Toward an Ecclesiology of Presence:
Understanding the Church as a Thin Place
Where Heaven Touches Earth through the People of God

by

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Date: 4/7/2022

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University.

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In a world that often seems to be burning around us, both literally and figuratively, it is difficult to notice a single burning bush. In a world deafened by the noise of the loudest and most powerful voices, the still small voice of the Holy Spirit all but disappears. Yet God continues to speak in the stillness, in the silence, and in the quiet out of the way places so few dare to walk, let alone take off their shoes. What will it take to notice? What will it take to pay attention and stay awake to God’s presence in our midst? And what will it take for the church to recover her role as sacred space where all people can drink deeply from the fountain of living water flowing forth from the loving presence of their creator?

Beginning with the Celtic image of “Thin Place,” I will explore our need to rediscover a sacramental worldview in which everything and everyone is sacred and all of creation is aflame with the light of God’s Holy presence if only we have eyes to see. I will then move toward a scriptural foundation for thin places with particular emphasis on Jacob and the Samaritan Woman at the Well, as each encounter the presence of God in the unexpected places of their ordinary lives. I will consider how the theme of God’s presence with us through the incarnation and the Holy Spirit is central to the entire Biblical narrative.
On the practical side, I turn toward the question of how we might become more aware of thin places in our midst and more readily encounter and respond to the presence of God with us. The ancient practices of silence and stillness offer a doorway into such sacred spaces in every time and place. I will also explore the vital role of the faith community or church in cultivating sacred space through the practices of silence and stillness together and examine our role as the Body of Christ to be a thin place both gathered and scattered throughout the world so that others may encounter God’s presence embodied in the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit. I believe that recovering a sacramental worldview and living a sacramental life is essential to our identity as Christians. As the Church, we must become thin places through whom the living water of God’s presence is readily accessible to a dry and weary world.
DEDICATION

To Ann Starrette and Don Carroll, co-founders of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order, in deepest gratitude for the sacred space they have cultivated in so many lives and for inspiring, equipping and empowering myself and others to continue this legacy.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to my wife, Rev. McKenzie Sefa, for her tremendous support throughout the DMin program and for serving as a conversation partner and editor in the research and writing process for this thesis.

Thanks also to my Wesleyan Contemplative Order Bands (Sabbath Circle and Shalom Band) and the School of the Spirit leadership team for teaching me the value of silence and for always holding sacred space even when I don’t realize how much I need it. It is often difficult to describe the inner work God does in spiritual formation, and I hope this thesis might open the door for others to cultivate sacred space and increase their awareness of God’s presence in every part of life.

Finally, thanks to the faculty and staff at Duke Divinity School who have gone above and beyond to keep our DMin cohort going through the midst of a global pandemic and to Dr. Peter Casarella and Dr. Lauren Winner for serving as advisors on this thesis. I am also incredibly grateful for the 2019 DMin Cohort who have expanded my thinking and understanding in so many rich and beautiful ways. It has truly been the most diverse group of which I have been a part and that has only deepened the experience. It has been an honor and a privilege to walk this journey with you as we have learned to “fumble with love” together.
1. INTRODUCTION

Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Exodus 3:5

Thursday, May 10, 2018 - 6:00 AM: I packed up my small basement Airbnb in Raleigh, NC, stopped off for a coffee, and pulled into the church parking lot for the final day of a spiritual writers’ conference. The preceding days, as at most conferences, felt like drinking from a fire hydrant. I am not a morning person, but my mind had been racing with ideas that kept me up much of the night and I had to get it all on paper before the next wave of information and inspiration washed over me in the day ahead. I intentionally arrived at the conference with more than enough time to spend an hour in the quiet sanctuary with my journal before the morning worship and keynote session began.

To my surprise, I was not the first one there, or even among the first twenty. The presence of other people was not a concern, but their choice to turn that quiet sanctuary into a social hall quickly put a damper on my quiet reflection time, particularly since the church also had a large fellowship area and entry hall available outside the sanctuary doors. Had I known the sanctuary walls would be reverberating with the chatter of a half a dozen other conversations, I would have stayed at the coffee shop to write and
process my thoughts. Instead, it was all I could do to keep from unintentionally eavesdropping on conversations in which I had little to no interest.

While I did not get a chance to write down anything that had been on my mind through the night, I did have nearly an hour to reflect on a new thought, specifically, “What has become of sacred space?”

I remembered a church I visited in Florida that began their worship time with what they called “Soaking.” They were intentionally trying to model themselves after the Presence Based Church concept taught by Terry Teykl. They carved out sacred space where people could be still and quiet enough to “soak” in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was a simple concept. Before worship, the fellowship hall and the large entry halls were open for conversation and catching up as people often like to do on a weekly basis at church. Everyone understood, however, that once they chose to enter the sanctuary, the chatter ceased. The large altar table modeled after the Ark of the Covenant had been meticulously hand carved out of a single tree trunk and served as a reminder that this space was holy ground. As the soft worship music played half an hour before the service, the invitation was much like God’s invitation to Moses to draw

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1 Throughout this work I will use the language of sacred space, thin place, and holy ground interchangeably. While each term has its own unique origin and theological nuance, I believe that, on a practical level, each function the same way and are crucial to an understanding of the church’s role in the world as a temple of God’s presence through the Holy Spirit.

near (Exod. 3:4-6). Nobody had to take off their shoes, though some did. Silence was expected.

“Soaking” is not the only way to create sacred space. In Louisville, KY, a friend serves as the pastor of Grace Kids, an inner-city church specifically designed for children living in a rough neighborhood. While many of the kids have little to no church background, they understand that the purple doorways over the sanctuary and the prayer room represent holy ground and have learned to honor and appreciate those rooms as set apart places where they are truly safe to bring their whole selves before God. Entering the well-used prayer room on the upper floor, one is struck by the beauty and intentionality of the hand painted murals of the cosmos covering the walls and the glorious starry night sky on the ceiling. In the middle of the floor sits a sandbox filled with rocks in the sand. Most of these stones have various symbols or images on them. The pastors and counselors invite students to find a symbol or image that speaks to them, and they can attach whatever meaning they want to it. A spiral, for example, may speak to a child who feels like their life is spinning out of control or it may offer comfort that though they feel like they are going in circles, they are always moving closer and closer to God in the center. In this room, kids who have never stepped foot in a church begin to see and feel the presence of God beside them. God’s Spirit speaks through

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these visible and tangible signs much as one might discern God’s whisper in the ancient practice of Visio Divina. Many tears are shed in that room. Many emotional and spiritual breakthroughs occur as they kneel beside that sandbox, tracing the symbols on their chosen rock with their fingers and expressing the pain and brokenness of their lives in a safe place before God, often for the first time.

Prayer rooms like this, when used well, can serve as powerful reminders of God’s presence. One church I attended had a team of two or three in the prayer room off the sanctuary praying during the entire worship service and it was known to those worshiping that there was always someone praying for them while they were in the building. At Walk to Emmaus, Pilgrimage, and other similar retreats rooted in the Catholic Cursillo movement, there is always a prayer room where team members are praying for each retreat participant and leader by name throughout the entire weekend. These are powerful experiences. They are not like public miracle prayers on a stage where the crowds expect God to answer specific requests on the spot in a visible way.


5 During a tour of the ministry, the pastor shared the story of a young girl who came to the Friday night church program on her own and while holding her rock in the prayer room was able to share the trauma of having witnessed her mother being shot in their home earlier that day. She walked to the church that night because she knew it was the only safe place she could go in the neighborhood. She knew God would protect her there. At Grace Kids, neighborhood children and youth with an endless array of traumatic experiences truly find a place of shelter and sanctuary.
The power instead comes from the knowledge that God inhabits the prayers of God’s people and that where two or three are gathered, so God is in their midst (Matt. 18:20). It is all about God’s presence. What makes the difference in these prayer rooms is the intentionality by which people enter that holy presence and call upon the Spirit to move freely in and through the hearts of the people gathered. As I reflect on the way God shows up in these sacred spaces, I grieve over the number of unused prayer rooms I have seen converted into storage space.

The truly miraculous, transforming and healing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the individuals and families who have entered such sacred spaces is undeniable. I recall the importance of setting apart sacred space from my own childhood in the Roman Catholic church. There was a tradition of dipping your fingers in holy water on the way in and marking your forehead with the sign of the cross. We would then kneel and offer the sign of the cross again before entering the pew. As a child I did not understand or appreciate the meaning or value of such practices. I confess that at the time they felt overly ritualistic. Looking back through the lens of that noisy sanctuary at the writers’ conference, I appreciate the intent of setting apart the space as sacred. No matter the form or the means, a recovery of sacred space is essential in today’s over-stimulated world.
1.1 Rediscovering Sacred Space

Walking through the streets of Dublin in 2016, I stumbled upon a James Joyce quote painted on the wall outside a corner pub: “In the particular is contained the universal.” Unpacking the importance of sacred space throughout church history and scripture is a monumental task. One might consider, for example, the centrality of sacred space to countless monastic movements from the Desert Fathers to the Benedictines, Franciscans, and Jesuits to the more contemporary Trappist Monks of Thomas Merton’s Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky or the Contemplative Outreach movement led by the late Father Thomas Keating out of St. Benedict’s monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Even such a narrow list is too exhaustive for the scope of this study. Therefore, I will explore universal truths about the importance of reclaiming sacred space in our churches and our world through the lens of a particular example rather than an exhaustive historical study.

