate after the first session stating that while she liked to talk she did not like to talk about personal experience. Everyone else attended with regularity. Sixteen participants attended all five sessions; ten participants attended four sessions; and two participants attended only three. Excluding the participant who dropped out after the first session,

thirteen participants had not taken part in any small group or study group at our church prior to Seeing Red.

As a result of this project, the LAC hoped that the participants would be able to answer the following questions: 1) Where have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in your lives? 2) How would you describe your participation in that experience? 3) What are you called to do or be in response? And, 4) How can we better engage the Holy Spirit in our congregational life, including our worship, meetings, service to the community and in determining how we further the mission of Christ in this particular church?

The LAC developed eight reflection questions to serve as the evaluation for this project. These were qualitative questions meant to allow participants to describe their experience in Seeing Red. While I do believe participants answered the questions truthfully, I also question their bias. “Respondents love to deliver answers they think will make the evaluators happy,” and participants wanted me to be happy! They knew that their participation would impact my work towards my Doctor of Ministry, and they wanted me to be happy with them. In fact, in the weeks following the completion of Seeing Red, several participants asked, “Did we give you anything you could use?” I am not entirely sure how much information on the evaluation is written based on actual experience or based on affection for me. However, the LAC members and I met briefly after each session to jot down any observations or issues, and our observations did support the positive experience reported in the group evaluations.

If I were designing this project’s evaluation again, I would build in quantitative questions to be asked prior to the sessions and after the sessions end such as, “What is your favorite way to pray?” or “How often do you notice the presence of the Holy

Spirit?” or “How often do you talk with others about how the Holy Spirit moves in your life?” Questions like these might show clearer changes in spiritual formation. In addition, such questions would have given me spiritual benchmarks other than my own observations. While I believe I know my congregation well, their own “before and after” descriptions of their spiritual lives would have given the evaluation results more personal depth. Then again, the Holy Spirit is difficult to quantify!

Even with these biases in the evaluation, we did gather some helpful data. First, one group exercise that seemed to work particularly well was the kick-off discussion in Session One. Participants were asked to describe a time in their lives when they especially felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. The LAC and I were pleasantly surprised at how willing and eager participants were to share these very personal stories. In fact, many of them reported that this activity bound them together right from the start. This sentiment was evident in answers to their evaluation reflection questions. Comments about this activity included: “I think this helped us to be comfortable and open with each other and to get more out of the experiences in all of the sessions,” or “It was very meaningful to hear each person’s life event of feeling the Holy Spirit,” or “I like sharing my inner thoughts with the group.” This starter exercise was very effective in building trust. Furthermore, the exercise clearly showcased the Holy Spirit’s activity in each participant’s own life, and it allowed each one to witness the Holy Spirit’s activity in the lives of fellow church members. From that perspective, participants began to gain confidence in their ability to recognize and share the Holy Spirit working in life today.

This newfound confidence continued to grow throughout our sessions. For example, in Session Three, participants were asked to bring in a photograph of someone

who had been spiritually influential to their lives. Then they were asked to share the name and relationship of the person in their photograph and to complete one of the fill-in-the-blank statements written on the white board (I know I grew spiritually (became more Christ-like) in this relationship as evidenced by_____. I know the Holy Spirit was present in this relationship because _____. I was aware of the Holy Spirit working in my life through this relationship by_____). Again, they all shared willingly and eagerly. In fact, they were simply unable to limit themselves to filling in a blank. They wanted to share the story behind the photograph.

On the one hand, we were unable to cover all of the material in the Session Guide for Week Three. On the other hand, the participants were sharing deeply. They could recognize the Holy Spirit's presence in their relationships, and they were eager to share the details of their stories. Stories allow people to frame their personal experiences so that others have a window to see with greater clarity who they really are. Stories encourage a deeper connection between people as one person shares deeply and another person listens deeply. Based on the responses in all three groups, I believe people today want to share deeply, but they lack forums in which to safely do it. Our groups jumped at the opportunity. Certainly, many people share by way of social media and technology, but the need to sit face to face and tell our stories in more than 140 characters is still very much a part of my congregation.

That said, if I were to run Seeing Red again, I would dedicate an entire session to this one exercise. That would allow the groups to thoroughly cover the other information in another session and to share as extensively as they would like. While a smaller group size might also facilitate thorough discussion, I found that all three groups struggled to

get through this session's material. Since they each were of different size (six members, nine members, and thirteen members), scheduling an entire session for this exercise seems to be a more appropriate response.

Comments about this exercise in Session Three included, "It gave me an insight into their spirituality and made me feel closer to them," and "The sharing of stories let you get to know one another better." As the facilitator, I could see the connections happening in participants as they listened to others. They nodded their heads in affirmation and asked appropriate follow-up questions of each other. Again, both the LAC and I were pleasantly surprised by how forthcoming each group was with its sharing, and at how easily they engaged in conversation about spiritual things. Their enthusiastic participation gave us answers to our questions of "Where have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in your lives?" and "How would you describe your participation in that experience?"

The LAC and I had also hoped that participants would not only recognize the Holy Spirit but would begin to deliberately respond to the Holy Spirit. One way that this happened was through the "breath prayers" that we prayed at the beginning of each session. Participants visibly relaxed with this exercise, and they became comfortable silently being together in the presence of God. In fact, since Seeing Red, our Board Chair asked if I would open the quarterly Board meeting with a breath prayer, and our elder chair asked if I would open the upcoming elder's meeting with a breath prayer. I know that participants found comfort in this contemplative form of prayer and that they felt the Holy Spirit moving when they were quiet and still. Many of them mentioned incorporating this kind of prayer in their daily activities and challenges.

As described in the project implementation chapter, we ended session five with a “laying on of hands.” This activity was designed to serve as a commissioning to continue to the hard work of spiritual formation that we began together and to affirm each one’s gifts for service. Our hope was that this ending would provide a strong finish to Seeing Red. It did. We ended each group on a spiritual “high.” I use the word “high” very intentionally, because about two months after the groups had ended, one participant said, “I feel like I have crashed. These groups were such a spiritual rush, and then they stopped, and now I feel like I have crashed.” She makes a good point for future consideration. With Seeing Red we met weekly. We were on the look-out for signs of the Holy Spirit. We intentionally built community by talking with each other, and emailing each other, and sharing spiritual observations. We had never before done this kind of thing with this level of intensity. We were thoroughly engaged with each other, the church, and with God. Then we stopped. If I were to do Seeing Red again, I would end it in the same way, but I would plan for follow-up. For instance, a Seeing Red reunion might be an option in which we schedule our groups at their usual times and get together to share what has happened in our spiritual lives since the initial group meetings. Or, maybe we could try scheduling short term spiritual formation groups at specific times throughout the liturgical year. If the participation is strong, we could offer long-term covenant groups that support each other in spiritual development. Furthermore, these groups could be led by laypeople. As long as I lead the groups, I am limited as to how many I can lead and how much time I can devote to the effort. However, if more church members assume leadership roles, our group options really are endless. I am convinced that the congregation craves opportunities to connect and share, and I believe some

follow-up is warranted. After all, although some downtime can be expected after a spiritual high, other opportunities for spiritual development might help with the feeling of “crashing” after an experience ends.

That said, I was a little disappointed that there was not more of a rush to our church sponsored spiritual endeavors after the groups ended. When I reviewed our evaluations and the question of “How is the Holy Spirit leading you to make a spiritual difference in our church?” I was excited to see some of the answers like, “I am moved to be more involved with the outreach ministries,” or “Getting more involved in volunteering for things like HOPE, LOGOS, and church events,” “By participating whenever possible,” or “The Holy Spirit is lighting a fire and pushing me to be all in!” I was hoping that these remarks would mean instant results. Yet, our worship attendance did not increase. Our volunteer sign-up sheets did not fill up. Many of the committees led by participants continue to operate with minimal prayer and no spiritual sharing or reflection. Granted, I probably judge the congregation harshest of all, because I see their potential. After Seeing Red, I know that they are not spiritually bereft and that they have the ability to be a spiritual powerhouse, yet many of them still lack the confidence or motivation to take these group spiritual experiences and build them into other parts of church life.

Yet, participants know what to do. On their evaluations, they were asked “How can we better engage the Holy Spirit as a congregation?” Their answers included listening, praying, sharing, preparing, awareness, slowing down, coming to worship, and working together to improve our relationships with God and the community. Many mentioned the importance of listening to the faith stories of others. When we met

together for our luncheon discussion, participants shared the same kind of things. They expressed a desire for more small groups, and they clearly acknowledged the importance of being able to share their spiritual journey with their faith community.

Even so, there was some discussion that a five week session was too long. Some participants suggested three to four week sessions or sessions lasting half-days. This notion came up in both the written reflections and the luncheon discussion. While it was not a majority opinion, it was a vocal opinion. Small groups do require a time commitment.

