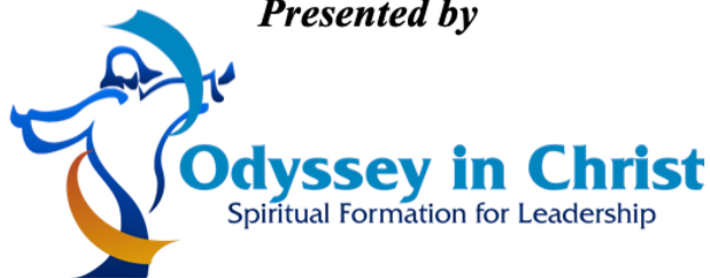




Living into Christ: Pathway to Spiritual Formation

***Living into Christ Retreat
A Congregational Journey in Spiritual Formation
Living Hope Christian Fellowship***

Presented by



**Fairfax, Virginia
September 12-14, 2025**



Introduction

Dear Participants,

Welcome to the *Living into Christ* retreat. I and our OIC team are so grateful that you have chosen to set aside this time, because at its heart this retreat is an invitation—not to do more, but to encounter the God who already desires to meet you. The truest thing about you is not your title, your gifts, or even your struggles; the truest thing is your desire for God. And the truest thing about God is his longing for you. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

In these days together, you are invited to slow down, to listen beneath the surface of busyness, and to pay attention to the longings that stir within you. These desires—whether for rest, healing, joy, or deeper intimacy with Christ—are gifts of the Spirit. They are not meant to be hidden or suppressed but offered to the One who receives them tenderly and meets them with transforming love. In this space you do not need to perform or strive. It is enough to be still and to know that you are God’s beloved.

This retreat is also about community. Jesus promised, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). We will discover his presence not only in silence and Scripture as well as in other activities, but also in the faces and stories of one another. Some encounters will bring comfort, others may stretch us; all are moments of grace, for the Spirit is weaving us together into the body of Christ.

As we journey together, we invite you to hold two simple questions close to heart: *How is God inviting me to grow as a disciple of Jesus? And how might what I experience here help me walk with others as a disciple-maker?* These questions connect deeply with your congregation’s call to nurture the Faith Avenue of belonging, believing, and becoming. What you receive here is not only for yourself but for those you will love, serve, and encourage when you return home.

Above all, remember this: God is already here. In him you “live and move and have your being” (Acts 17:28). Every breath, every word, every prayer, every shared silence is a doorway into his presence. Come as you are and open yourself to the Shepherd who longs to restore your soul and to bring you into greater awareness of his loving presence in your life. My prayer is that you will leave this time knowing—deeply and personally—“how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18).

With joy and expectation,

In Christ’s love,

Dr. Larry Hinkle

Founding Director, Odyssey in Christ – Spiritual Formation for Leadership



Presenters

Larry Hinkle

Larry Hinkle is the founder and director of Odyssey in Christ, Spiritual Formation for Leadership (OdysseyinChrist.com). He and his wife, Joanne, have been married for 56 years and have two children, two grandchildren and four great grandchildren. He has served the fellowship of Grace Communion International for some 50 years in teaching and in pastoral ministry. He currently teaches graduate seminary courses in Spiritual Formation at Grace Communion Seminary as well as at the Asian School of Development and Cross-cultural Studies and the Philippine Missionary Institute in Transformative Spirituality. Academic work includes master's degrees in Latin American Studies, Counseling, and Religion as well as a Doctorate in Formational Counseling from Ashland Theological Seminary, a Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction from San Francisco Theological Seminary and an Advanced Certificate in Spiritual Direction Supervision from Fordham University. Dr. Hinkle's passion is to help believers to know God better and to experience his love, grace and empowerment more fully in their lives.

Charles Fleming

Charles Fleming served as a minister for Grace Communion International ministry for more than 40 years. First in pastoral work in Puerto Rico and Jamaica and then as GCI's regional director and mission developer for Latin America and the Caribbean. During those years he earned a DMiss and MAGL from Fuller Theological Seminary and an MA in Public Administration at Florida International University. Though retired from his "day job," Charles continues to serve members of GCI by teaching a class on mission at Grace Communion Seminary and assisting with various training seminars for ministers. Charles and his wife, Carmen, live in Orlando, Florida. Together they raised three children and now enjoy their two grandchildren. Charles and Carmen share a love for spiritual formation that has led them to them to serve in the ministry of Odyssey in Christ, a ministry dedicated to helping people experience the love of the Triune God.