I came across Joyce’s quote in Dublin while on a Spiritual Pilgrimage in Ireland around the theme of Celtic Christianity. This movement has fascinated and inspired me, and many others, because it is both rooted in the tradition of the ancient desert fathers and mothers while also drawing deeply from the indigenous practices and traditions of the pre-Christian Celtic people. The Celtic Christian movement, while difficult to define, was largely successful in transforming the culture of Ireland and bringing peace
to a war-torn tribal land. For this study, I am particularly interested in the pre-Christian Celtic understanding of “Thin Places” which the Christian community later adopted.

Thin Places are places of Holy encounter between heaven and earth, between sacred and ordinary. Tracy Balzer describes a thin place as “any environment that invites transformation in us … any place that creates a space and an atmosphere that inspires us to be honest before God and to listen to the deep murmurings of his Spirit within us.”⁶ As an evangelical for whom such mysticism seemed foreign, Balzer’s journey into this rich Celtic Christian heritage speaks to a deeper hunger in the human heart to experience firsthand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20). As Elizabeth Browning writes in her classic poem,

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.⁷

1.2 A Scriptural Understanding of Thin Places

While a reflection of Thin Places in Celtic Christianity will serve as a historical foundation, I will also explore the ways sacred space permeates the pages of scripture. The language of “thin place” is not explicitly found in the Biblical text, yet there are

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countless stories of God’s encounters with human beings. God shows up in dreams, in burning bushes, at wells, in the tabernacle and temple, and even in the voice of a donkey, to name a few. God’s presence comes in fire, wind, water, cloud, silence, and most importantly, in the incarnation of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Repeatedly in scripture, God comes to us. Each encounter with God’s presence is a thin place.

God’s presence among us through the Holy Spirit is always an act of grace, initiated by the very one who created us in the divine image for the purpose of relationship with God and with one another. Such a relationship, however, necessitates the freedom of choice regarding how, or even if, we will respond to God’s grace. I will highlight two instances in which God’s self-revelation came as a surprise to individuals who did not anticipate or seek out such a Holy encounter. First, the story of Jacob, a deceiver who was on a journey to make his own way in life when God came to him in a dream (Gen. 28). Second, the story of the Samaritan Woman in John 4. By cultural standards she was unworthy and on the margins in every way. Yet God chose to meet her in her ordinary routine and offer her the living water of mercy and grace.

Jesus uses the image of living water as the means through which one’s spiritual thirst is satisfied. Tracing this image of living water from Eden to Ezekiel’s vision to the river of life in the New Jerusalem, Dr. Sandra Richter shows how the living water from this cosmic river functions as a central theological thread that runs through redemptive history from beginning to end, representing the places where the people of God dwell.
with full access to the presence of God. Drawing on a story from the late Peter Marshall, I will show how God is calling the church to be “Keepers of the Spring,” who care for our own souls and create space where others might drink deeply from the well-spring of living water that is found in relationship with Christ.

If thin places represent moments or spaces where the veil between heaven and earth seems virtually non-existent, there may be no thinner place than the incarnation of Christ himself. Jesus embodies the full presence of God and, in the emptying of himself, God reached down and touched earth in the flesh. Given the blurring of the line between Spirit and flesh we might at least say that Jesus creates thin places wherever he goes, as the divine presence literally touches our physical reality. By extension, I suggest a movement toward an “ecclesiology of presence” in which the church as Christ’s body on earth continues to embody God’s presence in the world. Following his resurrection and ascension, Christ desires that the church continue as a thin place in the world,

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10 Ian C Bradley, Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2020), 90. The term “ecclesiology of presence” is coined by Ian Bradley and will be explored further throughout this thesis. It describes what I mean when I say the church should be a “Thin Place” where people might readily encounter and respond to God’s presence in their midst.
empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the body of Christ through which all might encounter the presence of God.

1.3 Silence – A Doorway into Sacred Space

Earth is indeed crammed with heaven and every place is potentially a thin place through which God may choose to be present with humanity. Yet in our increasingly secular world, God often seems more distant than ever. The question remains, how do we cultivate an awareness of thin places in our daily lives?

Anthony DeMello defines spirituality as “waking up” to fully “understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing we call human existence.” Walking in Wonder offers a compilation of conversations with the late John O’Donohue, a renowned Irish poet and expert in Celtic mysticism. He uses the language of wonder as a means of recovering our deep connection with God in the ordinary things and moments of everyday life. Ken Gire talks about “Windows of the Soul” as God’s gifts through which we come to see who we truly are and become more aware of God’s presence with us. Each of these themes is another way of talking about “thin places” or sacred space, in

which we encounter God’s presence in our ordinary lives. As Jacob says after his dream in the wilderness, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” (Gen. 28:16).

While there are many spiritual practices available to help us become more aware of God’s presence, one stands out as an important first step often overlooked in our Christian education and discipleship: silence.13 Father Thomas Keating writes, “The greatest teacher is silence. To come out of interior silence and to practice its radiance, its love, its concern for others, its submission to God’s will, its trust in God – even in tragic situations – is the fruit of living from your inmost center, from the contemplative space within.”14 Silence is one of the most challenging and least practiced of the spiritual disciplines, and yet, “without silence, God disappears in the noise.”15 “In silence,” Ruth Haley Barton says, “we create space for God’s activity rather than filling every minute with our own.”16 Creating space for God through silence is precisely what I mean by cultivating thin spaces through which the presence of God may be more readily known. The practice of silence is a thin place, and it opens us to be more aware of thin places in the world and in and among the people around us where God is at work. Martin Laird

13 Common practices include Bible Study, prayer, journaling, worship, and serving others. Other more difficult or less common practices may include confession, fasting, intentional sabbath keeping and solitude. In Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster unpacks twelve key disciplines for spiritual growth, divided into inner, outer and corporate practices.


reminds us that silence is not about an external practice, but about cultivating an inner stillness where we might be more aware of God’s presence. Our perceived separation from God he calls an illusion.\textsuperscript{17} God is always closer than we realize, if only we have a heart quiet enough to hear the Spirit’s still small voice.

1.4 Cultivating Silence and Sacred Space in Community

In his research on those who have left the church, a demographic often referred to as “The Dones”, Josh Packard observes that many church goers struggle for a long time in their relationships with unhealthy church situations and ultimately feel that leaving is the only way to save their faith.\textsuperscript{18} “The church, they feel, is keeping them from God.”\textsuperscript{19} In many cases, The Dones are not running away from God. They are running away from the church to find the God they see in the life of Jesus. In his book, Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered, Jim Wilhoit argues that spiritual formation, “the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit,” is the task of

\textsuperscript{18} Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, \textit{Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith} (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015), 14–15.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 16.
the church and is not optional. In my experience, spiritual formation in the church is often limited to traditional educational models such as Sunday School and represents only a small percentage of the church membership. According to a 2003 study by the Willow Creek Association of churches, “merely increasing participation in church activities barely moved people to love God and others.”

Jesus did not come so that we might sit around in sanctuaries and classrooms to learn more about the Bible or to make us better church members for the sake of building, strengthening, growing, or even saving an institution. He came with a message of God’s kingdom opened to all so that, as Dallas Willard says, we might enter “the eternal kind of life now.”

In his book, *Transforming Discipleship*, Greg Ogden observes that spiritual formation in the church relies too heavily on content, where Jesus’ model of discipleship is “fundamentally a relational process.” “Being with Jesus in a relational setting,” he says, shapes the character of the disciples and “instills Jesus’ mission in them.” I presently serve on the council of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order, a growing group of individuals who long for thin places in their spiritual lives where they can “stay

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“awake” to the presence of God through the ancient practices of the church and who recognize the necessity of community and accountability in their spiritual formation journey. This understanding of formation and staying awake to the presence of God as a journey or a lifelong process is expounded more explicitly by Robert Mulholland, who describes a movement away from our self-indulgent and self-referential “false selves” toward our true-selves whose lives are hidden in Christ and fully reflect the image of God our creator.

Using the Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO) as a model, I will show how this way of staying awake to God’s presence through ancient practices in community, beginning with silence, is a primary means by which spiritual transformation occurs, and that such practices in community are essential to our identity as the church. The church becomes a thin place where the world can drink from the springs of living water only when we as Christ’s disciples arrange our lives around spiritual practices and disciplines which challenge our false-selves and open us to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Richard Foster argues that our ability to experience or encounter God’s transforming presence is directly tied to our longing for God. This longing grows in us as we intentionally enter a regular practice of spiritual disciplines, or what Henri

Nouwen calls, “The Way of the Heart” and Ruth Haley Barton describes as “Sacred Rhythms.”26 In my own experience I have found that participating in practices like silence, sabbath, Lectio Divina, and holy listening in community with others increases that longing or spiritual hunger. Practicing silence and other spiritual disciplines in community allows us to hold sacred space for one another when we are too distracted to enter God’s presence on our own.