This issue has been a source of contention for me since I began serving WMCC in 2005. People recognize the importance of community. They enjoy the sharing. They find the group experience to be meaningful...but, they do not want to commit to it for an extended period of time. One of my LAC members told me more than once that I should feel good about the support that Seeing Red received from the congregation, because clearly, they knew it was important to me, and they wanted to support my work towards my doctorate. I believe her. I had just hoped that the group experience would not be as much about supporting me as it would be about growing in spirit. Unrealistically, I hoped that the groups would result in a spiritual rush that would jumpstart our attendance and invigorate our members past some of the congregational lethargy. So far, that has not happened.

However, through this project, I have learned things about my congregation that I did not know prior to Seeing Red and these are things that can be used almost immediately to enhance ministry at our church. First, the congregation is capable of arriving on time. I realize that sounds trivial, but in actuality, whenever we have held

Bible studies, we always have late arrivals who disrupt the flow on conversation. When committee meetings are scheduled, we have late arrivals that miss the opening prayers and reflections, and in so doing, miss the tone that was set for the meeting. When I sent the introductory letter to participants and stressed the importance of being on time and explained the reasoning, they responded. If we plan to build breath prayers or any kind of theological reflection into the opening of our meetings, I will work with committee chairpersons to make sure that members understand the importance of being on time, and this may well allow us to begin to build deeper community in our committees. Further, I will encourage committee chairs and other group leaders to not shy away from setting expectations. At WMCC, for fear of “scaring people away,” we tend to have very low expectations when it comes to things like commitment. Seeing Red taught me that sometimes, people will respond when the bar is raised. Sometimes, when an issue is important to a leader, it becomes important to others.

Second, in Session Four, participants had the opportunity to better prepare themselves for Sunday worship by reflecting on the designated passage of scripture for the day. Many of them commented that they were eager to attend worship that Sunday to hear how the passage would be addressed. For several years, I have sent via email the scripture to the congregation early in the week. However, I am now developing reflection questions that are emailed out. For those who do not use email, I provide the questions in writing one week ahead of time on Sunday mornings. I hope that this practice will allow all church members to be better engaged during worship.

Along those lines (and in keeping in mind the interest in shorter sessions), I would like to offer a half-day session to teach *lectio divina*. Many participants commented on

how meaningful it was to listen to scripture in different ways. I believe a dedicated workshop on lectio divina would help. For the thinkers in our congregation, I would like to follow the four acts of lectio divina which are reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. For the more creative types, I would follow an artistic approach to lectio divina found in Sybil MacBeth's *Praying in Color*.¹ In Session Four, we tried an abbreviated artistic approach suggested by a member of the LAC. However, participants struggled to get past feeling embarrassed about their artistic abilities, or lack thereof. MacBeth's approach gives specific instructions on how to engage the scripture with color, not with artistic abilities. I believe a small contingency in my congregation would respond well to this approach. In fact, I plan to practice with it on our next scheduled women's retreat.

Third, I was overwhelmed with how quickly all groups took to the breath prayer, the guided meditation and the laying on of hands that we experienced together in the last session. This suggests to me that church members have a hunger for spiritual experiences that are outside of the usual activities of worship and Sunday school. I believe a Sunday morning spiritual formation group would be a good alternative to traditional Sunday school, which is not well-attended in our church. It would build community. It would strengthen connections to God. It would provide a safe space for sharing personal stories. It would give members continuous new ideas for ways of engaging the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives. A spiritual formation group may offer a spiritual connection that certain members of the congregation crave while allowing those who want a more traditional approach to continue with the status quo.

¹ Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2013).

Finally, the Seeing Red experience has given me inspiration to try some different things with the congregation. One reason that I wanted to work on a project utilizing small groups and lead those groups myself was that I have lacked confidence in leading small groups, always worrying about what to do if no one talks and wondering if I would be able to think fast enough to lead a meaningful discussion. With Seeing Red, I learned that I can indeed lead small groups. I found that I needed to be prayerfully centered beforehand, but as long as that was in place, I was able to lead. I am very pleased to have gained confidence in my small group leadership abilities.

On April 9, 2013, the LAC hosted Dr. Donna Ciangio of Drew University for dinner and a site visit to evaluate our project, Seeing Red for Lent. In preparation, the LAC prepared a written evaluation of their work and of my leadership (See Appendix 11). Then, they spent a great deal of time discussing what they wanted to serve for the meal that we would share with Dr. Ciangio. After much debate, they settled on traditional southern fare! The visit itself was very positive and affirming. All members of the LAC were in attendance and they shared their experiences easily with Dr. Ciangio. They expressed appreciation for the organization and planning phase of the project. They shared their surprise at how eagerly participants took part in group discussions. They shared areas of their own spirituality that grew through Seeing Red. As a group, we left the meeting feeling very encouraged in our work and very encouraged about the spiritual health of the congregation.

That brings me to my last point. I have gained a little confidence in my congregation. I do believe that historically, this congregation has shied away from public spiritual experiences outside of Sunday morning. Through Seeing Red, I found that

participants were excited about being able to share their stories and their experiences. They were willing to try anything that I asked of them, and the connections that they made to their fellow church members were very meaningful to them. To me, that suggests a desire to grow spiritually and a desire to grow in community. I am still not sure that they recognize where their own commitment falls in those areas, but I am positive that they have a spiritual hunger. I just need to continue to learn how to whet their appetites!

CHAPTER 6
SEEING RED IN THE FUTURE

The project, *Seeing Red for Lent*, was a spiritual boost to the congregation of WMCC, the group participants, the members of the LAC, and me. I anticipate that this positive, spiritual group experience will snowball into other areas of our life together. “There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts...Both within and beyond traditional faith communities, a hunger for spiritual depth and integrity is gaining momentum.”¹ For WMCC, this project was an opportunity to both identify, increase and feed this “hunger for spiritual depth.” These were newly recognized hunger pains for the congregation, and my hope is that they will continue to rumble into the future so that we will actively seek out spiritual nourishment.

Even with that hope, I know that the congregation will face familiar challenges. For example, throughout its history, WMCC has struggled with having strong attendance for worship, Sunday School, and special studies and groups. While *Seeing Red* certainly had good attendance, I do believe that was in part due to the congregation’s desire to help me with a school project. I make that assertion because in the past, we have offered small group opportunities when very few people showed up. Congregational commitment to attend spiritual formation events has been spotty.

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: an Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 1.

While part of that challenge stems from ministering to young families with schedules already bursting at the seams, part of the challenge also comes from the historical culture of the church. In the beginning of my ministry at WMCC, I spoke with a long-term elder and expressed my frustration with the lack of attendance in worship and the apparent lack of commitment to just show up. His explanation was, “We’ve always been a little family church where people come when they want to. That’s just the way it is.” However, “the way it is” is not “the way it always has to be.” That idea was foreign to the congregation. The notion that church can be a powerful and vital part of a thriving spirituality that impacts every part of our lives was somewhat foreign. Certainly, congregational interest and emphasis on a thriving spiritual life was somewhat foreign. As mentioned earlier, for years, the measure of success at WMCC was building upkeep and budget management. Spiritual formation was not a sought-after goal.

However, *Seeing Red* participants were so enthusiastic in their efforts to share and talk with one another about spiritual things that I am now convinced that WMCC does have a spiritual hunger. Whether they identify it as such or not, they have the desire to be fed by the Spirit and to share the experience with others. One challenge we face is transferring the spiritual “feeding frenzy” of *Seeing Red* to ongoing efforts in our church life. We are challenged to move the congregation’s spiritual hunger beyond a short-term project “to help the pastor finish school” and incorporate it into the routine life of individuals and families and into the routine life of the church. Such an incorporation would include committee meetings, group gatherings, and the administrative business of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church.

This great challenge can be directly addressed in the following three areas in the life of WMCC: 1) the role of the elders; 2) congregational opportunity for spiritual formation; and 3) pastoral leadership.

Until three years ago, the lay leadership of the church was stagnant. The same people chaired the same committees for over twenty years. In 2009, leadership changes took place, and we now have leaders who want to build up a new sense of hope and who are passionate about this church. However, they consistently face committees and groups that are accustomed to doing things a certain way. To move forward in concert with the Holy Spirit, we need strategies that shift from the same old structural questions about money and programming and ‘what we did last year,’ to the question of “What is God calling us to be and do in this time and place?” Or, in *Seeing Red* language, “Where do we sense the Holy Spirit’s movement in our life together now?”

The WMCC people who can lead this spiritual shift are our five elders. They are considered the spiritual leaders of the church. They meet on a monthly basis (or more if necessary), they serve on the board and on numerous committees, and they have the congregation’s respect. Spiritual formation must be a part of their fellowship. Their group can intentionally nourish the spiritual hunger in each other, challenge each other to take on spiritual disciplines, and practice spiritual disciplines together. In other words, the elders can decide that they will go deeper into their relationship with God together. These efforts will carry over into the congregation.