Carmen Fleming

Carmen and her husband Charles have been in ministry together for over four decades. Together they have 3 children and 2 grandchildren, the apple of their eyes. Carmen's academic and professional development includes a BA in Social work serving in Puerto Rico 3 years. She holds an Advanced-level Certification in the study and practice of Formational Prayer from Healing Care Ministries International in Ashland, Ohio. She served as a leader for the Walk to Emmaus spiritual retreats in South Florida for 3 years. She is a trained Odyssey in Christ Spiritual Director with 12 years of experience. She has a two-year master's degree in Transformative Spirituality from the Philippine Missionary Institute, School of Graduate Studies. Her greatest thrill as a retreat leader is to listen to the participants' experience of God's love as they open themselves to his presence. She also serves on the Odyssey in Christ Board of Directors as Secretary and as a Spiritual Director for OIC retreats and seminars.

Gracie Johnson

Gracie Johnson, an ordained minister, serves as a spiritual director and ministry instructor for the Odyssey in Christ Ministry, and is a member of the Board of Directors. She has one son who has given her two granddaughters. Gracie now serves as the program director for North America, the Caribbean, and an associate faculty member in the online Master in Transformative Spirituality program of ASDECS /Philippine Missionary Institute. Her academic work includes a Master of Human Resources Management with certificates in MBA & marketing. She has a graduate certificate in education and has completed doctoral level work in human services and counseling. Other ministry training includes a certificate in Advanced Healing Prayer from the Institute of Formational Counseling at Ashland Theological Seminary. She is committed to lifelong learning with and through the OIC Ministry including helping others to connect intimately with God, receive healing in both body and soul, and in her passion for serving the character-building needs of young people.

You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed
by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people
who will be able to pass them on to others.

2 Timothy 2:2



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Spiritual Desire

It is good for us to pause and get in touch with our truest desires—what’s really going on inside of us at the deepest levels of our being. David says in Psalm 51:6, “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” We encourage you to ask yourself this question: “What is the truest thing about me?” Ruth Haley Barton says that “The truest thing about you and me is that we desire more of God than we presently are experiencing.”¹

“Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you. You might think that your woundedness or your sinfulness is the truest thing about you or that your giftedness or your personality type or your job title or your identity as husband or wife, mother or father, somehow defines you. But in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now that is the deepest essence of who you are.”²

We long for God because he first longed for us. We reach for God because he first reached for us. Nothing in the spiritual life originates with us. It all originates with the God who is so passionate in his love for us that he became one of us.

Real spiritual transformation begins with desire. Deep issues of the soul cannot be addressed simply through will power and one’s own self-discipline. Learning the unforced rhythms of grace go beyond self-mastery and self-effort. As we get in touch with the desire that God has placed within our heart, we can attune ourselves to that desire and build up an appetite for more. As you go thru this retreat and training experience, we encourage you to think deeply and prayerfully about the real, inmost desires of your heart.

*You are blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God.
He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.*

Matthew 5:6, MSG

¹ This quote and main principles adapted from Barton, Ruth Haley (2009-12-14). Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation (The Transforming Center Set) (p. 24). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., p. 24.



Faith Avenue

Until Christ is formed in you.

Galatians. 4: 19

Since one of your congregation's priorities is establishing a healthy Faith Avenue, we have designed this retreat to help you with that goal. This is a natural fit as spiritual formation is an essential dimension of the Faith Avenue. Our encouragement is to enter into the retreat expecting that the exercises you participate in will help you both as a disciple of Jesus and as a disciple-maker.

Here is a brief description of the goals and priorities of the Faith Avenue. Keep them in mind as you go through the retreat.

The Why and What for of a Faith Avenue

The Faith Avenue is the space where GCI gives special attention to helping people grow as disciples of Jesus. The emphasis is on helping members grow in *relational connections*, *nurtures spiritual growth* and *equips members* for ministry and mission. As a result, we prioritize Belonging, Believing and Becoming (Three Bs).