The church must reclaim her identity as a thin place through which people can encounter the presence of God and be refreshed by the spring of living water that flows forth from the heart of God. We must become a people who hold space for one another and for the world to enter God’s presence and encounter God for themselves. Our present strivings for relevance and institutional survival have left both the church and the world feeling parched in a dry and weary land, driving people further away from the church to meet their spiritual needs. The ancient practice of silence serves as a primary means for cultivating thin places both within and beyond the church because it requires us to surrender control and teaches us how to be still in God’s presence. Regular rhythms of silence within the communal life of the church remind us that our

identity is not tied to what we do (our programs), or what we look like (our form or style), but to who God is and God’s desire to dwell among us.

While the Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO) is not a church, I believe it, and other similar movements, have the potential of becoming “fresh expressions” of church that will reach a spiritually thirsty culture increasingly disillusioned with the institutional church of the modern era. In whatever form it may take, the church must recover her role as keeper of the spring, making God’s living water readily accessible to all, rather than acting as a gatekeeper, trying to contain and protect the spring of God’s life-giving water within the thick walls of our sanctuaries. I offer here a theological framework for understanding the church as a thin place and suggest a practical model by which we might re-awaken to the transformational power of God’s presence in our midst.

27 “Fresh Expressions,” Fresh Expressions US, accessed September 6, 2021, https://freshexpressionsus.org/. “Fresh Expressions is an international movement of missionary disciples cultivating new kinds of church alongside existing congregations to more effectively engage our growing post-Christian society... What sets Fresh Expressions apart is a focus on forming faith communities especially for those who have never been involved in church (unchurched) or who have left the church (de-churched).”
2. CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AS A WAY OF SEEING

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?
Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life.
I’ll show you how to take a real rest.
Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.
Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.
I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.
Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Matthew 11:28-30 (THE MESSAGE)

In June 2016, I flew to Ireland for a 10-day spiritual retreat. Inspired by my travels, I later spent a year unpacking the richness of what is known as the Lorica of St. Patrick or the Breastplate Prayer, which culminated in the publication of a devotional book, I Arise Today: A 40 Day Journey through St. Patrick’s Breastplate Prayer. Given the popularity of pilgrimages and tour groups at the countless Celtic Christian sites found throughout Ireland, Scotland, Wales & England, it is safe to say I am not the only one inspired by the legendary saints of the Celtic world.

Celtic Christianity is not something one typically studies in Sunday School or hears preached in Sunday morning worship. It is a phenomenon, both ancient and modern, that draws people from within and beyond the walls of the church who thirst for a deeper well of spirituality. The stories of those who go on such journeys, even if only as tourists, tend to resonate with Jesus’ invitation in Matthew 11. They are often
tired and “burned out on religion.” They are seeking the “unforced rhythms of grace” found at the very least in the wealth of contemporary Celtic Christian literature, if not in the ancient writings, art, stories, and lives of the Irish saints themselves. Ian Bradley notes the striking interest among young people in Ireland who seek out holy wells and other sacred sites to rediscover the kind of “prayers that relate to everyday life and to bring their spirituality alive.”¹ Though most of the Celtic writings and art we have date centuries after the early saints, they have nonetheless sparked the imagination of many contemporary Christians in search of a “simple, meditative, rhythmic, and poetic liturgy.”² In this sense, Bradley compares the contemporary Celtic Christian movement to the Taizé communities of France or other similar neo-monastic movements around the globe.

Celtic Christianity is not a formal institution or even an organized religious movement in the way we think of later monastic communities such as the Benedictines, the Jesuits, or the Franciscans. Inspired in part by the desert mothers and fathers in Egypt and in part by the pre-Christian culture of Ireland, what we call Celtic Christianity is more about a way of seeing the world than about a particular structure or theological system. It has been developed and reimagined by the people of Ireland and

other Celtic lands who consistently lived “close to nature, close to the elements, close to God and close to homelessness, poverty and starvation.” Those drawn to Celtic Christianity over the past few centuries have found a story of hope, imagination, wholeness, and simplicity. Philip Newell describes it as a way of listening for the heartbeat of God in the whole of life. The Celtic imagination, as understood through writings and art like the Breastplate Prayer and the famous Book of Kells, among other poetry, prayers, songs and later liturgical sources, is one which emphasizes both the goodness of all creation and the image of God in all people. The divine character is imprinted upon all life and made known in the most ordinary places, routines, and things. While I will briefly address questions of historic authenticity and the lack of original source material from the early Celtic saints, my primary interest in Celtic Christianity is the sacramental worldview in which God’s presence is continually made known through the common and ordinary, both within and around us.

2.1 The Truth of Myth and Legend

In his inauguration speech at the University of Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien observed, “The term ‘Celtic’ is a magic bag into which anything may be put, and out of which

4 Ibid., 30.
almost anything may come.” Donald Meek, chair of Celtic studies at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, cautions that “contemporary agendas are easily interwoven into Celtic lore,” thereby blurring the lines between history and myth. Our understanding of Celtic Christianity comes largely from an imaginative tapestry of legends, folklore, poetry and art developed many centuries after the historical period in question. These sources are then overlaid with a smattering of historical accounts which offer little context for academic study.

Despite considerable debate and lack of primary source material around the so-called “Golden Age” of Celtic Christianity in Ireland, this obscure period of church history has significant appeal to spiritual seekers in the late 20th and early 21st century. Contemporary interest in the Celtic Saints marks the latest of at least six distinct historical revivals of Celtic Christianity. Gavin Wakefield further challenges the historicity of Celtic Christianity by claiming that the myths of ancient Ireland have been reframed to legitimize contemporary post-modern concerns. To be sure, there is a romanticized and almost fantasy-like quality to the picture we have of “Celtic

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6 Bradley, Following the Celtic Way, 17.
Christianity," if such a formal historical movement even existed. What little we know of the Celtic Saints is clouded by myth and legend.

Nevertheless, the legends speak to the power and influence these saints had on the culture at large. Later poetry, art, music, hagiographies, along with streams of theological, practical, and inspirational writing on the subject, demonstrate the enduring legacy and cultural impact of these Irish folk-heroes. While not entirely factual, myths and legends express truth in their own way. For example, one of the most famous legends concerning St. Patrick is that he drove all the snakes out of Ireland. Tour guides at Downpatrick and other sites along St. Patrick’s Way are quick to point out that the climate of Ireland has never been conducive to a snake population. Yet there is power in the image of Patrick’s 40-day fast on Croagh Patrick followed by a sweeping movement of Christianity which transformed much of the earlier pagan religion across the land. The legend clearly parallels Jesus’ own 40-day fast in the wilderness as he battled against the powers of darkness before beginning his earthly ministry. Similar stories are told of the desert mothers and fathers who fled to the desert to battle their inner demons and “drive out the evil snakes” as it were. Myths and legends like these, many even more fanciful, are told of nearly every early Irish saint. Scholars debate the line between fact and fiction in these tales along with their authenticity given the much later period in which many of them emerged. This does not change the reality that these stories hold an important kind of truth which is largely lost to the rational modern world. To
appreciate the value of the Celtic Christian worldview for our own time, we must lay aside the rational and historical deconstruction of the source material and honor the truths the early writers and storytellers intended to convey.

The most recent renewal of writing on Celtic Christianity emerged in the late 20th century, largely from the work of George MacLeod and the Iona community where he served. Disillusioned by his experiences as a Scottish military captain in World War I, George Macleod later became a Christian minister. In 1938 he gathered ministers, students, and unemployed laborers to rebuild the medieval Abby of St. Columba on the island of Iona. Living and working together, they sought to build a community that would “close the gap he perceived between the church and working people.”

MacLeod died in 1991. His beloved Iona continues to thrive as an international ecumenical community with a strong commitment to issues of peace and justice.

Influenced by earlier Celtic Christians, MacLeod and the Iona community have reimagined and helped to shape the form of Celtic Christianity we know today. In this modern period, the term “Celtic” is used as an extended metaphor for the kind of sacramental worldview that emerged over the centuries as much as it was for the actual lives and legends of the early Irish saints. Rosemary Power, among other outspoken

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10 “Scottish Review,” accessed October 27, 2021,
scholars, have challenged the historical authenticity of what we call Celtic Christianity. When evaluating and applying the principles and ideals of this modern Celtic Christian movement, it is right to acknowledge that we are likely projecting modern and post-modern concerns back onto the historical record, particularly as the actual historical record is so thin. “However,” he concludes, “if telling ourselves myths from Celtic Christianity helps us re-evaluate the Scriptures for our own day then that is gain and we may enjoy the narratives and poetry of Celtic Christianity without having to believe they are gospel truth!”

Therefore, when I refer to Celtic Christianity, or more accurately, Celtic Spirituality, I am not seeking to make historical claims about a movement or church in a particular place or time. Nor will I offer an exhaustive study of the themes and theological implications of Celtic Spirituality. I am speaking only of the rich practical and theological tradition which both fed and flowed out of this “Celtic world.” I will narrow my focus to the theme of sacred space and God’s presence in the everyday ordinary places of life and the implications of this theme for cultivating what Bradley calls an “ecclesiology of presence” in the church today. As the Body of Christ in the world, the church must embody the presence of Christ in her very being, both gathered and scattered. The language of “Thin Places,” commonly associated with both Celtic

12 Wakefield, “Myths of Celtic Christianity,” 206.
13 Bradley, Following the Celtic Way, 90.
Christianity and pre-Christian Irish religion, offers a rich and scripturally sound theology of sacred space and a tangible framework for recovering the centrality of God’s incarnational presence in an increasingly secularized church and world. Might the church in all her forms become a thin place where the veil between heaven and earth is transparent enough for the world to catch even a glimpse of her creator.