To that end, since *Seeing Red*, the elders have changed how they begin their meetings. Meetings used to begin with a cursory prayer, but now, the elders open their meetings with a breath prayer and brief meditation. At the close of the meeting, instead

of asking the minister to pray, they join hands in prayer and name aloud each household in the church. Those two small changes have already provided a spiritual depth to their meetings that simply was not present when the only nod to the Holy Spirit was the prayer that had to be out of the way before the “real meeting” began. “Spiritual purpose that emerges through the practice of meditation on scripture and prayer...is a powerful binding force in the spiritual realm.”² This statement has proved true with our elders.

Even though I believe that elders recognize the importance of their leadership in congregational spiritual formation, they will need ongoing encouragement to bring this approach to other church settings. Again, these other church settings are not accustomed to proactively seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the elders will meet some resistance. There will always be members with critical spirits whose “personal mission statement seems to be, “defending the status quo by defeating the different.”³ The elders are in a prime position to redirect energy aimed at squelching the Holy Spirit. They can do this in a non-threatening way that encourages others to engage in spiritual reflection.

For instance, our church board meetings tend to be all-business with the reporting of facts and figures, and of course, the obligatory voting that takes place around issues. By way of the church constitution, all elders are members of the church board. As a group, the elders can bring attention to the Holy Spirit by praying as the meeting progresses which will help them stay attuned to the Spirit, and by asking “God” questions that redirect the group’s attention to our higher calling. In fact, board agendas are usually sent out in advance, and when the elders receive these agendas, they could easily discuss

² Gary Straub and Judy G. Turner, *Your Calling as a Leader* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

amongst themselves what appropriate “God” questions may be for the issue at hand. Questions might include the following: “How does this issue further our mission?” or “May we take time to pray about this?” As the elders ‘try out’ these questions in meetings, they will need ongoing discussions with each other to debrief and assess how their change in focus is affecting other church leadership. They will need the opportunity to encourage each other.

The more we can naturally build spiritual formation into meetings and decisions already taking place at WMCC, the more the congregation will recognize that we are not striving for yet another new program or change in our by-laws. Rather, we simply want to match what we plan to do with what the Holy Spirit is moving us to do. We want to wake up our own spiritual imagination, and the elders can provide the wake-up call.

While the elders assume greater spiritual leadership, the congregation needs spiritual encouragement as well. One shortcoming of *Seeing Red* was simply that no follow-up was in place once the project ended. Without the weekly meeting and checking in with each other, participants have struggled to take the experiences we shared in *Seeing Red* into their activities of daily living. For example, in our last group session, participants talked about the importance of everyone’s presence in worship. They all recognized that simple attendance was a powerful way to serve the church and a powerful witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, worship attendance has not gone up. Making the jump from a spiritual observation to a spiritual action has proven difficult.

In addition, although participants identified their new connections with each other as positive, the intentional spiritual conversations have decreased or stopped all together. These were the conversations that promoted spiritual growth because they built

accountability into the experience. Participants talked with each other about how they were growing or not growing in Spirit. They reported on their progress in their attempts to recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They gave each other feedback. In some ways, the participants missed the point that we must be intentional and deliberate in recognizing and responding to the movement of the Holy Spirit. That intentional drive has been lost now that the sessions have ended. It almost seems that the spiritual practices that were learned in our sessions were left behind as quaint memories when *Seeing Red* came to a close.

That said, intentional spiritual formation is essential to health, vibrant church life. “The change God works in us through the Spirit results in a deeper awareness of God’s presence and will and an increasing desire to serve God and neighbor.”⁴ This change happens in community. I believe that some shifts in our programming and in our church communications can very easily begin to encourage the continuing and ongoing search for the Holy Spirit. We can strengthen Sunday School as an avenue for spiritual formation. Currently, Sunday School attendance is sporadic, and I believe that is partially due to boredom. I do not mean to suggest that the teachers are boring, but because we only have one adult class, participants grow weary of the same lesson formats taught by the same teachers week after week. I would like to offer a “Spirit Sunday” once a month, when either I or someone else, address a spiritual discipline or practice. A good starter reference would be Adele Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*⁵ which includes numerous spiritual practices from many Christian traditions. For each practice,

⁴ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 64.

⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005).

the author provides reflection questions, exercises, and suggestions of the spiritual fruits that may be gained from such a practice. This interactive and experiential format would break up the monotony of the usual routine, and it might continue to cultivate a spiritual hunger.

Further, for those members who are interested in a more intensive study of spiritual formation, we might consider holding a spiritual formation group during the Sunday School hour. The objective is to not take away Sunday School participants. However, as it is, Sunday School does not draw in the number of participants that *Seeing Red* did. We must find a way to offer ongoing opportunities for spiritual formation in a group setting. Otherwise, we miss the spiritual accountability that comes from our relationships and interactions with other believers. This aspect of faith formation is a non-negotiable practice of fruitful congregations.⁶ That said, I know that members of WMCC are not eager to add additional meetings to their weekly calendars. It is true that “people desire fellowship and want to learn about the faith, but they have trouble squeezing it into their lives. The more the church can do to accommodate, the better.”⁷ Providing a spiritual formation opportunity that would not entail another trip to the church and would in fact build on something that is already taking place, like weekly worship, we would encourage participation. Certainly, other venues like homes or coffee shops could be explored if the interest were there.

Church communications provide another pathway to spiritual formation in our congregation. Our monthly newsletter could be better utilized as a springboard for building spiritual formation into the daily routine. For example, to complement our

⁶ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

“Spirit Sunday” in Sunday School, we could offer a “Spirit Corner” in each newsletter. This “corner” could set forth a “spiritual practice of the month” with a start date and an end date in addition to suggestions on building the practice into a regular day. In the LAC’s planning, we discussed the importance of being specific in spiritual direction, at least in the beginning. A “Spirit Corner” is a way to get specific, concrete suggestions for spiritual formation into the congregation.

In *Seeing Red*, participants responded very well to hearing the testimonies of others about their experiences with the practices we learned. The practice of “giving testimony” is new to WMCC, but given how eagerly people shared and listened in *Seeing Red* groups, I believe WMCC should build testimony into its life together. As follow-up to a “Spirit Corner,” members could share their experiences with the suggested spiritual practices. This sharing could be done through newsletter articles (for those too shy to speak in front of the congregation) or as part of a “Spirit Moment” in a corporate worship service.

Seeing Red participants also responded well to receiving a red postcard each week that related to our sessions. It served as a visual reminder to seek the Holy Spirit during their normal schedules. We could encourage church members, adults and children alike, to report “Spirit Sightings.” During *Seeing Red*, participants became adept at identifying places where the Spirit was on the move. As the congregation grows in their ability to see the Spirit, members could write a brief description of recent Spirit Sightings, and we could send out a red postcard to the congregation with their testimony. These could be sent each month between Pentecost and the beginning of Lent perhaps on the monthly anniversary of Pentecost.

The church's facebook page can also be a tool for spiritual formation. Links can be provided to on-line resources addressing practical issues in spiritual formation. Church members can post photographs of places where they saw the movement of the Holy Spirit. Again, facebook can provide a forum for testimony and sharing. Carole Howard Merrit notes that in today's world, people are turning off their television sets in favor of "flat screens to tell their own stories. Through innovative social media, they now gather together in virtual communities, report on their days, and relate the stories of their lives."⁸ While some of our members do not even have an email address, many are technologically savvy. A more intentional use of the church's social networking capabilities might reach this busy group in a meaningful way.

Finally, short-term, intentional opportunities for the congregation of WMCC to engage in spiritual formation together are essential for a Spirit-infused future. *Seeing Red* participants clearly recognized and appreciated the strength of the personal connections that were made through our group experiences. We created memories in our groups and added to our congregational story throughout the project. In order to move into the next chapter of the story, the congregation may consider the following four events.

First, we currently hold an annual women's retreat that is well-attended each year. That should continue. That is a place where spiritual formation is anticipated and is enjoyed. Second, we may benefit from a churchwide retreat for spiritual formation that involves all genders and ages. This could easily be planned and implemented through our denomination's coastal camp which would allow activities that appeal to a wide range of interests. I would ask both Education Committee and our Membership

⁸ Carol Howard Merrit, *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 79.

Committee to plan this event. Third, Advent and Lent are seasons in which people are increasingly interested in spiritual things and more open to new disciplines. Certainly, a Lenten spiritual formation group would be a fine tradition to establish as WMCC. As for Advent, I have found that members are even more busy than usual during this time, and I wonder if a post-Advent “day apart” in January would be helpful. As follow-up to *Seeing Red*, we could reflect on the Holy Spirit’s movement in our individual lives, our relationships, our worship, and our service for the previous year. We might even see growth! We could spend time in structured prayer and then in conversation about the spiritual direction that we feel called to move towards in the coming year. That kind of honest conversation and planning may put us “in touch with a longing or desire for God that translates into intentional motivation for the spiritual journey.”⁹ What better time to think about such things than at the beginning of a brand new year?

On a personal note, two things became very clear to me about the future of my ministry through the *Seeing Red* experience. First, I do not have all the knowledge or creativity necessary to develop spiritual formation opportunities for the congregation. In *Seeing Red*, members of the LAC were crucial to planning the session formats and the extra touches that made this project successful. That observation has led me to ponder a different approach to leading spiritual formation efforts at WMCC.