The Goals of the Three Bs

The goal for belonging is to grow into a practice that results in everyone feeling they have a place and purpose in the congregation. So, a high priority is to create, within the church, a welcoming environment where people feel loved, accepted, and part of the church family.

The goal for believing is to provide opportunities for each member to deepen their faith through intentional teaching and relational support. The priority here is to help individuals grow in their understanding of Jesus and their identity in Him.

The goal for becoming is to disciple members so they also become disciple-makers. Here the priority is to intentionally empower disciples to participate in Jesus' ministry and disciple others.

Two Helpful Questions to ask yourself as you participate in the various exercises.

As a disciple - How does this experience help me become a better disciple? How can I integrate it into my life?

As a disciple-maker - How does this experience help me become a better *disciple-maker*? How can I integrate it into the Faith Avenue?



Solitude & Silence

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalm 46:10

There is a holy invitation waiting for each of us—an invitation to step away from the noise, to rest in quiet stillness, and to open ourselves to the God who longs to be with us. Moments of meditation in solitude and silence are not empty pauses; they are sacred spaces where our hearts are re-oriented toward what matters most: God’s abiding presence and relationship with us.

In silence, we discover freedom. We no longer need to strive, perform, or demand. It is enough that God is God—and that we are His beloved. Ruth Haley Barton describes solitude and silence as an invitation into “the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise of busyness.”¹ This invitation is not to withdraw from life but to enter more deeply into its truest meaning, to commune with the God who transforms us from within.

Solitude is more than being alone. It is being fully honest with ourselves and with God—allowing His Spirit to meet us beneath the surface, even in our hidden motives and fears. Adele Calhoun reminds us that when we stop leaning on the props of people, places, and things, God’s Spirit finally has room to work deeply in our souls. It can be uncomfortable at first, but it is profoundly freeing.²

The saints across centuries have testified to this gift. Thomas à Kempis wrote that “in silence and peace a devout soul makes progress and learns the secrets of the scriptures.”³ Kenneth Leech calls it “a penetration of one’s deepest centre.”⁴ And Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned of our tendency to flee from silence, lest we be confronted with ourselves. Yet when we dare to stay, silence opens us to communion with the One who loves us beyond measure.⁵

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 32.

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 112.

³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1940), 58.

⁴ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1992), 53.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 58.

Silence also awakens our senses. As when standing outside under a quiet starlit sky, our threshold of attention shifts—we hear whispers we normally miss. In the same way, silence helps us attune to the still, small voice of God that so often comes gently rather than dramatically.

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life...
If we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.

Henri Nouwen

Journal/Notes



Present Moment Reality

Sacrament of the Present Moment

*Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.*

Psalm 73:23

*Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and
don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow.
God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.*

Matthew 6:34, MSG

God is always present to us. The question is, how present are we to God? The Apostle Paul explained quite eloquently to the Athenians that God's desire was for mankind to, "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." The reason for this is that in Him we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28).

Jean-Pierre de Caussade called this reality *the sacrament of the present moment*, in which, "Everything proclaims him to you, everything reveals him to you, everything brings him to you. He is by your side, over you, around and in you . . . your suffering, your actions, your impulses are the mysteries under which God reveals himself to you."¹

François Fénelon echoes: "Above all, live in the present moment and God will give you all the grace you will need."² James Bryan Smith affirms that the kingdom of God is lived only in the now: "We can't live in it tomorrow, until tomorrow comes. Worrying about tomorrow is a useless distraction."³

Practicing presence requires intentional attentiveness. James Finley defines this kind of contemplative practice as any act "habitually entered into with your whole heart, as a way of awakening, deepening, and sustaining a contemplative experience of the inherent holiness of the present moment."⁴ To live the sacrament of the present moment is to surrender to God's embrace in every breath, every task, and every relationship, discovering that wholeness is always found in the *now*.

1. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989), 36.

2. François Fénelon, *Let Go* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1973), 28.

3. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 227.