2.2 Cultivating Awareness

2.2.1 Spirituality of Awareness

In his reflections on the lives of the early Irish saints, John J. Ó Ríordáin observes that the Western world “has knowledge of Christianity but doesn’t have much sense of Christ in our midst.” In practice, much of Christianity today has become an intellectual exercise in debating right doctrine rather than a way of life lived in relationship with the Triune God. Discussions around experiencing or encountering the presence of God tend to fall into the realm of subjective mysticism which is quickly challenged by our rational worldview. Terry Teykl, author of The Presence Based Church, asserts that it is precisely this tangible experience of God’s presence that is most needed in the church today. Where God’s presence is manifested, Teykl observes, humility, wisdom and peace
prevail, lives are transformed, addictions are overcome, relationships are healed and the “powers of darkness are forced to retreat.”

The retreat of the powers of darkness is the very phenomenon described in the legends and stories of St. Patrick. For Patrick, as with most of the early Irish saints, everything in life was interpreted through the lens of God’s grace. Behind the legends stands a real man, or rather, a real boy, who came to know the love of God as a slave, tending sheep in the woods and mountains of a foreign and inhospitable Irish landscape. In the Confession of St. Patrick, the Patron Irish saint writes,

… my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountains; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me – as I now see, because the spirit within me was then fervent.

As Ó Riordáin puts it, talking to God became as natural to Patrick “as breathing in the air, or absorbing the warmth and light of the sun.”

It is difficult to imagine consciously stopping for prayer one hundred times or more in a day. Even strict monastic rules which observe the daily office only pray seven times a day based on the example of Psalm 119:164. Similarly, the Muslim call to prayer occurs five times per day. Both remind us of the importance of intentionally breaking

from our daily routine to draw near to God. What Patrick describes, however, is far more than honoring liturgical hours of prayer. One hundred times a day, literal or not, more closely resembles Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). In his biography of Saint Columba, Adomnán writes, “[Columba] could not spend even a single hour without attending to prayer or reading or writing.”¹⁷ Like Columba and Patrick, this kind of continuous prayer life is a mark of many Irish saints. The importance of developing a lifestyle of prayer in every moment is found in most monastic movements beginning with the desert mothers and fathers.

Henri Nouwen says this kind of prayer is “to think, speak and live in the presence of God all day.”¹⁸ Modern mystic Frank Laubach laments the reality that only a fraction of the population thinks about Christ in any given week. On average, people spend less than 10 minutes a week contemplating the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. This “is not saving our country or our world; for selfishness, greed, and hate are getting a thousand times that much thought. What a nation thinks about that it is.”¹⁹ When Jesus called his disciples, he called them to walk with him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. As Laubach puts it, “He chose them that they might be with

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¹⁷ Bradley, Following the Celtic Way, 43. Adomnán serves as the abbot of Columba’s Iona Abbey from 679 to 704 and is a distant relative of Columba on his father’s side.


him, 168 hours a week!" To that end, Laubach developed what he calls “The Game of Minutes.” He begins by scoring the number of minutes in a given hour one can remember or think of God at least once. The “game” concept is intended to make continual prayer a joyful experience rather than a burden. The end goal is not to chart each minute of success or failure, but to develop a habit such that we invite God into every task, every moment, and indeed every breath of our day. It is about recognizing and becoming more aware of the presence of God with us. This is the heart of prayer. This is the heart of Celtic Christianity. This is the heart of following Christ in every age.

George MacLeod describes a more typical experience of prayer in the Christian life. “Get through the day, we are apt to say, and then perhaps at nine o’clock, or nearer perhaps to eleven, we can have our time with God.” We tend to think of prayer in terms of time set apart from all other activity and it is often difficult to fit into our busy calendars. Even during a Sunday worship service, we may only set apart a few minutes out of the hour for dedicated prayer and the pastor typically prays on behalf of the congregation. These set apart times for prayer are necessary and important, but alone they are insufficient to truly experience the life transforming grace of God’s presence in our lives. A few minutes or an hour a week, or even every day, hardly does justice to

20 Laubach, 88.
21 George F MacLeod and Ron Ferguson, *Daily Readings with George MacLeod* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2001), 36–37.
the attention a Holy God deserves. MacLeod observes that it is not poor technique that debilitates our prayer life, but that we have separated our prayer life from the rest of life, as though “the pressures of life are on one side while God is on some other side.”22 When we pray out of this mindset, we typically ask God, who is outside of our everyday circumstances, to step in and interfere in some way as to affect change in the ordinary things of our lives. In this way, God might be compared to a tag-team wrestling partner who we “tag-in” to fight for us whenever we need a little help. Most people would not put it so crudely as we are all well-intentioned in our prayers. The reality remains the same. Imagine if we could only choose to breathe when we felt like we were gasping for air. Patrick, Columba, and the other Irish Saints, along with more contemporary spiritual leaders like Nouwen, Laubach and MacLeod, all remind us that the presence of God is the very air we breathe. We must not stop breathing it, even for a moment. We cannot hold our breath for more than a few minutes. What makes us think we can hold our spiritual breath so much longer?

22 Ibid., 36–37.
2.2.2 A Sacramental Worldview

Karl Rahner describes the heartwarming assurance of God’s presence in “concrete, tangible, visible signs.” In particular, these signs refer to the elements of the sacraments which primarily include the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. Rahner also includes the “audible word of forgiveness spoken by the priest,” among other sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church. Ninth Century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena describes the entire physical universe in sacramental terms. Just as God is present in the bread and wine, so “God is in all things, the essence of life.” In summarizing Eriugena’s homilies, Phillip Newell says that “Christ moves among us in two shoes... one shoe being that of creation, the other that of the Scriptures.” Scripture and creation are seen as two books of revelation, both declaring the glory and character of God. While some view Eriugena a heretical supporter of pantheism, scholars find that most references to the immanence of God in Eriugena’s work are well balanced with themes of God’s transcendence, thus maintaining that while God may be revealed within creation, creation and creator

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23 Karl Rahner, Encounters with Silence (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 70.
24 Ibid., 70.
26 Newell, Listening for the Heartbeat of God, 34.
remain distinct. Eriugena also falls in line with orthodox interpretations of Romans 1:20 which Augustine quotes when he says, “My greatest certainty was that ‘the invisible things of thine from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,’ even thy eternal power and Godhead.”

The theme of God made known in creation features prominently in later Celtic poetry, though Wakefield cautions that such a positive view of creation reflects a “later nostalgic longing for a deeper connection with creation” and should not be seen as evidence of an “ecological heart” among the early Celtic saints. Nevertheless, all early monastics lived close to nature, both enjoying her fruits and surviving against her fury. As with most ancient cultures, this leads to a healthy respect for and honoring of creation without the romanticized trappings imposed by a modern people who have lost touch with nature. Conceding Wakefield’s point that the early Celtic saints did not hold a unique ecological view, the truth of God’s self-revelation through all of creation remains. Later Celtic poets were inspired by the Psalms filled with imagery of rocks, mountains, trees, and other elements of nature praising the Lord. Drawing on the

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29 Wakefield, “Myths of Celtic Christianity,” 200.
majestic praise of the psalmist, hymn writer Robert Grant sings of a God “whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.”

While themes of praise feature prominently, they equally elevate themes of penitence and lament. The cross holds a central place in the Celtic worldview as evidenced by the intricately carved high crosses across the Irish landscape. Though they were constructed long after the death of the early saints, these crosses “were put up literally to stop people in their tracks... Pierced by the sun’s rays or silhouetted against the evening sky the high crosses still have an enormous power and presence, standing as a silent witness to the eternal that is in our midst and pointing from earth to heaven.”

The stories of God in scripture, history and creation are told through the images carved upon these crosses in order that a largely illiterate population could know and experience God’s salvation. These images often include the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden and the image of Christus Victor or the resurrected Christ at the center. For all the focus on the divine light penetrating and emanating from everything in the Celtic world, the frequent juxtaposition of these two images reminds us that it is the light which overcomes the darkness (Jn. 1:5). Living in the shadow of these high crosses made it difficult for people to ignore or diminish the power of darkness, but it makes it equally difficult to be overcome by the darkness because the light of the resurrection is

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30 Robert Grant, O Worship the King (Public Domain, 1833); Psalm 104:1.
always before them. The distinctive circle at the center of the Celtic Cross has been interpreted many ways, as the wreath and crown of Christus Victor, as the unending circle of the Alpha and Omega, as a symbol of eternity, or as a representation of the sun which was a central object of worship for the pre-Christian culture. Others have said it was simply constructed that way to hold up the arms of the cross. We may never know the full intention of those who designed and built these high crosses, but the possibilities of the symbolism provide much room for rich theological reflection. Celtic Christians in every age “excelled at expressing their faith in symbols, metaphors and images... They had the ability to invest the ordinary and the commonplace with sacramental significance.”