I am the only person on staff at WMCC. Quite often, I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of guiding this congregation’s spiritual development. While I think I am a strong generalist in the ministry, I do not have the expertise to address all of the different learning styles and personalities that make up our congregation. I could surely find inspiration and expertise from a team approach much like the LAC. I use the word

⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 256.

“team” instead of “committee” because “committee” implies by-laws and rules and regulations. As a congregation, we do not need additional committees, but we could benefit greatly from a spiritual formation team of many voices that plans for our congregation’s spiritual growth, coordinates the implementation of those plans, and then evaluates progress.

Such a team could be comprised of interested elders and any other active church members who might be interested in participating. To set the stage, I would lead a team book study of Lynn Baab’s *Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation*.¹⁰ This resource is very readable and identifies practices and gives examples of churches currently using them. While the book does not provide an exhaustive list of spiritual practices, its chapters might inspire thoughts and ideas about planning for our spiritual growth and how we might go about it. Furthermore, that plan should include evaluation.

The fact of the matter is that as a church, we evaluate programs and styles using attendance and numerical scales, but we do not engage much in the evaluation of our congregation’s spiritual growth. Perhaps, this stems from the fact that spiritual things are hard to measure and seem subjective. Or, perhaps this stems from the fact that no one has ever suggested evaluation of spiritual growth. However, we have no way of knowing if we are growing or not growing unless we engage in honest assessment on a regular basis. In *Your Calling as a Leader*, Gary Straub and Judy Turner identify indicators that can be used for individuals pondering their own spiritual development. These indicators include statements such as, “I am sensing and enjoying God’s presence more than I did yesterday,” and “I am expressing more compassion and concern for the people around me

¹⁰ Lynn M. Baab. *Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

than I did yesterday,” and “I am devoting more of my resources to God’s work than I did yesterday.”¹¹ These indicators could easily be tweaked for congregational assessment.

In addition, the spiritual growth planner found in Adele Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* might prove to be a useful starting point for evaluating our congregation’s spiritual growth.¹² Although it is intended for individual use, it provides various spiritual domains that a spiritual development team would find accessible. Both of these resources move us from defining spiritual success numerically to defining it transformationally. How are we “placing ourselves in the hands of God so that God can sculpt our souls and recreate us in the image of Christ”?¹³ How are we seeking out the Holy Spirit? Through planning and evaluation, a spiritual development team could certainly keep the congregation moving forward spiritually.

Second, as I observed participants in *Seeing Red* making connections with each other and trying out new spiritual practices, I realized how much I miss having those kinds of relationships. I realized how much I missed having a group of peers with whom to share my own walk of faith. As the pastor and leader of WMCC, I cannot share with church members in the way that I might share with others outside the church. It is very important to me to take care of my own spiritual health. To that end, I am going to implement three new practices in my own life. First, in addition to leading and planning for our church retreats, I will go on retreat for myself each year. This practice will model spiritual prioritization and it will feed my soul. Second, I will organize a small group of

¹¹ Gary Straub and Judy G. Turner, *Your Calling as a Leader*, 26.

¹² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 256-263.

¹³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, 78.

local clergy to meet regularly for prayer and sharing of spiritual matters. Community ministers currently meet to plan for community events and to hear what is going on in each other's churches. However, a small sub-group has expressed an interest in establishing a spiritual formation group, and since I am now craving spiritual community for myself, I have the motivation to organize it. Lastly, I will make an effort to attend worship experiences during Advent and Lent that I do not lead. During these seasons of heightened spiritual sensitivity, I sometimes want to worship without assuming a leadership role. That is important to me, because it allows me to relax in the presence of God surrounded by others.

In summary, as WMCC moves into the future, *Seeing Red* can be the kick-off to ongoing efforts in intentional spiritual formation for the congregation. In interviews with members of thriving mainline churches, Diana Butler Bass found that they “were allowing themselves to be remade by the breath of God. They easily spoke of the Spirit, referring to that often mysterious person of the Trinity, and expectantly anticipated God’s movement in their midst.”¹⁴ The people of WMCC began to do just that with *Seeing Red*. They were willing to trust each other. They were willing to trust me. Most of all, they were willing to trust that the “breath of God” was moving in the most ordinary moments of their days. They began to anticipate that the Holy Spirit was on the loose in their lives.

When the Holy Spirit is on the loose, things change. God calls us into new places, new relationships, and new missions. I believe that God continues to call the good people of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church into a deeper experience of the Spirit.

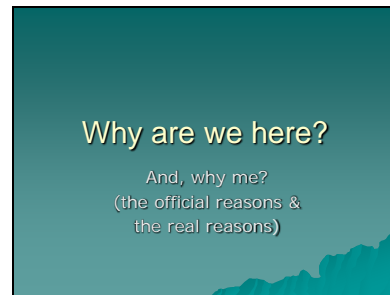
¹⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York: Harper One, 2006) 242.

With just a little effort on our part, I believe that the Holy Spirit will take us to places in our ministry that we have not even dared to dream. That belief gives me hope.

APPENDIX I

INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION FOR LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Slide 1



Slide 2



Slide 3

What can we expect from the minister?

- ◆ Pray
- ◆ Be prepared with an agenda
- ◆ Keep you informed
- ◆ Keep an open mind
- ◆ Keep us moving

Slide 4

What can the minister expect from us?

- ◆ Pray
- ◆ Show up
- ◆ Maintain confidentiality
- ◆ Complete any assignments

Slide 5

What is the project?
HOLY SPIRIT!



Slide 6

The WMCC congregation has historically defined its spiritual formation in terms of its own tradition, personalities, and practicality rather than reliance upon and cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Slide 7

Not a Criticism

- ◆ It's a trend in a lot of churches
- ◆ "Binitarian"
- ◆ Spiritual communities

Slide 8

- ◆ Use small groups to further develop a congregational context in which the Holy Spirit can be the recognized center of spiritual formation.

What does all that mumbo jumbo mean? Why is it important?

Slide 9

My hope is...

Group participants will be able to answer these questions:

1. Where have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in your lives?
2. What was your participation during that experience?
3. What are you called to do or be in response?
4. How can we better engage the Holy Spirit in our congregational life?

Slide 10

First Phase

Assist the pastor in developing the format for the five weeks of a small spiritual formation group study about the Holy Spirit

- Approve and suggest material about the biblical story of the Holy Spirit and create discussion guides about how that story plays out today

Slide 11

Second Phase

- ◆ Recruit participants (2-3 small groups – question of leadership)
- ◆ These groups will meet weekly for 5 weeks

Slide 12

Third Phase

- ◆ Evaluation

Small groups will come together for one large meeting to celebrate the completion of the study, to evaluate the effectiveness of the process, and to identify the next steps

Slide 13

For next time:

- ◆ Scriptural reflection
- ◆ Format
 - Meeting space
 - Meeting agenda
 - Reflection questions
 - Daily practice?

APPENDIX 2

DEFINITIONS

Congregational context – the spiritual atmosphere of the church which may include worship, fellowship, meetings, and service

Discussion guides – written questions for the pastor to use to facilitate conversation in the small groups. Each discussion guide will address a selected aspect of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit – using the Biblical story primarily in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is considered the very presence of God generously at work in individuals, the church, and the world

Ministry team – These are the project planners. The team will be selected by the pastor and will include six members of Wilson’s Mills Christian Church and one local pastor in another church

Spiritual – For our purposes, spirituality refers to how believers share life with God, themselves, others, and the world while in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Formation – how believers intentionally shape their lives around Jesus Christ. Spiritual formation may include prayer, study, worship, or service.

Small Spiritual Formation Group – an intentional gathering of people for the purpose of strengthening their spiritual formation. Group size will be determined when group members are recruited.

Tradition – the history of what is important to WMCC including the building, the historical personalities, and the church’s ministries

APPENDIX 3

NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

Another Message from the Minister

I need your help. I have finished all of the required coursework for school, and I am now in the 'professional project' stage. In reality, the professional project is simply a ministry that serves and involves the congregation. You all have heard me say that "the Spirit is on the loose at WMCC," so of course, my project is Holy Spirit related!

As a congregation, we have certainly had opportunities to study the Bible and to learn about our traditions as Disciples (and those things are important), but we have not spent much time delving into how the Holy Spirit moves and intervenes in our lives and how we can better recognize when the Holy Spirit is on the move. As I pondered a ministry that would enhance our spiritual development as a congregation, I wanted to do something that would develop our habit of noticing the Holy Spirit's reality and guidance.

So, during Lent of 2013 (February 13 – March 30), I hope you will take advantage of "Seeing Red for Lent." Red, of course, is the liturgical color that represents the Holy Spirit, and we will offer small group discussions to explore when the Holy Spirit pops up in our own lives (when we "see red"). These groups will be a little different than our previous Lenten studies in that you will not be asked to read a book or to watch a video. But, you will be asked to meet for one hour, once a week for five weeks (between February 13 and March 30) in a small group led by me. You will be asked to pray, to listen, and to offer your experiences as you feel comfortable. In between meetings, you may be asked to pay attention to certain things in your own lives or to try out a different method of prayer.