4. James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 46.



Journey to Wholeness in Christ

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 147:3

When Jesus stood in the synagogue in Nazareth, he read from the prophet Isaiah and declared his mission: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18–19, NIV; cf. Isaiah 61). In doing so, he revealed himself as the fulfillment of prophecy—the One who brings healing, freedom, and restoration to all creation. Jesus is God’s Wounded Healer: *“by his wounds we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5). His suffering and rejection became the doorway to life, love, and community.

Reflection

Each of us carries wounds—whether from past hurts, present struggles, or hidden fears. In Christ, these wounds are not dismissed or ignored. Instead, they are gently touched by His healing love and transformed into places of strength and compassion. As we open our brokenness to Jesus, we find that what once brought pain can now be a source of connection and healing for others. This is why Peter tells us that we are priests—wounded healers and those who represent the people to God and who represent God to the people.

As you come to him, the living Stone —
rejected by humans but chosen by God
and precious to him— you also, like living stones,
are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,
offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:4-5

A Prayer to Pray

Jesus, wounded Healer, I bring You my broken places. Transform them with Your love. May my wounds no longer be sources of shame or hiding, but channels of Your grace, compassion, and healing for others. Teach me to walk in Your steps, sharing the wholeness that only You can give. Amen.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,
who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort
those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

2 Corinthians 1:3-4



Experiencing the Loving Presence of God

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power...
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.*

Ephesians 3:17

We are created in the image of God with a heart longing to be loved and with the desire to love. When these are satisfied we experience a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging in our inner being. This love of God produces in us both peace and empowerment. It is to this love of the Father that Paul makes reference when he prays that “out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph. 3:16). Paul also wrote in Ephesians 1:3-4 that the Father chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight in love. We are the focus of the Father’s love, and it is the love of God that renews and transforms us.

Silence and stillness are essentials in discerning the presence, love and the movement of God. The psalmist says “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). God is everywhere to be found, discerned and discovered. One way to contemplatively experience the presence, love and movement of God is the prayer of the 3Rs that involves resting, receiving and responding. Procedures are as follows:

1. Rest/Take a position of comfort and notice any stress in your body and just let it go and relax and be still and silent. Simply rest in God’s presence. Breathe in and out. Breathe in rest and breath out rest. Let each breath be a reminder to rest in God’s presence and in the peace he provides.
2. Receive/Out of the rest, allow yourself to receive God’s love. You may enjoy cupping your hands in front of you and maybe just tip your head slightly to one side. Receive God’s love. Notice what you feel in that posture.
3. Respond/Now respond to God’s rest, to this sense of God’s love, to God speaking to you through this rest and love. Maybe you would want to pray verbally or silently or perhaps with some physical gesture such as the raising of your hand(s). Just take a moment to respond in whatever way you would like.

With this simple exercise, you can quickly center yourself to notice God’s presence, rest in His love, and open your heart to respond. It is a gentle way to begin ministry (for yourself and others)—creating space for trust, awareness, and discernment of the Spirit’s movement. Starting in stillness, we first experience love, and from that place we are prepared for all that God desires to do and accomplish.

Adapted from Robert Woodcock, “Finding God in All Things” / <http://hcminternational.org/audio>.



Spiritual Life Rhythms for Transformation

We can, through faith and grace,
become like Christ by practicing
the types of activities he engaged in...

Dallas Willard

Peter Scazzero, in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*,¹ reminds us that it is impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. Growth in Christ requires that we tend to both our inner and outer lives. One way we do this is by embracing a spiritual rhythm of life—what Christians throughout history have called a “rule of life.”

Think of a grapevine: without a trellis, it sprawls along the ground, vulnerable and unfruitful. With a trellis, it rises upward, stretching toward the sun and producing abundant fruit. In the same way, a personal rule of life becomes the trellis that supports our soul. It is not a set of rigid rules but an intentional framework that helps us keep God at the center of our lives.

This rhythm is unique to each of us. It may include prayer, silence, Sabbath rest, time in Scripture, planned daily work activities including practices of service and love. Whatever form it takes, the purpose is the same—to create space to abide in Christ, to remember God’s presence, and to let His love shape us.