While we can learn much about God and indeed encounter the presence of God in creation, we must be careful not to elevate creation as the only or even the primary source of revelation. Celtic Christianity was not an amorphous nature-based spirituality. It is deeply rooted in the orthodox doctrines and traditions of the church. Columbanus reminds us that while God is immanently present in Creation, God is at the same time transcendent and unknowable. “For just as the depth of the sea is invisible to human sight, even so the Godhead of the Trinity is found to be unknowable by human

senses.”

Often their sense of God’s presence felt like an undefinable “mighty power hovering over every situation.”

On the other hand, we must not allow this sense of mystery frighten us and turn us away from creation. If Christianity is true, then creation cannot contradict her creator, only illuminate. As Tracy Balzer puts it, there is nothing we can discover that is “big enough to eat God!”

2.2.3 Blessings

Experiencing the presence of God is not merely an intellectual or philosophical exercise. For the Celtic people, this sacramental worldview is often seen in the everyday practice of blessings. Poetry and prayers from the Celtic tradition are centered around menial tasks like getting up, kindling the fire, going to work, going to bed, birth, marriage, death, and so on. One popular blessing found in the Carmina Gadelica is a prayer for washing one’s face in the morning.

33 G.S.M. Walker, Sancti Columhani Opera, quoted in ibid., 70.
34 Thomas O’Loughlin, Celtic Theology: Humanity, World, and God in Early Irish Writings (New York: Continuum, 2000), 34.
The palmful of the God of Life  
The palmful of the Christ of Love  
The palmful of the Spirit of Peace  
Triune of Grace

As with most Celtic blessings, this prayer is explicitly trinitarian and focuses one’s attention on God’s presence in the most ordinary of tasks. By praying this blessing each morning, one is essentially washing in the very presence of God made known in the cleansing water. In the same way, Brother Lawrence is known for his observation that God was as close if not closer when he was washing dishes than when he was in prayer. “When appointed times of prayer came and went, he found no difference because he went right on with God, praising and blessing Him with all his might.”

In the Benedictine tradition, everything is considered sacred. The stranger is welcomed as Christ, and the kitchen utensils are given the same honor as altar vessels.

Blessings “do not beg or ask God to give this or that. Instead, they recognize what is already there, already given, waiting to be seen, to be taken up, enjoyed.” They are about pausing to see each moment in the light of God’s presence, much like Laubach’s game with minutes. We must also remember that a life of blessings is not about happiness, nor does it imply a lack of suffering. The Celtic poets also have

40 De Waal, The Celtic Way of Prayer, 211.
blessings for the darkness, recognizing that darkness is as holy as the light because God is as present in the deepest grief and fear as in the most joyful moments of celebration. Thresholds or transitions through the seasons of life are seen as times of darkness and unknowing, but they are also honored as places where God may be felt most clearly.\(^{41}\)

One common means of blessing the darkness is through an encircling prayer. High crosses often mark the four sides of a chapel or monastery. Adapted from pre-Christian traditions and incantations, these crosses and prayers are about encircling a place or a situation for the purpose of protection and casting out the darkness. The idea of dark spiritual forces does not resonate well in our modern rational culture, but, as Ian Bradley puts it, “anyone who has encountered or experienced drug or alcohol addiction, sexual or physical abuse and illnesses such as schizophrenia or depression knows only too well the almost physical reality of dark and chaotic forces, malevolent voices within and a sense of being possessed by something overwhelmingly evil.”\(^{42}\) In the Wesleyan Contemplative Order, we have seen firsthand the power contemplative community has to bring healing to such inner brokenness by “encircling” one another in love and grace. For Celtic Christians, encircling prayer is not about magic or attempting to manipulate God to drive out such darkness. Rather it served as a reminder that we are always

\(^{41}\) Paintner, *The Soul’s Slow Ripening*, 15.

\(^{42}\) Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 47.
surrounded by God. God encompasses and encircles us. As Paul says to the people of Athens, “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

2.2.4 The Divine Spark

Cultivating an awareness of God’s presence in everything does not end with the external beauty or even darkness of creation. It includes seeing God’s presence in every person as well. Consider this popular section of St. Patrick’s Breastplate prayer:

Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

The *imago Dei*, or “Image of God” in every person is a central part of Celtic theology which has significant implications for mission and evangelism. As Ian Bradley writes, for the early Celtic missionaries, evangelism was “more a matter of liberating and releasing the divine spark which was already there in every person than of imposing a new external creed.” Pelagius, though a controversial figure in church history, emphasized our “capacity to glimpse what he called ‘the shafts of divine light’

43 Genesis 1:26-27 is the first declaration of the *imago Dei* (Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”), Genesis 5:1 also hearkens back to this creation account. In Acts 17:28 we see it is in Christ we live and move and have our being followed by an agreement with Greek poets who view humanity as God’s “offspring”, Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24 both reference Paul’s understanding of being renewed or restored to the image of God in which we were created, James 3:9 admonishes against cursing those who are made in the likeness of God.

that penetrate the thin veil dividing heaven and earth – especially in the essential
goodness of humanity.”45 This theology is also in line with the Greek Fathers of the
Eastern church who “had a strong sense of human kinship with God and taught that the
divine spark which is kindled in every human being at birth is never extinguished by
sin.”46 The Apostle Paul also uses the language of being renewed or restored to the
likeness of God in Christ (Col. 3:10, Eph. 4:24).

One reason for the success of Celtic missions and the striking lack of violence,
bloodshed and martyrdom in Celtic Christian history is the willingness of these
missionaries to look for ways in which God was already at work in the indigenous
communities instead of assuming that everything “pagan” must be denounced as evil.
George MacLeod believed the primary Christian mission was to bring all people to an
awareness of the God who was already present in their lives.47 Bradley observes that
this way of seeing God’s presence even in pre-Christian cultures anticipates Karl
Rahner’s doctrine of “anonymous Christianity” in which Christ may dwell “in an
unacknowledged and anonymous way” in the hearts of those who never call themselves
Christian.48 One may also hear echoes of John Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace in
which God’s grace is already at work in a person’s life long before they are aware of it.

45 Newell, Listening for the Heartbeat of God, 5–6.
46 Ibid., 60.
48 Ibid., 94.
Given the starting point that God is already present and at work in all people, inter-religious dialog becomes less about who is right or wrong and more about how the God of creation may be made known through our shared values.

There are also significant social implications for this view of God’s presence in all persons. St. Patrick saw firsthand the transformation of an entire society as slave traders became liberators, murderers became peacemakers, and barbarians became children of God.49 Inspired by John Scotus Eriugena and the Celtic Christian emphasis on the goodness of all creation, including all people, later Irish theologians like Alexander John Scott worked to develop “Christian Socialism.” Scott fully recognized the powers of darkness scattered throughout the goodness of creation and the power such forces had to threaten the mind and soul of people and communities, but he believed that the goodness of all humanity demanded Christians to focus on the deepest sources of inequity and injustice in society.50 Similarly, George MacDonald worked with social reformer John Ruskin to transform the overcrowded and ugly slums of the city into dwellings that would reflect what they called “the divine proportion,” restoring a sense

of human dignity, the beauty of creation, and the glory of God to communities darkened by poverty and industrialization.  

Elevating people in this way is not about pride or humanist ideology, but rather an antidote for the low self-esteem among the outcasts of society. The idea of inherent human worth and goodness is also influential in liberation theology, which, like Celtic theology, is birthed out of the unjust and disgraceful conditions of marginalized communities. The Celtic and Irish people through history “have experienced virtually every form of suffering” including social exile, economic insecurity and deprivation, and political oppression. Out of this sustained experience living under constant threat, the Celtic nations remind us to “expect the morning light.” As Esther De Waal puts it, “it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

2.2.5 Thin Places

In the 1930’s, George MacLeod popularized the language of “thin place” to describe those places where the veil between heaven and earth is almost transparent and we feel God’s presence most clearly. The monastery he led at Iona is said to be such a “thin place.” While the origins of this term are unknown, the concept may well reflect

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51 Ibid., 69. It is important to remember that this work was done long before the ecological awareness which arose later in the 20th century.
52 De Waal, The Celtic Way of Prayer, 117.
53 Ibid., 117.
chooses of the pre-Christian Celts who believed in the thin veil between the fairy world and the mundane world. Holy wells are common examples of such places as the ancients saw them as “the source of all life bubbling up from within the earth.” They were often understood as “portals between worlds… between what is seen and unseen.”

Rather than destroying or replacing pre-Christian sacred sites, Patrick blessed these holy places and recognized them as places where the Holy Spirit “seemed as near as one’s breath.” He turned the people’s attention from the sacredness of creation to the worship of the Creator. When Patrick and other Celtic Saints invoke the elements of creation, it is distinct from the magical invocations of the druids. Creation was no longer an object of worship, but it revealed the glory of God the Creator, who “loves human beings and wishes them success.”

Bradley observes that there is no blurring of the distinction between Creator and creation. Quoting Saunders Davies, a Welsh Anglican priest, he writes, “creation is translucent; it lets through glimpses of the glory of God.”

MacLeod understood that both the church and creation play a vital role in a person’s spiritual life. To this end he worked to transform Sabbath regulations that

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54 Power, “A Place of Community,” 45.
55 Paintner, The Soul’s Slow Ripening, 85.
56 Balzer, Thin Places, 29.
57 Cahill, How The Irish Saved Civilization, 131.
58 Bradley, The Celtic Way, 35.
would limit people from traveling to the countryside or even to the Botanical Gardens within the city. Rather than setting apart only one day as holy, MacLeod saw the whole of life as sacred. If one could not enjoy the pleasures of God’s creation on the Sabbath, what then was the point of setting apart this day to bask in the presence of God?