My advisory committee (Beth Burton-Williams from FCC – Smithfield, Sarah Foxworth, Ginger Lee, Allison Lawhorn, Janet Stephenson, Tim Wells, and Alex Wilson) has been working really hard to develop the format for these group meetings.

To keep you from having to drive back to the church on a weeknight, we are planning to offer meeting times on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday mornings.

Please consider participating – you might just get a phone call from me about it. Our hope is that the small group experience will be a good Lenten discipline and that it will be meaningful to your spiritual growth.

In addition, your participation would be a tremendous help to me as I work towards finishing my degree.

APPEDENDIX 4

POSTER AND BULLETIN INSERT



APPENDIX 5
SESSION PLANS

Week One

How the Holy Spirit Comes to Us and Abides in Us

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants:

- be at ease with the small spiritual formation group process
- recognize when and how the Holy Spirit has come into their lives in their past
- recognize that the Holy Spirit is active in their lives today
- consider hopes for how the Holy Spirit will be a part of their lives in the future
- gain confidence in talking about the Holy Spirit

Room set-up: TBA

Supplies: Whiteboard, markers, eraser

Opening remarks:

What is a small spiritual formation group? (group where we learn how to shape our lives around the life of Christ)

What are the expectations?

- Attendance – important for building relationship
- Be on time – opening activities are designed to set a particular tone and late arrivals may be disruptive to the process
- Let the leader know if you cannot attend so the group does not wait
- Confidentiality
- Enjoy the opportunity to learn something new

What can help us, inspire us, and strengthen us for the task of spiritual formation? (Holy Spirit – the very presence of God)

This session is the first of five sessions in which we will explore ways that we experience the Holy Spirit. As a church, we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. The liturgical color for that day is red. However, the Holy Spirit is a powerful force in our lives 365 days a year, and our time together over the next five weeks, will

be a time of training ourselves to ‘see red,’ – to recognize and appreciate the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Opening Activity

Reminder to turn off or silence cell phones.

Read Scripture - Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22

“...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” Genesis 2:7

“When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” John 20:22

In scripture, God gives life through breath. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit through breath. It makes sense that we could employ our own breathing to enhance our attentiveness to the Holy Spirit.

If we are to slow our bodies and minds down to pay special attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit, we need to do just that – slow down. To help us with this, we will start tonight’s session with a breath prayer.

Sit up straight, feet flat on the floor, hands in lap, and I will lead you into this time, explaining what to do as we go along. We will have a few minutes of no talking with just the music in the background, and I will ring a chime to let you know when we are finished.

Close your eyes and begin to pay attention to your breath.

Breathing in and breathing out.

When God created human beings, God breathed life into them.

Breath is life. Breathing in and breathing out.

When Jesus gave the gift of his Spirit to the disciples, he breathed on them.

Breath is spirit. Breathing in and breathing out.

Follow your own breath,

In and out.

Let your breath become a prayer.

Inhale God’s love,

and exhale everything that is not God’s love.

While you are breathing, remember the scripture about Jesus:

He breathed on them, and said,

“Receive the Holy Spirit.”

That will be our breath prayer.

As you inhale, hear the words, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

As you exhale, remember, he breathed on them, and he breathes on you.

Keep repeating that to yourself,

And, if your mind wanders, do not get frustrated.
 Just bring yourself back to “Receive the Holy Spirit,”
 And “He breathes on me.”

Continue in silence for 2-3 minutes.

Ring chime.

Ask: “How did this activity open you to the presence of the Holy Spirit? If you had difficulty with the activity, what was that like?”

Learning Together

Our first two scripture readings suggest that life and the Spirit can come to us through the breath of God.

Our next passage suggests another way that the Holy Spirit can come to us – through prayer and the laying on of hands.

“The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” Acts 8:15-17

In each reading, the Holy Spirit is pure gift. In the Garden of Eden, God gave life and breath to Adam and Eve. They could do nothing to earn it. It was gift.

In John, Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the disciples. They could do nothing to earn it.

And, in Acts, people of Samaria received the Holy Spirit as gift. Remember that the Samaritans would have been considered unclean and theologically unfit to be in communion with something as precious as the Holy Spirit. And, yet, the Spirit was given to them.

The Spirit continues to make its way into our lives today as pure gift. We can do nothing to earn it or control it. However, we can notice it.

(Put a timeline on a whiteboard that stretches back 10-15 years. Go around the room and ask participants to mark a spot on that timeline when they especially felt the presence of the Holy Spirit).

Reflection question: Describe a moment or a time in your past when you have been especially aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. How did you know that this presence was the Holy Spirit and not something else?

It may be useful to restate what participants were doing when they had this awareness. For example, were they praying, worshiping, taking a walk, etc. Are there any patterns or trends?

Reflection question: What senses (hearing, smell, touch, vision, taste) were you using when you had this awareness of the Spirit? Can you sometimes feel or hear the Holy Spirit? If so, in what ways?

Reflection question: Imagine a life in which you are constantly aware of the Holy Spirit's presence. What is comforting about that idea? What is intimidating? What might that kind of awareness change about your life?

Taking it home

Ask participants to take a few moments each evening to review the day paying particular attention to any moments whenever they realized that the Holy Spirit was moving in their own lives or in someone else's life. It may be helpful to jot a few notes down for these reviews. Share one of those experiences with another person. Sharing may take place through email, written notes, telephone calls, or personal conversation.

Preparing for next week

Find something that symbolizes the Holy Spirit's movement in your life and bring it to the next session.

Closing prayer

Ask participants to think of one word that describes one way the Holy Spirit is present in their lives today.

Then pray: Thank you for the many ways that you send your Spirit to us. Thank you especially for...(go around the room with participants inserting their word). Open our eyes to see your Spirit. Open our ears to hear your Spirit. Open our hearts to feel your Spirit, and open our minds to grow in the wisdom of your Spirit. Fill us, Lord, with your Holy Spirit. These things we ask in the name of the one who set his Spirit loose in the world. Amen.

Week Two

The Nature of the Relationships the Holy Spirit Calls Forth

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants:

- identify how the Holy Spirit has been present in past relationships, particularly in the church
- identify ‘markers’ of the Holy Spirit’s activity in current relationships, particularly in the church
- strengthen personal connections and relationships in this group
- continue to gain confidence in talking about the Holy Spirit

Room set-up: TBA (maybe something with stained glass – or a bowl of red glass stones that can be found at craft stores?)

Supplies: Whiteboard, markers, eraser, copy of “The Glassmakers of Gurven” by Marlys Boddy

Opening remarks:

This is our second group meeting, and last week, we discussed how the Holy Spirit comes to us and lives in us. Specifically, we talked about the Holy Spirit as the breath of God. So, let’s take just a moment to take a deep breath...and to remember Jesus’ words to “Receive the Holy Spirit.” We’ll take a minute of silence to breathe, to remember, and to receive whatever the Spirit has for us.

As you feel led, would you briefly describe the item that symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit in your own life.

Last week, you were asked to take time each evening to review the day paying particular attention to any moments when you realized that the Holy Spirit was moving in your own life or in someone else’s life. You were asked to share one of those experiences with another person.

Reflection Questions: Were you able to quickly find the Holy Spirit moving in your lives and circumstances or did it take a while? Could you identify experiences of the Holy Spirit moving that you had not recognized before doing the exercise? What was it like to share that experience with someone else?

We will continue building upon that experience today. You have already started to broaden your interaction with the Holy Spirit by your willingness to share your experiences. That willingness expands the space that the Holy Spirit has to move around in our lives by widening the circle to include others.

Just as we can intentionally notice the Holy Spirit moving in our lives, we can also intentionally notice marks of the Holy Spirit in our relationships.

Opening Activity

Reminder to turn off or silence cell phones.

Read Scripture - Matthew 18:20 and Ephesians 4:1-5

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Matthew 18:20.

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” Ephesians 4:1-5

In scripture, we are given the promise that when we are together as Christians, Jesus himself is among us. His spirit is living and breathing among us. And, this spirit calls us to a way of being together as Christians that is characterized by all of the things Paul mentions – humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity.

Read “The Glassmakers of Gurven” by Marlys Boddy.

Reflection Question: Where does the Holy Spirit show up in this story? (In the mayor speaking truth to the glassmakers. In the glassmakers as they talked and thought and considered all the people of Gurven)

Reflection Question: What had to happen for the glassmakers to be receptive to the Holy Spirit? (had to have humility, gentleness, patience, love and unity – to complete their work for the church, they had to set aside their usual business practices)

At first, the glassmakers’ bitterness and arguments impacted the entire town. The town just wanted the arguments to stop. After the glassmakers built new relationships with each other, the town paid attention. The town was curious. The town wanted to know what they were doing.