The truth is, each of us already lives by some kind of rhythm whether or not we have realized it or named it as such. The invitation is to ask: *Does the rhythm I live by nurture love for God and deepen love for others?* At its heart, a rule of life is simply a daily “yes” to God’s transforming presence. It is flexible, gracious, and life-giving—a way of staying rooted in love as we grow.

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it....

Romans 12:1-2, MSG

Prayer

Gracious Lord, You are the true vine, and I long to remain rooted in You. Teach me to shape my days around Your presence so that every breath, every step, and every moment becomes a way of abiding in Your love. Free me from striving, and guide me into a rhythm of life that is spacious, flexible, and centered in You. May my choices today draw me closer to Your heart and overflow in love toward others. Amen

¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).



Discerning God's Presence in Community

Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.

Matthew 18:20

When we gather in community, we enter into a sacred space where God is already present. This promise calls us to pay attention—not only to God's presence within our own hearts but also to how God may be revealed in the faces, stories, and lives of others around us. To discern God's presence in community is to listen with openness, humility, and expectancy, trusting that the Spirit often speaks through the voices and experiences of those beside us.

Discerning God's presence in community invites us to slow down and notice the subtle ways God is at work. Sometimes this comes as a word of encouragement, a prayer offered, or a deep sense of peace in shared silence. At other times, God's presence is revealed through challenge—when another's perspective expands our own, or when we are stretched to see Christ in someone who thinks or feels differently than we do. In both comfort and challenge, God's Spirit is weaving us together into the body of Christ.

Community discernment also teaches us that God's voice is not always discovered in isolation. While personal prayer is essential, we are not meant to walk this journey alone. When we open ourselves to listen with others, we often hear God more clearly. Shared discernment helps us guard against self-deception, invites us into deeper trust, and reminds us that the Spirit is not confined to our individual insights. The practice of listening together allows us to name and confirm the movements of God's Spirit in ways that shape us more fully into Christ's likeness.

As you participate in this retreat, you are invited to practice holy attentiveness within the community gathered here. Notice where you sense God's presence—in a shared silence, a conversation, a gesture of kindness, or even in tension that asks for patience and grace. Remember that every person in this circle carries the image of God and offers something unique to the discernment process. In learning to listen to God in one another, we open ourselves to the transforming work of the Spirit in community.

Christian community is not an ideal which we must realize;
it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. . .

The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Spiritual Direction

The essence of spiritual direction is a patient and humble attentiveness to the Spirit of God, who speaks in the depths of our being and in the circumstances of our daily life.

Thomas Merton

Spiritual direction is a ministry of attentive listening and prayerful companionship that has been part of Christian tradition since the early centuries of the Church. In the desert communities of the third and fourth centuries, men and women sought out wise elders—often called “abba” or “amma”—to help them discern the movement of God in their lives. Over the centuries, this practice evolved in monasteries, spiritual communities, and churches as a way for Christians to deepen their walk with Christ through guidance, discernment, and encouragement in the journey of faith.

At its heart, spiritual direction is not about giving advice or solving problems, but about creating sacred space to notice and respond to God’s presence. The essence of the ministry is listening together—director and directee—attentively to the Holy Spirit. Through conversation, prayer, silence, and reflection, the director helps the directee become more aware of God’s action in the everyday movements of life. In this way, direction nurtures a deeper intimacy with Christ and a greater openness to the Spirit’s transforming love.

Individually, spiritual direction offers a safe, confidential, and prayerful relationship where a directee can explore questions, desires, struggles, and experiences of God. The director listens deeply and asks gentle questions that evoke reflection and discernment, while always honoring the mystery of God’s work in the person’s life. Together they seek to discern God’s invitations and to strengthen the directee’s capacity for ongoing prayer and presence.

Spiritual direction can also take place in groups, where several people gather with a facilitator to listen to one another in the presence of God. Group direction creates an environment of sacred listening, where each person has the opportunity to share while the others prayerfully attend to what is being expressed. The Spirit’s guidance often emerges through patterns, resonances, or gentle confirmations within the group. This form of direction helps participants recognize God’s presence not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others, reminding us that we journey together as the body of Christ.

Whether individually or in community, the ministry of spiritual direction is about opening ourselves more fully to the God who is always present, always speaking, and always drawing us into deeper love.

The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.