As Ó Ríordáin says, the church today desperately needs to recapture a real sense or awareness of Christ’s presence in our midst. Thin places are not just about beautiful spots in nature, ancient sacred ruins, monastic sites, or even contemporary church sanctuaries. What makes a space “thin” is, first and foremost, our own internal landscape. If God is truly present in everything and in everyone as the Celtic Saints and other contemplatives, mystics, and monastics have said, then the real question is to what degree our hearts, minds, and souls are awake to the Divine already in our midst.

In the incarnation of Christ, the divine presence fully takes on the frailty of human flesh and mortality. It may be said that Christ himself is the quintessential “Thin Place” in which the veil between heaven and earth entirely disappears. In him there is no boundary between earth and heaven, secular and sacred, human and divine. Jesus is the perfect window through which humanity can see and touch the heart of the Father. In the embodied person of Christ, God is most fully made known. Therefore, the church as the body of Christ should be a “thin place” through which God’s presence is made

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59 Balzer, Thin Places, 38.
known in the world. In his unpacking of the Christology of Pope Francis, Philip McCosker suggests that “the gospel is incarnated in everyone who hears and responds to it.”

Citing Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says that the gospel invites us to first respond to the God whom we encounter in Christ and then to see Jesus in the face of others. Jesus himself declares this truth of God’s presence in all people when he says that whatever we do or do not do for the “least of these”, knowingly or unknowingly, we have done or not done for him (Matt. 25:31-46). As my former seminary chaplain used to say, “The Spirit of Christ in me greets the Spirit of Christ in you.” Imagine the transformative power in all our greetings, blessings, interactions, and relationships if they were animated by such a deep awareness of God’s presence through Christ in everyone.

2.3 Following the Celtic Way

2.3.1 Journey to the Desert

Imitating the desert mothers and fathers before them, the Celtic saints teach us that our awareness of God’s presence grows stronger in out of the way places like the desert or the wilderness. Contemporary spiritual directors emphasize the need to “find

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61 Ibid., 62.
the desert within.” To be sure, the contemplative life is just as countercultural today as it was in the third and fourth centuries. Facing a “churchless Christianity,” much like we face in the Western world today, Athanasius sought to harness the energy of the monastic movement and make it work for the church rather than against it. Given the dramatic exodus from the church today and the equally dramatic rise of those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” it seems church leaders might take seriously Athanasius’ concern.

If we are not careful, our external acts of love and service might distract us from the inner work of transformation. More dangerous still is the possibility that our commitment to activism may fuel our pride. In our fight for social justice and our efforts to reset the moral compass of our nation, have we come to believe that we have risen above the need for such deep soul-searching? Our inner demons are quite content with a superficial faith that looks good to others while at the same time building up our own egos and keeping our hearts far from the cross of Christ.

As we confront the darkness within, we come to realize the many ways our modern culture distracts us from the spiritual life, and we discover that we are not really

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in control. When we humbly ourselves before this truth, the desert gives us clear vision. The desert gives us glimpses of the way things really are. It offers us a place of “detox from the noise” so that we can recognize the presence of God standing with us in even in the midst of chaos.

2.3.2 Cutting Through the Noise

The cell in which the monk spent most of his or her time serves as a metaphor or a symbol for the inner cell where we are called to do the deep work of the soul by becoming more attentive to God’s presence within us. While many Christians struggle with the idea of withdrawing to a cell for prayer, Christine Paintner observes that we quite naturally withdraw into endless mind-numbing hours of social media, TV, or other distractions which do not satisfy. Why, then, would we not desire to withdraw into a quiet space with God and drink from the streams of living water which alone can satisfy?

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Anthony Bloom invites us to experiment with even a short time of “being alone with our thoughts” in silence. It does not take long before we feel bored.\textsuperscript{67} We do not like to be alone with ourselves. Some people might enjoy a few days of quiet retreat, but for most the thought of spending years alone in a cell is terrifying. To choose such a life willingly may be viewed as a sign of insanity. Yet to whatever degree we are willing to face ourselves in the silence, we will discover the places of emptiness within. We will learn how much our lives are controlled by external forces and realize just how lonely and how thirsty we really are.

2.3.4 The Church as a Ministry of Presence

Like most monastic and neo-monastic movements, Celtic monasteries were not entirely detached from the world around them. “Since Ireland had no cities, these monastic establishments grew rapidly into the first population centers, hubs of unprecedented prosperity, art, and learning.”\textsuperscript{68} As Ian Bradley writes, they served as “little pools of gentleness and enlightenment, oases of compassion and charity in the ever-extending desert of secular materialism… presences in society which witnessed to the Gospel as much by being there as by activity and involvement in schemes and

\textsuperscript{67} Chryssavgis and Zosimas, \textit{In the Heart of the Desert}, 81.
\textsuperscript{68} Cahill, \textit{How The Irish Saved Civilization}, 155.
projects.” Phillip Newell argues that, like these early Celtic Monasteries in Ireland, the church should be a ministry of presence in the world. What if, as he suggests, churches “become places where we could more easily step into and out of daily life and be reminded that the real cathedral of God is the whole of creation... [where] we might more fully rediscover that God’s heartbeat can be heard in the whole of life... if we will only listen.”

God’s presence is not confined in the monastic cell, in the chapel, in sacred places within nature, or in our churches. These places are intended to point to the holiness of God that is present everywhere. The church plays a vital role in grounding our spirituality in the timeless truths of God made known most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. It is only by following the way of Christ in community that we can truly find meaning in both light and darkness, beauty and pain, joy and grief. Without the church, spirituality is diluted to a nostalgic or sentimental sail across a calm sea with no anchor to weather the storms. Like the path set before us by Christ and his disciples, the Celtic way is not individualistic. It is deeply rooted in the church community and in the community beyond the church. The church always exists for the sake of those outside her walls, to be the anchor in the storms which inevitably shake us along this pilgrimage we call life.

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People often see spiritual formation, monasticism, mysticism and other inner forms of spirituality as turning away from the world. “It is rather to go more deeply into life, to find God at the heart of life, deeper than any wrong, and to liberate God’s goodness within us and in our relationships, both individually and collectively.”

As we turn our attention toward the scriptural foundations for following the Celtic way in our own day, let us take a moment to reflect on this prayer from George MacLeod over the construction of the new abbey at Iona in 1938. In his prayer we find a dedication and justification for the Iona community and a greater call and purpose for our own churches today.

It is not just the interior of these walls,
It is our own inner beings you have renewed.
We are your temple not made with hands.
We are your body.
If every wall should crumble,
And every church decay, we are your habitation.
Nearer are you than breathing,
Closer than hands and feet,
Ours are the eyes with which you, in the mystery,
Look out in compassion on the world.
So we bless you for this place,
For your directing of us,
Your redeeming of us, and your indwelling.
Take us outside the camp, O Lord, Outside holiness,
Out to where the soldiers gamble, and thieves curse,
And nations clash at the cross-roads of the world…
So shall this building continue to be justified.

71 Ibid., 79.
3. THIN PLACES IN SCRIPTURE

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 
“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

Genesis 28:16

The concept of “Thin Place” is a prevalent theme among Celtic Christians to describe physical places which hold some sacred value to pilgrims and visitors seeking a personal encounter with God. While we understand that God is present in all places, those places which are called “thin” tend to make us pause as we become more consciously aware of God’s presence in our midst. The barrier between heaven and earth becomes porous, as if there is almost no barrier at all. Biblical writers may not have had the explicit language of “Thin Places” in their vocabulary, yet the themes of sacred space and encountering God’s presence in specific places reverberate throughout the pages of scripture. In this chapter I will trace the themes of sacred space and the centrality of God’s presence throughout the Biblical narrative.

In general, there are four major shifts in the locus of God’s presence among humanity following the exile from Eden. First, God appears in unique and seemingly random encounters through as messengers, dreams, burning bushes, pillars of cloud
and fire, and other such signs.\textsuperscript{1} Secondly, the place of God’s presence moves to the tabernacle and later to a more permanent temple structure, so that God might dwell among the people (Exod. 40, 1 Kings 8). As we move into the New Testament, God’s presence takes on flesh in the person of Jesus. In the incarnation there is no separation between heaven and earth, as Jesus is both the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity. As John writes, “No one has ever seen God. It is God’s only Son… who has made him known” (Jn. 1:18). As Jesus prepares his disciples for his final days on earth, the locus of God’s presence shifts once more, this time through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Father will “give you another Advocate, to be with you forever,” Jesus says. “This is the Spirit of Truth… You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (Jn. 14:16-17). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh at Pentecost, as prophesied in Joel, marks the beginning of the church (Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2). In our present age until Christ returns, the primary place of God’s presence remains in the church, both gathered and scattered, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit among God’s people.