This glassmakers’ spirit of unity was also a spirit of witness.

Our relationships in the church can be an entry point for the Holy Spirit or an obstacle for the Holy Spirit.

Learning Together

Split the group into at least two smaller groups and ask them to reflect upon the following questions.

How are church relationships different from social/work/family relationships?

What expectations do we have of church family? How does church family sometimes let us down?

What is our responsibility to others in our church family? How do we sense the Holy Spirit in each other? What are the signs that the Holy Spirit is present?

Come back to together as a larger group. What were some of the insights that these smaller group reflections brought to light? (These may be recorded on a white board)

Is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our own lives shaped by church?

Taking it home

Ask participants to write this week's verse from Matthew 18:20 (*"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*) on a sticky note or an index card or in their smart phone. It should be written somewhere that will be seen regularly as they go about their routines. As they go through their day, ask them to pay attention to the communication they have with the people they encounter. This would include conversations, emails, text messages, and even lessons and sermons in church. As they listen to others and intentionally remember that the Holy Spirit is present, take a few moments to ask God "How can I better honor your presence in this encounter?" It may be helpful to jot a few notes down as participants adjust to searching for the Holy Spirit's guidance in their routine relationships.

Preparing for next week

Take some time to consider the relationships in your own life. Who are the people who bring humility, gentleness, patience, love and unity out of you? Which relationships bring out your best? Please bring a photograph of one of these people to our next session.

Closing prayer

If red glass stones were used as part of the room set-up, offer each participant a stone to carry with them as a reminder of the Spirit's presence.

We are so very thankful that we do not travel this road alone. We are so very thankful that your Holy Spirit can spring to life in our conversations, our projects, our decision-making, our recreation and in all of the ways that we interact with each other.

We give you thanks for our families remembering in particular those who have the Spirit to lead us in a closer walk with you, especially...

We give you thanks for our friends remembering in particular those who have the Spirit to challenge us to give you our very best and who call us on it when we do not , especially...

We give you thanks for this church and this congregation and for your Holy Spirit that continues to move us and shape us into the people you have called us to be.

In silence now, we pray for your Holy Spirit to come to us....

to fill us...

and to inspire us.

Strengthen our ties with each other. Stain our lives with the colors of humility, gentleness, patience, love and unity. And strengthen your presence in us.

Amen.

Week Three

Opening Ourselves and Our Relationships to the Holy Spirit

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants:

- appreciate how relationships, particularly in the church, have been open to the Holy Spirit
- recognize those things that may interfere with the movement of the Holy Spirit in relationships
- identify actions that can be taken to make more room for the movement of the Holy Spirit in relationships
- strengthen personal connections and relationships in this group
- continue to gain confidence in talking about the Holy Spirit

Room set-up: TBA (maybe a communion set, some way to display the photographs brought to the session); write the following three statements on a white board:

I know I grew spiritually (became more Christ-like) in this relationship as evidenced by_____.

I know the Holy Spirit was present in this relationship because _____.

I was aware of the Holy Spirit working in my life through this relationship by_____.

Supplies: Whiteboard, markers, eraser

Opening remarks:

This is our third week of “seeing red” and intentionally noticing the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We’ve talked about the Holy Spirit as the breath of life breathed into us by God. We’ve talked about the kind of relationships that the Holy Spirit inspires. Today, we will read the story of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit as the Spirit makes a dramatic appearance. We will read about the actions the disciples took to remain open to each other and to the Holy Spirit

First, let’s take a moment to take a deep breath and to remember Jesus’ words from Matthew 18:20 that “whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Let us remember that we are gathered in Jesus’ name...let us remember that Jesus is here among us. Let us rest in that presence for a moment.

Last week, you were asked to write out that verse and to put it in a place that you would see regularly. You were asked to pay attention to the communication you have with the people you encounter, and to ask God “How can I better honor your presence in this encounter?”

Reflection Questions: How did God answer that question? Could you identify actions to take that further honored God’s presence in your communications? What was it like to intentionally acknowledge God’s presence in your encounters?

Opening Activity

Reminder to turn off or silence cell phones.

Ask participants to share the name and relationship of the person in their photograph. Ask them to pick one of the questions on the white board and to fill in the blank and to share their answers with the group, if they would like.

Reflection Question: (pair up the group members and give them 5 minutes to answer the following questions with their partner) What helped you to be receptive to the Holy Spirit in this relationship? Did/do you behave differently in this relationship than you did/do in others? If so, how?

Read Acts 2:1-13 and 42-47.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." Acts 2:1-13

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke

bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

What were the disciples doing when the Holy Spirit came? What was the result?

Our relationships in the church can be an entry point for the Holy Spirit or an obstacle for the Holy Spirit. In *Making All Things New*, Henri Nouwen writes that “Community discipline is the effort to create a free and empty space among people where together we can practice true obedience...to create space for God among us requires the constant recognition of God in each other.” Church and the spiritual relationships we build here are meant to be a showcase for what people committed to Spirit-empowered love can do.

As you think of your own life from elementary school through high school through adulthood to where you are today, think back to the person in the picture you brought in and think back to those people who have helped you create space for God and who have recognized God in you. How would you describe the people who have helped you grow? (Put descriptors on the white board) What gift did they give to you?

Learning Together

Does the story of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples and the story of the Holy Spirit coming to you from these relationships suggest anything to us about how we, as members of WMCC, can intentionally create space for the Holy Spirit to work? (keeping company with God and each other, prayer, worship, caring for others, committing to each other)

In your opinion, if we did all of that perfectly, how would that differ from what we do now? What differences might you see? What differences might you hear? What differences might you feel? (Write answers on a white board)

Are any of those differences/changes uncomfortable? What interferes with doing our part to make them a reality?

As a group, what is one small step we can take this week to foster a stronger awareness of the Holy Spirit at work in the church? What is one step that the spiritual leadership of the church can take to foster a stronger awareness of the Holy Spirit at work in the church?

Taking it home

Place participant names on small slips of paper and put them in a bowl or bag. Ask participants to draw out one name. As they go through the coming week, ask them to pray for the person whose name they drew. Specifically, they will pray that God will open the relationships in this person’s life to the power of the Holy Spirit. Before the next session, ask participants to contact the person (via email, text, phone, facebook, etc.) to let them know that prayers are ascending on their behalf.

Preparing for next week

Ponder times when you have been deeply moved by worship. Were you worshipping alone or in a group? What was happening in your life at the time? What was going on in worship?

Closing prayer

Holy God, you are our God, our Redeemer, our friend and you are the Spirit that goes with us into every moment of every day. You come to us in many different ways to find a relationship with us that brings us closer to you. We thank you for the people you bring into our lives who serve as our guides and our mentors as we listen for the whispers of your Holy Spirit. In particular, we thank you for....

We thank you for the gifts that they brought to us, for...

We thank you for your Holy Spirit that is forever guiding our lives and challenging our actions and moving us closer to you.

Week Four

The Holy Spirit's Presence in Worship

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants:

- identify how the Holy Spirit is present in elements of worship
- experiment with scripture as an entry point for the Holy Spirit in worship
- identify actions that can cultivate cooperation with the Holy Spirit's movement in worship experiences
- strengthen personal connections and relationships in this group
- continue to gain confidence in talking about the Holy Spirit

Room set-up: TBA (maybe a worship table to include a Bible, the elements of communion, red stole, candles)

Supplies: Whiteboard, markers, eraser, red pencils and sketch books for group participants, copies of scriptures passages to use in the lectio divina exercise, movie-clip and TV

Opening remarks:

This is our fourth group meeting, and for the past two weeks, we have talked about the Holy Spirit in our relationships and in our interactions. Today, we are going to explore the Holy Spirit in worship. But, before we center ourselves into that theme, let's discuss the exercise from last week – praying for someone and letting them know you were praying for them.

Reflection Questions: Has intentionally praying for someone else led you into anything surprising or new? What helped you to remember to pray for this person?

Pay attention to the things that help you remember. Pay attention to the things that bring you into the presence of God – that the Holy Spirit uses to bring you into the presence of God. These things may include fellowship, sharing meals, music, service work, reading, writing or silence. These things are clues for you as to how you might go about preparing for your own times of worship. Our preparation is an important part of worship. Our expectation that God will communicate with us through the Holy Spirit is an important part of worship.

Opening Activity

Reminder to turn off or silence cell phones.

Read Scripture – John 4:23-24 and Romans 12:1-2

“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” - John 4:23-24.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” - Romans 12:1-12

Watch the clip “The Reconciliation of Shug Avery” from “The Color Purple”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFTitXRVM0Y>

Reflection Question: Do you believe that the Holy Spirit tries to “tell us something” in worship? How does your belief influence how you approach worship?

Our worship services are spirited differently than the film clip that we just saw, but that does not mean that the Holy Spirit is any less present. How did we recognize the Holy Spirit in the film clip (the response of the people – immediate physical and emotional response and a spiritual response that rose from the preacher’s own heart when he heard the message of reconciliation himself and put his arms around his daughter)?

