

My Emerging Model of Spiritual Formation

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Part 1 – Introduction and Overview

Identifying Necessary Ingredients for Spiritual Growth

Awareness

Lowe (2024) in his "Introduction to Ecologies of Christian Formation" video reminds us that nothing grows alone. Everything is connected as part of a larger ecosystem for the natural growth process which corresponds to the spiritual growth of the kingdom and church body likened to the development of the individual parts comprising the human body. So, a necessary ingredient for spiritual growth begins with awareness of the interconnectedness of worldly social connections between oneself and others, like a spider web or a power grid of lines (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 11). Additionally, this awareness provides a person, serving in ministries and still forming their convictions on issues, the ability to think with a Christian mindset within their surrounding culture (Pettit, 2008, 34).

Unfortunately, many humans journey through life's murky valley because sin and death corrupted and wrecked God's preeminent creation. Adam's disobedience and commission rather than the omission of sin initiated this corruption (Pettit, 2008, p. 41). Thus, humans have turned to their way, breaking the mutual connections (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 75) perfectly established by God.

These interconnections between humans remain essential for maximizing the growth and flourishing of God's creation just as the non-human creations require reciprocal relations for sharing nutrients and resources for survival (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 190). Like nature exchanging physical organic nutrients (carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, etc.); the kingdom and church exchange the spiritual nutrients through interactions between believers and non-believers (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 42). Christians can cultivate a kingdom just as farmers produce crops by

preparing the soil and sowing the seeds in the proper environment provided by God for reaping (Petti, 2008, 44). These spiritual nutrients can grow through the united and motivated efforts of Christian believers who invite their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share God's word (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 194).

Connection

A person not only requires awareness of the universal interconnected relationships of people and cultures but they require a connection. As Pettit reminds us, God created humans as a community and for a community (Pettit, 2008, 75). However, many people have been hurt by others too many times causing a disconnect in our universal communal web of relationships. This hurt has caused them to seek seclusion resulting in lonely people who no longer desire to share their feelings, anger, or fears (Pettit, 2008, 83). They forget or don't know that they were chosen by God and are precious in his eyes though rejected by humans of the world (Pettit, 2008, 66).

Instead of seeking out inclusive friendships of vulnerabilities, openness, and sharing, individuals begin seeking a competitive environment (Pettit, 2008, 83). They work longer hours and spend more time commuting, leaving little time to connect with other people (Pettit, 2008, 81). They began aligning with an African Proverb noted in Lowe's (2024) video, "Leadership and spiritual formation," by going fast and alone rather than going far and together as a community like in the Old and New Testament. They become so consumed with their competitive nature, that their humanitarian traits (temptation, anger, love, hunger) transform into sinful actions thus breaking the connections established by God.

To repair broken connections, humans must establish a relationship through God's Word for renewal and freedom from the isolation imposed upon them by the culture of the world. This

freedom will allow them to seek positional salvation or justification by recognizing the depth of their sin and placing their trust in Jesus Christ (Pettit, 2008, 43) while remembering Jesus' perfect humanitarian traits. Jesus demonstrated his perfection through his obedience to and complete dependency on his father. So, by modeling Jesus, humans can restore broken connections through acceptance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit with grace and truth (Pettit, 2008, 43).

Community

After a person establishes or restores connections, they can discern their role, and spiritual gift, in a unified Christian community starting the Spiritual formation process, a third ingredient to spiritual formation. As a member of a Christian community, they become unified with other Christians operating from the same center of biblical truth for behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Pettit, 2008, 41). A Christian community allows for spiritual nourishment among one another by reciprocally supporting each other with their spiritual gift given to them freely empowered through a common Holy Spirit (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 61). This nourishment allows the community of God's kingdom to strengthen their interconnections and grow by sharing spiritually and growing in mutual faith as believers in the salvation offered through Jesus Christ rather than the commonalities of their secular life.

Their strength and growth occur through Jesus Christ who provides the capacities for members to experience joy in one another, and fellowship with one another by making the one into many, a community of Faith in Christ with the Holy Spirit, bringing all into community with God (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 176). This faith allows the members to work side-by-side sharing in sufferings, persecution, and glory with an unbreakable strength to resist the worldly, divisive,

distinctions such as race, class, and gender (Pettit, 2008, 80). By working with one another, Christians assimilate through God's original plan for spiritually forming his children.