Two particular “thin places” in Scripture, Jacob’s surprise encounter with God in the wilderness and the Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus at the Jacob’s Well, will serve as anchor points to demonstrate this ever-expanding locus of God’s presence on

\textsuperscript{1} This partial list of Old Testament encounters with God’s presence include Abraham’s conversation with the messengers (Genesis 18), Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28), a burning bush (Exodus 3), and a pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13).
earth. The image of a river of life flowing forth from God’s throne in the New Jerusalem shows how God’s very presence brings healing and restoration to all of creation. God calls the church in every age to serve as keepers of this spring of living water, thereby making the Body of Christ herself a Thin Place through which the world might drink deeply from the ever-flowing river of God’s Holy presence. The Church can fulfill this call only to the degree that she is empowered by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling.

3.1 People, Place & Presence

"Your life is a journey," Peter writes, that “you must travel with a deep consciousness of God" (1 Pet. 1:17, MSG). Along this journey, “the Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deut. 31:7-8). God has not abandoned or forsaken us and wherever we may go, God can always be found. This is the hope of the gospel.

In Psalm 63:2, David declares God’s transcendence revealed in the holy place; “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and glory.” Yet in Psalm 139:7-10, he wrestles with the intimacy of God by asking, “where can I go from your presence?” For David, the place of God’s presence is not a question of either / or. God has not left the sanctuary and God cannot be contained by the walls of a tabernacle or temple. In this way, I imagine David much like St. Patrick, praying and praising God a
hundred times a day or more as he cares for the sheep in the pasture. While both David and Patrick honored the holiness of the sanctuary later in life, they first met God not at the tabernacle or in a church, but in the fields where they worked as humble servants, and in Patrick’s case, as a slave.

Later theologians would echo this theme of God’s presence in unexpected places. John Calvin writes, “…wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory… this skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.”

Similarly, C.S. Lewis says that “We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”

When we think of an ecclesiology centered around the presence of God, it is not so much about where that presence is to be felt as it is about how to cultivate an awareness of the divine presence both in and beyond the confines of the church. In other words, how do we stay awake to the presence of God in our midst and alert to the ways in which the kingdom of heaven is breaking in upon the earth?

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Humanity’s struggle with God’s presence on earth begins in Eden, or rather, just beyond Eden. We stand on the outside of paradise looking in. A flaming sword reminds us that we have been cut off from God’s Holy Presence because we wanted to be in control (Gen. 3:23-24). The Image of God, or Imago Dei, in which we were perfectly created, has been marred. From that day forward God has poured everything into bringing humanity back to Eden and restoring in us the fullness of the Imago Dei. Eden represents both God’s original intent for creation and God’s final intent. Old Testament scholar Dr. Sandra Richter boils it down to three words: people, place, and presence.⁴ Eden represents the place where the people of God can dwell securely with full access to the loving presence of God who desires to dwell with us.

In John’s vision of the New Jerusalem, we see the city described as a cube. The only cube shaped place in Israel’s history is the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple, where God’s presence resided in the Ark of the Covenant.⁵ Like Eden, God’s presence resides in the whole of the city. Even more impressive is the scope of the city’s boundaries, stretching 12,000 stadia or 1,500 miles (Rev. 21:16). Robert Mulholland observes that if one were to overlay a 1,500-mile square on a map of the 1st century world, centered at John’s location on Patmos, its borders would reach to Jerusalem in the

East, Rome in the West, and to the approximate geographical boundaries of the Roman Empire to the North and South. The image here is that the New Jerusalem, consumed by the glory of God’s presence, will encompass all of Rome or, what John calls, Fallen Babylon. For John’s readers and hearers, this is like saying that the Kingdom of God will entirely overtake the kingdoms of this world and that everything on earth shall be as it is in heaven.

God’s presence is no longer confined by the Holy of Holies. It now permeates the entire city so that there is no division between sacred and secular. In this way, all people have full access to God’s presence, just as it was in the garden. Eden is fully restored, and it has grown to incorporate all the world.

### 3.2 Caught by Surprise

The God of Israel is understood throughout scripture as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 50:24; Exod. 3:15; Acts 7:32). God may have indeed self-identified as Jacob’s God, but Jacob’s faith in the God of his father and grandfather did not come as naturally as one might expect. From the beginning Jacob proves to be a man who trusts more in his own abilities and scheming than in the favor of an invisible divine hand. First Jacob cons his elder brother out of his birthright and later we find him and his

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6 Mulholland, *Journey Through the Bible: Revelation*, 16:122.
mother plotting together to steal Esau’s blessing (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:1-42). As the younger sibling, he does not demonstrate trust in the God of his ancestors. Instead he attempts to gain every blessing through trickery and manipulation.

Fearing his brother’s wrath, the deceitful twin set out into the wilderness to make a life for himself. Every blessing in his life he gained through his own guile, including the stolen blessing reserved for a first-born son from his father. Before it was over, he would go on to manipulate his uncle out of the strongest animals in the flock and he would return home with two wives, twelve sons, and great wealth. Jacob is what our contemporary capitalistic society might call a “self-made man,” even if his means of making it were a bit shady.

As darkness settled over the desert early in his journey to Uncle Laban’s, a bright light shone forth from the clouds as angels descended and ascended on a ladder reaching to the heavens. Jacob has now inherited God’s promise to Abraham. He would become a great nation on this very land and a blessing to all the world. Eventually the hardness of the rock under his head revealed that it was only a dream. To Jacob, it was something more. He awoke saying, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it” (Gen. 28:16).

Jacob was raised in a God-fearing home and, at least to some degree, he held onto the faith instilled in him as a child. Yet like many today who may have grown up with at least some basic training in religious values, Jacob had come to a point in life
where he had to find his own way. As he set out to start his own family and career, he was not particularly seeking an encounter with God. He did not stop off at a holy site to pray. In fact, the name of the place is not even known until after his dream. Nor was he facing any immediate crisis that might bring him to his knees. He was simply on a journey that would lead him from one stage of life to another. It was in this in-between place that God initiates an entirely unexpected encounter with Jacob.8

God chooses to meet Jacob in a dream. As Walter Brueggemann observes, “the wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness (and, we may imagine, unresolved guilt).”9 In this conscious world, Jacob strives to remain in control. The more we think we are in control of our lives, the less likely we are to be aware of God’s presence in our midst. As the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, “when you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with your whole heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13). In this moment, Jacob was not searching for God. God comes to Jacob in his sleep, when he is most vulnerable and unable to “conjure the meeting” on his own terms.10

The narrative of Jacob points us to the reality of divine in-breaking into the common and ordinary places of our world. God always initiates such encounters, even with the most unworthy people. As Jacob watches the angelic messengers climbing up and down this heavenly ladder or ramp, the message is clear: “there is traffic between

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9 Ibid., 243.
10 Ibid., 241.
heaven and earth... Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods.”11 God is more than an abstract object of spiritual belief with little relevance to everyday life. For Jacob, the world was now filled with possibility because it was “not cut off from the sustaining role of God.”12 This revelation is what Bruggeman calls the seed of “incarnational faith.”13 The hope of humanity is that God chooses to be present with us, that our Creator is also our Immanuel.

The place of Jacob’s encounter with God is truly a “thin place” where the veil between heaven and earth is almost entirely transparent. God’s own voice delivers the promise of God’s ongoing presence and blessing to Jacob. This encounter reminds us that it is not the place itself which makes it holy, sacred, or “thin.” The awareness of God’s presence transforms an ordinary place into a sanctuary and an ordinary stone into an altar.14 While we need specific places for worship to provide order, discipline, and focus, we must be careful that these places do not become idols, as if they are the only places in which God can be found.15

We are all on a journey through the wilderness of life. We cling tightly to control, believing that we alone have the strength to forge our own path. We also share

11 Ibid., 243.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 1:543.
Jacob’s underlying thirst for something more. Something deep within our souls wants to be surprised by God’s presence in our midst.

### 3.3 God’s Presence as Living Water

A prominent image of God’s presence throughout scripture is Living Water. The Psalmist gives thanks for God’s steadfast love and refuge for God’s people saying, “You give them drink from the river of your delights for with you is the fountain of life…” (Ps. 36:9-10). This fountain of life or stream of living water flows in Eden and in the New Jerusalem, connecting people of all times and places to the spring of life, God’s Holy Presence. As N.T. Wright observes, the city where God and the Lamb are “personally present” is the “great wellspring of life, flowing out to those who need it!”

The prophet Ezekiel records his vision of a river flowing forth from the Temple growing deeper and wider until it reaches the Dead Sea where it transforms the once stagnant waters into an oasis teeming with new life (Ezek. 47:1-12). Expanding on Ezekiel’s vision, John sees this river flowing beyond the Dead Sea and bringing life and healing to all nations (Rev. 22:1-5). Through the river and the trees of life along its

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16 Ian Bradley, *Water: A Spiritual History* (London New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). The sacred and even magical properties of water are well documented throughout religious history and in particular throughout Irish myth and legend. Ancient Holy Wells continue to serve as common pilgrimage sites across the Irish landscape.

banks, the nations can be restored and made citizens of New Jerusalem. This Edenic river flowing through the new Jerusalem is a fulfillment of Joel’s proclamation that a fountain or spring will flow forth from the house of the Lord (Joel 3:18). This river of living water flows right through the main street of the city. In other words, the river which imparts “eternal fellowship with God is an essential characteristic of the city.”