We recognize the Holy Spirit in our worship when something sparkles in our hearts – when you get a big, happy lump in your throat (you saw that with the choir in the film clip) or when something pricks our conscience – when you believe the word is just for you and is suggesting that you take an action (you saw that with the preacher).

It is not surprising when God does speak. God has spoken to humankind throughout history as the written word, the spoken word, and the incarnate Word. The written word, scripture, is an important route that the Holy Spirit takes to move us closer to God. Asking for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and setting aside time to be with God in the scripture is one way that we can worship and open ourselves up to divine guidance.

Learning Together

Today, we are going to approach the scripture as a way to worship God and to listen for the Holy Spirit, and we are going to use a variation of a practice that was prevalent in the first 1500 years of church history: *lectio divina*. In her book “Spiritual Disciplines Handbook,” Adele Calhoun points out that “Since many people were illiterate and many

that could read didn't have Bibles, lectio divina offered a way of attending to scripture as it was read in church, with an ear to hearing a word from God. Some brief and memorable word or phrase became bread for the soul throughout the week." (p. 168)

Lectio divina is a kind of reading that is different from what happens in Sunday school or in our study groups. Its intent is only to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that our relationship to God can be strengthened.

We will read our scripture passages four times. We will do the first reading together as a group out loud. I will do the second reading and will emphasize particular words or phrases. You will do the third reading on your own. When a word or phrase catches your attention, don't rush on to the next one. Stay with it. Breathe it. Listen. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to an understanding of what God is saying to you. And, respond to that by sketching something on a piece of paper that illustrates which words or phrases are speaking to you, which words "sparkle" for you or "prick" your heart? The fourth reading is done together.

Let's try it together, and I will do the third reading and the sketch to show you how you might approach the task. (The leader should have already prepared for this exercise through the practice of lectio divina and should have an image or two in mind).

"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." - John 4:23-24.

Complete the exercise with the group.

Reflection question: How is this different from the way you usually read scripture?

We will now look at our second passage of scripture. We will read it together followed by a brief silence. Then, I will read it. Then, you will take your copy of the scripture (or your Bible), your sketch pad, and your pencil anywhere in the church – the sanctuary, fellowship hall, etc. And, you will read the scripture to yourself. Don't rush. You will have 10 minutes. Pay attention to the words that jump out to you. And, sketch out any images that come to mind. We will meet back here for the fourth reading.

Reflection question: How would you describe your experience of reading scripture in this way? How was this kind of reading an act of worship?

Taking it home

The scripture that will be used in next Sunday's worship service will be emailed out tomorrow. Spend some time in prayer ask God to reveal the particular message meant for you in this passage. Throughout the week, experiment with different ways of listening to Scripture. Read the passage silently. Read the passage out loud. What words stand out

for you? Is there a verse that speaks to you? Write it on a card and put it where you will see it. Put a word or two from the verse as the screensaver on your computer.

Ask God to speak through the scripture and through the upcoming worship service.

Preparing for next week

Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. Above one column, write "For Me." Above the second column, write "For Others." Above the third column, write "For God." At the close of each day, jot down in each column the things you have bought and done for yourself, others and God. Bring your list with you to our final session next week.

Closing prayer

Today we will close with a palm to palm benediction. We will rise and we will touch hands, palm to palm, with the words "May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this week."

Week Five

Response to the Holy Spirit through Mission and Service

Session Goals

This session is intended to help participants:

- kindle an interest in serving as a way to connect to the Holy Spirit
- identify ways that the Holy Spirit equips us for service
- strengthen commitment to use our influence to better the lives of others
- strengthen personal connections and relationships in this group
- continue to gain confidence in talking about the Holy Spirit

Room set-up: TBA (maybe a worship table to include a basin, water pitcher and towel, as well as objects that represent gifts in our congregation such as a calculator, a flash drive, cooking utensil, carpentry tool, etc.), table with index cards with one participant name written on each one

Supplies: Whiteboard, markers, eraser, clipboards, paper, pencils, a way to play selected song, list of church needs as identified by church elders and deacons

Preparation: Ask elders and deacons to each identify three needs in our church

Opening remarks:

As the participants arrive, direct them to a table set up with the cards and names. Ask the participants to write down a word or a phrase on each card that describes a gift that the identified person has. By gift, we mean something that “sparkles” about that person. Gather the cards after they have been completed.

This is our fifth and last meeting as a small group. We have covered a lot of spiritual territory in the last five weeks. We’ve talked about ways that the Holy Spirit moves in our lives and seeks us out in our relationships and in worship. We’ve talked about ways that we can make space in our lives for the Holy Spirit to move us and to guide us including prayer and simply taking time to remember each other. Hopefully, we have been very intentional as we have practiced recognizing the Holy Spirit in our own lives. Tonight, we will talk about mission and service as a response to the Holy Spirit and as another way to engage the Holy Spirit. But, first, let’s revisit our task from this week which was reading scripture using the lectio divina method.

Reflection Questions: What was your experience in reading scripture using this method? What parts were enjoyable? What parts were challenging? How did God speak to you through the study of scripture this week?

Opening Activity

Reminder to turn off or silence cell phones.

We will begin our group exploration of the Spirit in mission and service by spending a little time in the scripture. Have you ever read a biblical story and tried to imagine what it might have been like to have been there? That's what we will do for the next 5-10 minutes – we will imagine ourselves in the story. Actually, activating our imagination as we read scripture is an ancient practice most associated with Ignatius of Loyola from the 16th century. He taught his followers how to imagine themselves as part of the Gospel story in order to help them discern God's call for their own lives.

It's very simple. You start by getting comfortable. You offer a prayer to God that recognizes you are already in God's presence. You ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And, you read the scripture taking time to let your imagination, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, carry you into story.

Let's try this today with a passage from John.

Let's sit comfortably, close your eyes, and breathe.

As you breathe, let your breath carry God's loving presence into you and let your breath carry your love out to God.

Breathing in and out, in and out.

Allow your body to rest in God's love as the Spirit drains away any tension that you carry.

Each week, we gather at the Lord's Table.

Imagine what it might have been like to be at the first table.

With Jesus and his disciples.

Where are you sitting at the table?

Who is talking the loudest? Who is laughing the loudest?

Take time to look around that table.

Notice Jesus taking time to look around that table.

Watch him look at his friends.

See Jesus get up; see Jesus pick up a bowl of water and a towel.

The room grows quiet.

See him kneel down in front of the person beside you.

He takes off their shoes and he washes their feet.

Watch what he does – the time he takes.

As he finishes, he smiles, stands up, and moves in front of you.

Does he say anything to you?

Watch him kneel down, feel his eyes as they look into yours, feel him reaching to take off your shoes.

Allow Jesus to wash your feet.

Is the water cool?

Are you comfortable?

When Jesus finishes, he stands up and speaks.
 "Do you know what I have done to you?
 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right,
 for that is what I am.
 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
 you also ought to wash one another's feet."
 Then he looks at you.
 "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."
 What does he mean? Look at him.
 What is he trying to reach in you?
 As you look around the table again, the disciples have grown comfortably quiet.
 You know it is time for you to leave,
 As you stand up, but you remember his words.
 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.
 Touch his shoulder as you leave.
 Tell him you will remember.

Reflection Questions: What was it like to entertain the idea of Jesus washing your feet? The disciples could have washed their own feet. You could have washed your own feet. What point was Jesus making? What feelings might he have had as he served his disciples in this way? What does his action say to us about the nature of discipleship?

Adele Calhoun writes that "The Christian discipline of service is the way the world discovers the love of God. We are the way God blesses the earth." I would add that service is also the way we more deeply discover the love of God.

Reflection Question: Can you describe a time that you felt closer to God as a result of serving?

Serving also helps us to draw closer to each other – as we serve each other in the name of Christ AND as we serve WITH each other in the name of Christ. Service may not always result in a planned outcome, but service is another way to open the door for the Spirit to move into our lives.

Learning Together

That said, service may be a part of discipleship that does not come naturally. It is ever so easy to go through our days and look right through others – not noticing the need. When we do not notice the need, we do not care about the need. Often, this habit of not noticing is driven by our schedules more than callousness on our part. We spend a lot of time working and accomplishing and being productive...sometimes at the expense of paying attention to where/who the Spirit is leading us.

Let's ponder that. Take out your list/columns from this past week.

Reflection Question: What did this short inventory reveal about your life? What drives your time and schedule? How would you like to see the answers in your columns change over the next few months?

If Jesus had ever been tasked with completing such an inventory, we would probably see him come down heavily in the “for others” and “for God” columns. Those are the interests that seemed to drive his life and ministry. We know that he loved God by praying, worshiping, studying and deliberately spending time with God. We know that he also loved others. He served them by teaching and healing and feeding, in God’s name. It was hard work. Jesus knew that it was a way of life that ran counter cultural to his world, and to ours. He knew that his followers would need help. When he ascended into heaven, he promised that his followers would receive power to live out this challenging life of discipleship. That power came in the form of the Holy Spirit.