Spiritual formation begins with a community of awareness, connected image bearers bowing their knee and calling on the name of the Lord with a devotion to the only one true God and continuing their worship throughout their entire Christian life (Pettit, 2008, 60). Their life should reflect an eternal love relationship displaying God's glory (Pettit, 2008, 38) while working the effects of the gospels into the depths of their hearts (Pettit, 2008, 61). Participating together rather than exalting themselves, the members will strengthen the community by building up one another and pursuing peace with encouraging words and love (Pettit, 2008, 92). Spiritual formation is a socially interactive community activity reproducing God's life and character (Pettit, 2008, 46).

For this reason, assembling as a church for worship remains the center of a human's life experience in Christ (Pettit, 2008, 65), essential for empowering ministry growth (Pettit, 2008, 110) and spiritual formation. Through community worship, the human spirit of God's children can be transformed to godliness overcoming their ongoing experience of corruption caused by the fall of Adam and its aftermath and returning them to their original created image and likeness of God (Pettit, 2008, 56). By finishing the process of entire sanctification or spiritual maturity, all God's children have an opportunity to one day stand "complete in Christ" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 201).

**Part 2 – The Role of the Christian Community
in
Facilitating Spiritual Maturity**

Recruiter

Pettit (2008) reminds Christians that every individual life story comprises a larger story supporting an overarching biblical metanarrative of salvation from creation to the fall of humans to redemption by Christ to finally a new creation (Pettit, 2008, p. 219). As a recruiter for God's Kingdom, a person's role is to greet and welcome individuals (the lost) into a community of family members allowing them to share their life story. As each individual acknowledges and shares their emotional feelings, an intentional design by God (Pettit, 2008, p. 131), they begin relating to community members.

As a person's relationship within the community grows; Agape, holy love as designed by God grows as well. This love of the lost allows an individual to experience the grace of Christ's followers, accepting God's love into their life (Pettit, 2008, p. 173), and sharing the story of Christ (Pettit, 2008, p. 175). Through this experience, an individual begins seeking a better understanding of their gifts, personality, and passions for better integration into the community (Pettit, 2008, p. 197).

Through constant community engagement, an individual becomes committed to growing in love and loving others well. They begin laying aside their problem and patiently supporting the life problems of others (Pettit, 2008, p. 172). The individual starts experiencing individual growth through corporate planting and watering as discussed in Lowe's video, "New Testament process terms for spiritual formation." Additionally, through growth by God with reciprocal love between the individual and the community, the person experiences a process transforming them into the likeness of God, spiritual formation (Lowe, 2024), and living by the Holy Spirit.

Mentor

Pettit (2008) discusses the Spirit's strength to restore hope and the Apostle Paul's words to live by the Spirit (p. 160). The community plays a significant role in the collective, redemptive process through the understanding of human growth and development (New International Version, 2011, John 13:35). As a collective body, the community mentors each other in developing a character of loving God with the whole heart, soul, and mind and one's neighbor as themselves (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 22:37-39).

Individual character matures through a community of believers (Pettit, 2008, p. 143). This maturity in character will produce personal qualities such as self-respect, teamwork, moral reasoning, and openness to constructive feedback (Pettit, 2008, p. 147). Additionally, the community mentors the individual in growing their relationship with God (Pettit, 2008, p. 143).

Also, the community mentors the individual about their primary calling as designed by God, a living and dynamic relationship with him, and a life of holiness. By understanding one's primary calling as a believer, a person can continue growing by learning how to live out this calling through their functional calling (Pettit, 2008, p. 198). The community role is essential in an individual's spiritual discernment of their functional calling. In the community, a person lives out their transforming life, call to faith and service (Pettit, 2008, p. 198). So, the community, the church, mentors the individual in identifying their spiritual gift, an essential element to a believer's life allowing for continued growth in their relationship with God (Pettit, 2008, p. 159).

This individual growth continues within the community until the church, the body of Christ, reaches a mature, unity of faith, obtaining the fullness of Christ (Pettit, 2008, p. 159). And, as an individual grows in their relationship with God and become an integral community member, their identity in Christ continually matures resulting in a lifetime pursuit of integrity

within the community, glorifying God, and spiritual formation (Pettit, 2008, p. 275) toward a likeness of Jesus. Their heart starts cultivating so much in this likeness that they begin to endure the pain accompanying lifetime character and spiritual transformation (Pettit, 2008, p. 124). However, throughout this painful process of spiritual formation, community members coach individuals in enduring the painful tests just as Jesus did in the 24 hours of his life on the cross (Pettit, 2008, p. 122).