Proverbs 20:5



Psalm 23 Reflection

“God’s Shepherd Heart” A Meditation on Psalm 23

Understanding the heart of God is a gift given but also an infinite quest, for our God is greater than we can ever imagine. When God invites us into a dependent interactive relationship it’s because he wants to be known and understood.

Psalm 23 is the poetic reflection of the shepherd, David. It’s a praise for God’s loving heart from a man who experienced the many vicissitudes of life. Like a sheep he knew what it was like to be in a dependent relationship with God receiving care during the good and the bad times. The scriptures do not skirt over the challenges David faced in all kinds of situations even though he was a man after God’s own heart.

As disciples of Jesus, we have been invited on an “odyssey.” It’s a journey of learning to trust our Shepherd through every season of life. He will even carry us if necessary for he says he will never leave us nor forsake us. It’s the Good Shepherd’s compassion, constant care and provision that strengthens us on this divine adventure over many mountains and through many valleys.

Jesus reveals the heart of God when he says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Ultimately, our odyssey with our Shepherd King leads us into an ever-deepening friendship. He fills our hearts with love and trust so that we become willing to lay down our life for others. Through it all, our growth in character is the work of God in us. He creates in us a loving compassion that reflects the heart of God. He does this for our own sake, but also for the sake of the world.

Reflection: Read the Psalm slowly as if you had never heard it before. Listen for a word or a verse that is lifted off the page just for you. Carry it with you through the day and meditate on it. What does God want you to know about your relationship with him in this season of life?

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
 He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
 For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
 You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
 Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.



A Journey with the Trinity

The basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being.

Romans 1:20, MSG

The story of creation is not random or accidental—it is the loving work of God the Father, who calls all things into being and sustains them with care. The heavens declare His glory, and every tree, river, and mountain quietly sings of His presence. To see creation with new eyes is to recognize that it is a book in which God has written His love, inviting us to pause, notice, and give thanks. *Where in nature have you recently encountered God's presence?*

In Jesus Christ, God's love takes on flesh. The Word who was with God in the beginning entered His creation and walked among us. Jesus often used creation to illustrate spiritual principles of life. He is the one who holds all things together—cosmos and soul alike—showing us that nothing in our lives is beyond His sustaining love. The incarnation assures us that God's love extends even to the smallest detail of our everyday lives. *How does Jesus' incarnation show you God's love for the created world?*

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, hovering over the waters at creation and breathing new life into the world still. Every breath we take is gift. The Spirit is present in the groaning of creation and in our own weariness, bringing renewal, comfort, and strength. The Spirit awakens us to the sacred in the ordinary. *What simple rhythms—such as silence, prayer, or stillness, walking outdoors, or gazing at the night sky help you encounter the Spirit in the wonders of God's creation?*

Together, Father, Son, and Spirit invite us into communion—the eternal dance of divine love. The Trinity is not distant but deeply relational: God-for-us and God-with-us. To journey with the Trinity is to live with a deep awareness that all creation, including our lives, is embraced in this fellowship of love.

Everything proclaims him to you, everything reveals him to you, everything brings him to you. He is by your side, over you, around and in you . . . your suffering, your actions, your impulses are the mysteries under which God reveals himself to you.¹

Jean Pierre Cassaude

¹ Caussade, Jean-Pierre de. *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982.



Surrendering to Love

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16, 19

Every authentic spiritual journey must be rooted in direct, personal encounter with God. There is no substitute for meeting Perfect Love face-to-face. To know God is not merely to hold beliefs about Him—it is to enter into relationship. True knowing goes beyond information; it is heart-to-heart intimacy. Both the analytical thinker who lives in the head and the imaginative dreamer who lives close to emotion must ground their identity in the lived reality of being deeply and unconditionally loved by God.

To rest in Jesus is to abide in His love, to remain there as in the safest of homes. Love alone transforms us into Christ's likeness. David Benner reminds us in *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* that at the very center of transformation lies this surrender: "Christian surrender is saying yes to God's Yes! . . . Surrender to his love is the work of his Spirit, making his love ours and his nature ours."¹

If we are honest, we know our deep hunger to believe, feel, and experience God's love more fully. Yet we often live as though unloved because we do not allow that love to saturate us. In moments of crisis, our reflex is to fall back on old feelings, fearful thoughts, and painful associations with the past, rather than standing in the truth of God's delight in us. Sometimes this even spirals into self-condemnation. But there is a better way. It requires soaking long enough in God's love that it reshapes the very core of our identity.