The first gift that the Holy Spirit poured out onto the disciples was the gift of communication and speech that could be understood by people who spoke many different languages. The gifts that we are given today continue to be gifts that communicate the message of the Gospel.

Read scripture.

I Corinthians 12:4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

I asked each of our elders and deacons to identify three needs in our church or our immediate community that could be met by individuals willing to serve. Here is what they said: Open the white board.

I also have cards here that list out gifts that have been identified in each of you. I will call a few of those out (without identifying who they belong to), and you tell me which need(s) this gift might serve.

After the exercise, give each participant the card with his/her name on it and their listed gifts.

These are gifts that others, your brothers and sisters here, have seen activated in you. That means that these are gifts given to you by the Holy Spirit, and these are gifts to be used for the common good.

Reflection Questions: Are there any surprises? If you chose to further develop one or two of your gifts, would it shift anything in your columns? Do you see a need on this list that your gifts could help to address?

Taking it home

Each morning during the next week, as your spouse or colleague or friend “What can I do for you today?” Then do it. Talk to God about what this was like for you and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide you to places and people where your gifts can be used for the glory of God.

Preparing for next week

Thinks about the ways that the Holy Spirit has moved in your life over the past five weeks.

Closing prayer

Today, we will close with a laying on of hands. This is an ancient practice. If you read your New Testament, you will find several examples of times when believers laid hands on each other for healing and for receiving the Holy Spirit. We will pace a chair in the center of the group. You each are invited to sit in the chair, and the rest of us will stand around you. We will place our hands either on you or on the shoulders of the person in front of us. You are not required to participate or do anything that you are uncomfortable doing. As you each take a seat, I will offer a prayer to God of thanksgiving for you, and others will have the opportunity to pray for you as well.

APPENDIX 6
REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Wilson's Mills Christian Church
Reflection Questions for
"Seeing Red for Lent" - 2013

Please circle the number of sessions you attended: 1 2 3 4 5

1. How have these sessions changed your awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence in your life?
2. What has been most valuable about the relationships in your small group, and was there a particular experience that bound you together?
3. I would/would not like to continue to meet in a similar group because...
4. How has the group connected you with a calling/mission beyond this experience?
5. How can we better engage the Holy Spirit as a congregation?
6. Which session was particularly meaningful and why?

7. How is the Holy Spirit leading you to make a spiritual difference in our church?

8. What improvements or suggestions do you have for future groups?

Optional Information

Male

Female

Which group did you attend?

Sundays at 2:00 pm

Sundays at 4:00 pm

Wednesdays at 10:00 am

APPENDIX 7

MINISTER'S WEEKLY EVALUATION FORM



Wilson's Mills Christian Church
 "Seeing Red for Lent" – 2013
 Minister's Weekly Evaluation Form

Session: **One** **Two** **Three** **Four** **Five** **(Circle the appropriate one)**

Group: **Sunday 2PM** **Sunday 4 PM** **Wednesday 10 AM**

Number in Group_____ **Number in Attendance**_____

1. What went well during this session?

2. What can be improved?

3. How are participants engaging in the activities and discussion?

4. How did group participants connect to each other during this session?

5. Are there any issues that need to be addressed prior to the next session?

6. For sessions 2-5, are participants trying the suggested practices in between sessions? How do you know?

7. In general, the meeting was Excellent Good Fair
 Poor

APPENDIX 8
PARTICIPANT LETTER

Dear Seeing Red Participant,

I am so happy that you will be participating in "Seeing Red for Lent." The planning committee has been working very hard since September to make this a meaningful experience for our congregation.

Some have asked if you can attend another group if you have a scheduling snafu. The answer is "yes and no." Of course, our interest is that you to participate in as many sessions as possible, so if that means that you need to attend another group one week, we understand. That said, we also hope that group members will prioritize their participation in a single group. We look forward to members deepening their connection to each other and to God through the Holy Spirit, and that is more likely to happen with member commitment.

I have also been asked if there is a cost or a book. No. You only need the following two things: a relationship with God and a willingness to participate in the group, which leads me to a third question. What exactly will we be doing? We will learn about different ways to open our lives to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We will try out some ancient practices of prayer. We will approach the Scripture in different ways. We will talk about how some of these spiritual things come to life for each of us. You will be asked to try out a spiritual practice in between meetings so that we have something to discuss when we get together. You will not be asked to do anything you are not comfortable doing. So, no worries.

Finally, at WMCC, we are usually pretty lax about start times and don't pay too much attention to whether or not someone arrives 10-15 minutes late. However, these group sessions will have an opening exercise, and in many cases, latecomers would not only miss the foundation for the meeting, but they would also be disruptive to the exercise. If you have to trick yourself into thinking we start 15 minutes earlier, do so!

Finally, the planning committee would like to invite you to lunch after church on March 24th. We will eat and then briefly discuss the experience of "Seeing Red." This will be part of the evaluation (which is a required part of the project for me). So, if you can make plans to attend, I would most appreciate it, and I absolutely promise not to keep you for long.

Lea

APPENDIX 9

POSTCARDS

2:00 p.m. Session One Postcards

Breathing in...receive the Holy Spirit...

Where are you
"seeing red" this
week?

Friendship
Light
Comfort
Joy
Strength
Family
Calm
Love
Laughter

4:00 p.m. Session One Postcards

Breathing in...receive the Holy Spirit...

Where are you
"seeing red" this
week?

Family
Happiness
Laughter
Strength
Faith
Love
Grace
Comfort
Peace
Service

10:00 a.m. Session One Postcard

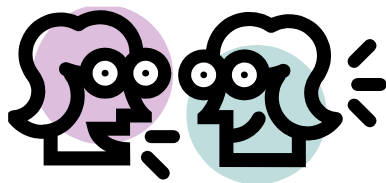
Breathing in...receive the Holy Spirit...

Where are you
“seeing red” this
week?

Peace **Contentment**
Understanding
Patience **Fullness**
Hope **Joy** **Love**

Session Two Postcards (all groups)

“For where two or three are gathered in
my name, I am there among them.”
- Matthew 18:20



How do you honor the
presence of Christ in your
daily interactions?

Session Three Postcards (all groups)

“All who believed were together and had
all things in common.”

- Acts 2:44

Relationships

+

=

Holy Spirit

patience
faithfulness
accountability
compassion
gentleness
faith
generosity
joy
goodness
confidence
calm
peace
graciousness
self-control
love
kindness

Session Four Postcards (all groups)

Is “God trying
to tell
you
something?”

Be transformed by the
renewing of your minds...

Don't forget to
breathe...and receive the
Holy Spirit

APPENDIX 10

CHURCH NEEDS IDENTIFIED BY CHURCH LEADERS

- Youth leaders
- Youth choir director
- Commitment
- More activities for youth and toddlers
- More participation from all church members
- Expanded music programs
- More outreach opportunities
- Commitment to outreach
- Commitment to prayer
- Compassion
- More participation
- Leader for men's group
- Increased organization in committees and groups
- Attendance
- More adult Sunday School teachers
- Active youth group
- More volunteerism
- Prayer
- Commitment
- Passion
- Communication
- Volunteers
- Constructive methods for feedback

APPENDIX 11

LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE EVALUATION

Prepared by: Reverend Lea Slaton's Lay Advisory Committee

The planning of the "Red for Lent" small group studies went exceptionally well. Reverend Slaton's leadership of the committee was both a guiding presence and a nurturing one. She led us through the process but at the same time she allowed, wanted, and listened to our ideas. We were encouraged to take risks, to think and plan activities that might be outside our comfort areas so that the study groups might have a more spiritual, educational, and memorable experience. Through the course of the planning period a great deal of trust was established inside the committee itself. A theme that would surface again in each of the small study groups as well; according to the attendee's. Reverend Slaton led and we followed! She was extremely organized at each planning session and group study class. She showed strength and bravery in going places when she was unsure of the outcome... and yet she moved forward! We feel that the entire planning process proved to us that we are more willing to extend ourselves spiritually than even we know.

We have now completed the Seeing Red for Lent small group "study". We as a committee feel there has been a spiritual advancement at Wilson's Mills Christian Church as a result of the study. Some of our comments follow:

- "There has been a measurable growth in the awareness of the Holy Spirit in the daily lives of the committee members."
- "There has been an increased yearning for a closer walk with God in our daily lives."
- "Being able to verbally express personal experiences of the Holy Spirit in our lives with others of like faith broadened my willingness to share my personal beliefs."
- "I think those involved are more aware of the Holy Spirit in their lives (from shared comments of the attendees). New relationships have been formed resulting in congregational and personal growth. I believe this study will create changes in our congregation which we have yet to see."
- I have already seen changes in all involved. The congregation seems to be more open with each other and with Reverend Slaton. The study has connected members of the congregation young and old by phone calls, e-mails, or a simple hug at church.

The committee feels on the whole that this has been an exceptionally well planned and successful event.

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