Coach

The community ensures an individual doesn't remain standing like a helpless child while in pain. With the assistance of the community, the individual can overcome the pain. As mentioned in module four, week four video, "The role of the faith community in spiritual formation," through God's Spirit and God's Word, members of the Christian community enliven individual maturity through encouragement and building each other up so common enemies can be defeated not just individually but corporately and collectively (Lowe, 2024).

With community coaching, the individual develops mature Christian characteristics and gifts. They learn to balance self-direction and discipline while fully embracing life's mysteries and interacting with others. Their experiences are no longer based on what their eyes can see (Pettit, 2008, p. 154). They become visionary; understand long-term implications and consequences before implementing any actions; and demonstrate self-awareness of their character traits (Pettit, 2008, p. 157). The individual spiritually transforms into a servant leader.

Spiritual formation becomes the primary focus of the individual's life as a servant leader resulting from community involvement. The individual now views their spiritual gift as a gift from God with their gift to God being how they best utilize that spiritual gift (Pettit, 2008, p. 271). They know who they are and whose they are (Pettit, 2008, p. 271). They now seek a

service toward God and others in a Christ-devoted life (Pettit, 2008, p. 271). For this reason, they seek to identify, diagnose, and correct any character deficiency before a leadership failure occurs (Pettit, 2008, p. 158). The spiritually formed servant leader remains committed to fulfilling God's mission and purpose for their life (Pettit, 2008, p. 158) as an integrated part of the community, the church, and the body of Christ.

Servant Leader

A servant leader for God focuses on spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ into their surrounding community. In accomplishing this task, the leader understands and accepts both, their primary and secondary calling. Additionally, servant leaders must be disciplined and able to envision what God is doing through them with their calling. With this self-awareness, a leader influences individuals, moving them from a state of awareness to commitment (Roxburgh et al, 2006).

A leader must be able to influence others because only a small percentage of believers have the necessary discipline. And, a servant leader must have the patience to disciple new believers through stages slowly like Jesus as if moving a child from infancy to adulthood. These discipleship stages include Inquiry, Living Example (I do, you watch), Mentor (I do, You Help), Coach (You do, I Help), and Delegator (You Do, I Watch) (Ogden, 2003).

Discipleship remains crucial to developing an emotionally healthy church and reaching individuals of surrounding communities. A healthy church can teach individuals to embrace loss and grieve by identifying and living beyond brokenness, breaking the power of the past, and growing from hurt. A healthy church projects an incarnation model of living and loving like Jesus (Scazzero, 2010) when growing the kingdom of God.

**Part 3 – The Targeted Outcome
of the
Spiritual Formation Process**

Maturing Character

Lowe's video (2024), "Spiritual target outcome: Whole church transformation", discussed a way to measure the spiritual maturity of a person and the church (Body of Christ) using the Pauline Triad (Faith, Hope, and Love). This triad has been a spiritual measuring stick for the firm foundation of faith passed down for many generations. Seeking this firm foundation gives a person hope in fulfilling the scripture writing in Romans. Through spiritual maturity, they find the glory in their sufferings learning to persevere in the most difficult times. This perseverance builds their character which removes their shame by restoring their hope and filling their heart with God's love (New International Version, 2011, Romans 5:3-5). This restoration allows for the continued maturing of a person's beliefs and values.

According to Leffel (2007), a maturing person identifies with some concept of tradition involving virtual practices allowing them to overcome dangers, temptations, and distractions because of increasing self-knowledge of themselves and good. Their values reflect moral values (empathy, compassion, gratitude) with an ability to convert moral thoughts into caring behavior. Thus, a person enables valued reciprocal relationships (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 67) within a morally contagious network of social connections promoting prosocial actions by spreading happiness and love rather than beliefs and behaviors resulting in alcoholism, suicide, and depression (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 128).

By enabling a moral network, they begin understanding how people tick beyond the children of God, they start understanding the complexities of relational and conversational

beings. Though struggles still exist because of differing opinions, a movement occurs toward relational and spiritual integration rather than just a logical process. The movement allows a person to overcome failed relationships because of their ability to stay grounded and centered with their beliefs and values while finding common ground and bonding with others (Haynes, 2020).