Reflection Prayer

Loving God, I pause in Your presence. Quiet my striving and calm my fears. Open my heart to receive the truth that I am Your beloved child. Where I resist Your love, meet me with gentleness. Where I feel unworthy, surround me with grace. Let Your love take root deep within me, shaping my identity and transforming me into the likeness of Christ. Amen.

Reflection Exercise

Take a few slow, deep breaths. Imagine God looking at you with delight. Sit quietly for five minutes just soaking in his love and allow the words, "*I am God's beloved*", to repeat gently in your heart. Notice any resistance. Offer even that resistance back to God in surrender.

1. David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 57.



Faith Avenue Integration

Spiritual Formation at the Heart of the Faith Avenue

The Faith Avenue centers on Belonging, Believing, and Becoming as the pathway of Discipleship and is

- Belonging – Everyone should know they have a place and purpose. We create a welcoming environment where people feel loved, accepted, and part of the family. *Practices include intergenerational gatherings, connect groups, and storytelling nights.*
- Believing – Members are invited to deepen their faith through teaching, mentoring, prayer, and reflection so they grow in knowing Jesus and their identity in Him. *Practices include small group studies, mentoring relationships, and personal prayer and Scripture reflection.*
- Becoming – Disciples are called to be disciple-makers. We intentionally equip and empower members to join Jesus in His ministry of serving others. *Practices include team-based leadership, service in ministries, and retreats or workshops on spiritual gifts.*

Reflection & Processing

Spiritual formation is central to discipleship. Everything you experience here is designed to help strengthen your own growth in Christ and prepare you to walk with others in that journey. Remember that God is already at work shaping you into Christ's likeness—and inviting you to share in His work of discipling others.

Consider your current spiritually formative practices.

- In what ways am I presently deepening my relationship with Jesus?
- Where do I sense the Spirit nudging me toward greater surrender or trust?
- How do my daily rhythms—prayer, Scripture, relationships, choices—shape me into Christ's likeness?
- Who has helped me grow in faith, and how might I now encourage others in their journey?
- What practices might I begin (or renew) that would help me remain more open to God's transforming presence?

A Prayer to Pray

Lord Jesus, You are the vine and I am a branch. Apart from You, I can do nothing. Draw me closer to You in heart, mind, and spirit, that my belief may be more than words—it may become the life I live. Teach me to rest in Your love, to trust in Your truth, and to open myself daily to Your transforming grace. Shape me into Your likeness so that my life may bear fruit and draw others to You. Amen.

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Romans 12:2



Recommended Resources

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

Benner, David G. *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

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

DeGroat, Chuck. *Healing What's Within: Inside Transformative Grace*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024.

Johnson, Jan. *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999.

Reeves, Michael. *Rejoicing in Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Silf, Margaret. *Going on Retreat: A Beginner's Guide to the Christian Retreat Experience*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Willard, Dallas. *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

———. *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018.

The Ministry of Odyssey in Christ

Odyssey in Christ offers a sacred space for spiritual renewal and transformation, inviting seekers and leaders alike into deeper communion with the Triune God. Through experiential learning, participants are gently led into practices of silence, prayer, discernment, and inner healing that awaken the soul to God's loving presence. These gatherings are not simply about learning information but about encountering God in ways that touch the heart, restore the spirit, and bring wholeness in body, soul and spirit.

Our ministry embraces a variety of offerings—from two-year formation programs in spiritual direction to shorter retreats, workshops and classes that nurture intimacy with God. Whether walking alongside individuals through spiritual coaching, formational prayer, guiding leaders into rhythms of rest and discernment, or creating community spaces for prayer and renewal, Odyssey in Christ seeks to meet the deep longing in every heart: to know God better, to live more fully in His love, and to discover the freedom and joy of life in Christ.

For further information feel free to contact Dr. Larry Hinkle at larryhinkle.oic@gmail.com.