Deepened Relationships

Overcoming failed relationships proves difficult for many people because humans naturally seek protection from harm, so they hide who they are from other people. Also, many people are self-absorbed and maintain unrealistic expectations of others because of cultural differences. Until a person accepts God's loving, relational invitation and becomes self-giving rather than self-centered, spiritual formation will not occur (McHale et al., 2018).

For this reason, the person requires integration into a unified community with purpose and strong relationships. Also, a community will allow them to experience the love of God; learn that everything does not center around them; and find common ground with others (McHale et al., 2018). Through community, a person can overcome failed relationships through encouragement and perseverance. This type of community provides a person the willingness to build a spiritually formed character by overcoming suffered trauma in their life. They allow God to use their suffering to deepen their faith in him. God deepens this faith by connecting the person's human suffering with the suffering of Jesus, thus creating a bi-directional, associational relationship between the person and Jesus (Sorenson, 2017).

A relationship with Jesus can foster socially and influential interactive relationships supporting a stable, contagious, trusting network (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 123). Also, interpersonal influence within a community, whether online or face-to-face, can drive bi-directional,

reciprocal, and relational growth of not only the individual but the community as a whole (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 85). However, for continuous growth and sustainment, certain needs must be fulfilled through participant negotiation, engagement (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 84), and the greatest need - unending love that is kind and patient. A type of love that does not envy, boast, dishonor, or keep records of wrong and is not self-seeking, easily angered, or proud (New International Version, 2011, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8), a Christ-like love.

Christ-like

With Christ-like love, a person can navigate a road to full spiritual completion, a likeness of Christ. However, as mentioned in Lowe's video (2024), "Spiritual Formation target outcome: Whole person conformation", they must obtain whole spiritual completion consisting of five personal aspects (intellectual, emotional, moral, social, physical) rather than just one if they have identified and zeroed in on the correct target (Lowe, 2024). Additionally, they must remember that God has made all the necessary equipment available to them, primarily the Holy Spirit. God has entrusted all spiritually formed people with the highest calling any person could receive in environments of intimate sharing about the love of God and the joys of a Christian life (Henderson, 2012).

The road to fulfilling this calling and becoming Christ-like will remain long because Christians will continually fight a cultural war battle dividing the secular and sacred. They will attempt to live two lives, a public (secular) and private (sacred) unlike the integration of both during colonial times. During colonial times, all family members knew the roles and responsibilities of the other members so God's mission would not halt in the absence of any one member (Percy, 2005).

However, today, the home and business life are separate entities eroding relationships with the removal of scripture. Many more hours are now devoted to the culture of the world rather than the sacred, making scripture no longer a representation of objective truth. The bridge between the Christian and secular views has been destroyed eroding Christ-like images worldwide (Percy, 2005).

For this reason, the Holy Spirit remains key to the spiritual growth of all individuals because the Holy Spirit disperses the same quickened power used by Jesus to minister Christianity in the world through the body of Christ (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 73), a collaborative environment. Learning occurs in a collaborative environment discovering better ways to approach life and lead others. Through collaboration with others, the long road to spiritual formation filled with life activities is better navigated. (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 102).

For this reason, each person must focus on their acquired target and travel the road laid before them with intentionality, reflection, and interactive engagement with those traveling on the same road (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, 102). They must travel with joyful faith and love while continuously praying and giving thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to live a spiritual life to become the spiritually formed person intended by God.

Though spiritual formation is not an instantaneous process, even within the presence of many Christians, when complete, the spiritually formed individual as well as the church represents a body of obedient servants. These obedient servants minister with love in the Spirit, great endurance, and patience. And, each person leads a mature Christ-like life bearing fruit growing in the knowledge of God and growing others in every good work while standing firm in their faith and the hope of the gospel qualifying them to receive a share of the inheritance of God's Kingdom (New International Version, 2011, Colossians 1).

**Part 4 – Application of Emerging Model
to
Diverse Settings**

Embrace

People including Christians are becoming convinced that pastors know as little as they do about following Christ. Also, they are growing tired of having to embrace a church's vision so they seek a church that embraces their vision (Campbell, H. & Garner, 2016, p. 86). Since the world promotes the media on the internet as having great potential for finding desired answers, people are seeking answers by embracing the internet as an innovative resource for achieving religious goals. Even, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association supports internet evangelism for spreading the Christian message (Campbell, H. & Garner, 2016, p. 98).

Beyond the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, more and more Christian communities are conforming to the digital world and relying heavily on the internet and technology for disciple-making. Young adults are spending more than 20 hours a week online. For this reason, churches must seek to understand the benefits and limitations of technology for building disciples with deepened, spiritual relationships through the internet, without having face-to-face interaction. However, the internet should be recognized as a secondary tool, a conduit, for reaching disciples. Scriptures, the church, and ministry experiences should remain the primary tools for building disciples while remaining focused on God's mission and using available tools wisely (Shirley, 2017).

Many theologians continue debating the suitability of online learning and its suitability for cultivating a person's spirit, character, and mind to deepen one's faith. But, as mentioned earlier, the internet must be embraced by the church. So, a reframing of focus must occur in the thought process of internet usage. The reframing should include focusing on the different

features of online learning rather than the difference between online and face-to-face learning (Hockridge, 2011).

A deeper understanding of internet features and greater theological learning occurs with the integration of a reframed mindset of the church towards the internet and its supporting worldwide communities. With the proper, reframed mindset, the church can create a highly contagious, happy, corporate culture as discussed in Dr. Mary Lowe's video titled Social Networks and Spiritual Formation Part 2. By spreading a culture of happiness, relational experiences of entire social networks are positively altered because of the nature of human behavior (Lowe, M., 2024).

Engage

For a church to influence a culture of happiness, the church must not only embrace the online community, but the church must engage this community and technology. This engagement is inherent in the relationship between God and the individuals of the corporate environment. Individuals are to integrate their faith with every aspect of the technological world including but not limited to social, political, cultural, and economic aspects (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p.128).

Today, people live in a world promoting these aspects worldwide utilizing technology with increased exponential speed of communication. People are connected virtually, worldwide, and interact with multitudes of cultures. This mobility and speed are defining the higher education learning and behavioral landscapes worldwide. This virtual citizenship is progressing the definition of citizen from a context of national to global citizenship. Human behavior is being influenced greatly by virtual citizenship and includes individuals of all ages, especially the millennials born between 1980 and 2000 and the following generations (Bauman et al, 2014).

Technological improvements have allowed for the invasive and pervasive integration of digital media into every aspect of life. The improvements have promised greater adaptability, flexibility, and personalization with less and less individual interaction promising environments with a greater level of interactivity, experiences, and faster creation of media content while promoting underlying values. These environments promote an increase in media circulation and social network engagements (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 48).

Appropriate online engagement requires Christians to understand and adhere to the direction of the Christian faith. Christians must understand the importance of this requirement because online media supports an avenue connecting both private and public worlds with no boundary limits for reflection and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 117). For this reason, Christians must lead the engagement with media and technology to build strong, interconnected relationships while standing strong with a continuous, Christ-centered faith influence (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 122).

Encounter

Dr. Mary Lowe's Video, Social Networks and Spiritual Formation Part 1, outlines the negative impacts (heart disease, stroke, depression) resulting from isolation while social relationships (support groups, friends) sustain people through the most difficult times. Studies have shown social connectedness as being linked to longevity and whole-person development to include spiritual development. However, to develop spiritually, a person must encounter and be engaged in a community of healthy believers. Through a spiritually interconnected community, people and the community can be put back together overcoming sin in our fallen and broken creation resulting from the sin of our parents (Lowe, M. 2024).

According to Sider & et al, people were created by God to be interconnected so they would not be alone (2002). Genesis reminds us that not just man but every person created by God needs a suitable helper or helpers. For this reason, people must maintain their interconnectedness through a web of social relationships (Sider & et al, 2002).

The internet is just another way of assisting others in encountering Christ and developing a deepened relationship with God. Encountering people through media goes back to the printing press which progressed to the radio, then television, and the internet (websites, social media, mobile apps). Continue growth remains inevitable as demonstrated by the current growth of technology into the realm of Artificial Intelligence with each progression of growth allowing for a greater reach within a global audience (Praeda, 2024).

With this greater reach, a church must incorporate a balanced approach to online and offline interaction. In obtaining a balanced approach, the corporate body must build a scaled system based on the understanding of the local values and knowledge of the encountered community. This balanced approach avoids potential negative impacts articulated by the pessimists (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 122).

Now, a person does not have to embrace every aspect or assumption when engaging with technology, individually or communally. However, a need does exist to encounter people interconnected through technology with kindness and compassion contributing to the well-being of others. So, believers must set the Christian example by being humble, just, faithful, and loving in actions and words so they can continue to walk humbly with God. For this reason, the body of Christ down to the individual members must maintain a Christ-like manner when encountering others across the many web-based, media platforms (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 141).

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