Isaiah describes similar springs of living water bursting forth in the wilderness, quenching the thirst of the poor and needy who seek water (Isa. 41:17-20; 43:19-21). John Oswalt points out that the exiles would not have needed water, either in “well-watered Babylon” or on the return route to Jerusalem which followed the path of the Euphrates River. Here water and thirst are used as “powerful image[s] of every human need – physical, spiritual and emotional,” which God alone can fulfill. The salvation which comes through this river is not an escape route from the poverty and injustices of this world to some other-worldly paradise. It is the “salvation of the world” which completely transforms and restores all of creation to the place where all people might dwell in the shalom of God’s presence. God’s desire to redeem the world and restore

18 Mulholland, Journey Through the Bible: Revelation, 16:125.
19 See also Zechariah 14:8 where living waters flow forth from Jerusalem and the Lord becomes king over all the earth.
21 Ibid., 1104.
23 Witherington, Revelation, 266.
life to the Dead Sea, to the wilderness, and to every corner of creation, is most clearly evidenced in the incarnation of Christ. In the person of Jesus, we see that “God desires fellowship so badly with his creatures that he becomes one of them to redeem them.”

The living water of God’s presence, as we will see, is accessible to humanity primarily through the incarnation of the Son of God.

3.4 Jesus as the Source of Living Water

The road from Eden to the New Jerusalem is a long and perilous path through a dry and weary land. Jacob’s vision and his realization of God’s presence in the land promised to Abraham and Isaac brings us one small step closer to reconciling God and humanity and restoring God’s dwelling place among all people. Nearly twenty centuries later, we find the story of an ordinary woman coming to collect water from an ordinary well somewhere within the bounds of the land God promised to Jacob, appropriately called “Jacob’s Well” (Jn. 4:4-26). While there is no reference to Jacob’s Well in the Old Testament, Jewish tradition says this well is fed from the springs in the land which Jacob took from the Amorites and gave as an inheritance to Joseph and his descendants, likely located in modern day Shechem. According to tradition, this well miraculously produced flowing water, and had flowed in abundance from the time of

24 Ibid., 277.
Jacob all the way to Jesus’ present day. John McHugh suggests that the naming of this particular well gives this Samaritan woman a sense of national identity tied to Jacob. As an outsider to Israel, this shared heritage stands in direct contrast to Ben Sira’s description of the “foolish people that live in Shechem” who are “not even a people.”

In Jesus’ day, this region known as Samaria was no longer recognized as part of God’s promised place. Like Adam and Eve on the outside of Eden, this woman and her people had been cut off from God’s presence in the Jerusalem Temple. God’s people established a place where they believed they could encounter the presence of God, and Samaritans were simply not welcome. Even so, she claimed a heritage that was deeply rooted in God’s gift of land through her ancestor Jacob. John emphasizes the “gift” motif throughout this section of the narrative and calls to mind the gift of the Son given freely out of God’s love for all the world, as Jesus previously shared with Nicodemus (Jn. 3:5, 16). Whereas Jacob’s gift is the exclusive inheritance of Israel, the gift of God through Christ is open to all who desire it.

26 Ibid., 138.
28 This gift of living water is the same gift offered to Nicodemus when Jesus says that he must be born again by water and the Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit through water is a sign of new birth which enables a person to have union with the Father through Christ and to grow in grace and truth that they might bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit as outlined in Galatians 5:22-23. John 3:16 reminds us that this gift of God’s own self through the Holy Spirit is freely available to everyone without exception.
29 McHugh and Stanton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1-4, 102.
The story of this unnamed Samaritan woman on the margins of society is central to the discussion of God’s presence, precisely because it is at this very well with this very woman that God’s presence showed up in a place that everyone assumed God would not go. As the woman’s story unfolds, we find Jesus committing every taboo possible and breaking down social barriers by speaking to her in public and asking her for a drink. His reputation as a Jewish teacher would surely be called into question for initiating a conversation with an unknown woman in public, let alone a woman of Samaria. 30 By the end of their conversation, however, this foreign woman finds herself fully included in the story of God’s people. Though she does not say it explicitly, there is a sense of increasing spiritual awareness in which her heart and soul declares with Jacob, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn’t know it.”

Like most of us, the Samaritan woman was simply going about her daily routine, collecting enough water to provide for her daily needs and temporarily quench her thirst. Jesus offers her living water. She likely understands him to be talking about a fresh spring or river of flowing water as opposed to the stagnant water of a cistern or a well. For John, living water holds a double meaning. Francis Moloney lays out the progression of God’s gift thus far in John’s gospel. He begins with Jesus as the gift of

God, the very Word or logos of God made flesh (Jn. 1:14). Jesus makes known the fullness of God and later offers the gift of eternal life to those who would be born of water and the Spirit (Jn. 1:18, 3:5). Finally, we see that this gift of life is no longer exclusive to Israel but is now freely offered to all of humankind (Jn. 3:16). The living water Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman “will touch the depths of the human spirit, resolving its desires and questions once and for all. In the gift of living water which Jesus has to offer, everyone can find the fullness of God’s gift, a fullness of a gift which is the truth.”

This same living water flows from Eden to the New Jerusalem, gushing forth from the spring that is the very presence of God and bringing life and healing to all the nations. Jesus promises that by drinking from this spring she will never thirst again. For someone completely cut off from God’s presence and thirsting for the love and affirmation that only God can give, such an invitation is truly a sign of amazing grace.

The woman does not fully understand what Jesus is offering or even the fullness of who he is. Nevertheless, she willingly acknowledges her need, or thirst, and receives this gift. What she does understand is that Jesus knows her deeply, even the secrets she would never openly confess. He is fully aware of her painful marital history with five husbands and the man who is not her husband with whom she now resides. While there is no explicit implication of guilt or sin, and we do not know the reasons for each

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31 Moloney, Belief in the Word, 143.
of these marriages, the shame and stigma which followed her to the well is a source of great distress in her life. Jesus accepts and honors her honest response when she says she has no husband, and her vulnerability opens the door for a genuine relationship with this all-seeing rabbi (Jn. 4:16-19). In his acceptance, she experiences mercy and grace, if not outright forgiveness. This moment of vulnerability and grace opens the door for her to consider her own life of faith, particularly how and where she is presently able to commune with God.

When Jesus declares that the hour has come when true worship would no longer be defined by location, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit, he is saying that the anticipated coming of God’s Kingdom is now a present reality. “Jesus' presence in the world initiates this transformation of worship, because Jesus' presence changes the moment of anticipation into the moment of inbreaking.”32 Just as God’s presence permeates New Jerusalem, so Jesus’ presence makes possible true worship in the Spirit by making God’s presence accessible even to a marginalized woman of Samaria. True worship is no longer about physical place, whether on mountains or in sanctuaries. True worship is about the orientation of one’s whole being toward God. The “thin place,” or the locus of God’s presence, moves from the physical location to the heart of the worshipping community itself, made up of the hearts of worshipers of every tribe, tongue and nation, filled with and enlivened by the “all-pervading personal presence”

of the Spirit. In John 7, Jesus cries out to the crowds, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (Jn. 7:37-38). John goes on to say that this living water is the Holy Spirit, which believers would receive through Christ. The very presence of God gives new life to the believer and flows out from the believer so that the world might also know the heart of the Father. The life-giving water of God’s presence is now located within the person who drinks it and it “will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14).

3.5 The Body of Christ as a Thin Place

It is no secret that the church in America and throughout the Western world is in decline and has been for quite some time. At best, the church is viewed as irrelevant. At worst, it has been a source of pain and even spiritual abuse, actively driving participants away. Many who have left the church struggled with their decision and saw leaving as the only way to save their faith. The church itself, they feel, “is keeping

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33 Moloney, Belief in the Word, 152.
34 “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (blog), October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/. According to this 2019 Pew Research study, American’s who identified as religiously unaffiliated or “nones” increased from 14 to 22 percent since 2000, and up from 7 to 8 percent as recent as the early 1990’s. Similarly, those who never attend religious services has increased from 18 to 27 percent since 2000.
35 Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015), 14.
them from God.”

From 2012 to 2017, those who identified as “spiritual but not religious” increased from 19 to 27 percent. Despite overall trends of religious decline, there is clearly an increase in spiritual hunger and thirst. Jesus says, “Come to me all who are thirsty” while the thirsty are leaving the church in search of water.

I draw our attention to this rapidly growing demographic precisely because they are like modern-day Samaritans, cut off from the church and, in some ways, cut off from God’s presence in our “temples.” Countless more are standing just outside the door, looking in past the flaming swords of our judgmental stares and insecurities, and wondering if they will ever again find all that they have lost. People are thirsty for living water. They want to encounter the presence of a living God. We cannot manufacture an encounter with God on Sunday mornings. “The consumer-based church is a mirage that promises refreshment but delivers an empty cup. Only the Presence of God can quench their thirst.”

When we evaluate our own churches, we must ask how we are contributing to the healing, wholeness, and transformation of souls. Sometimes we enable people to

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36 Ibid., 16.
38 Terry Teykl and Lynn Ponder, *The Presence Based Church* (Muncie, IN: Prayer Point Press, 2003), 204. A consumer-based church is one driven more by programs than by the presence of God. In general, such churches focus more on entertainment and institutional survival than on quiet spiritual practices, discipleship, and life transformation.
feel good about themselves as they are by virtue of their church involvement. God desires that all people might be transformed and renewed by grace to reflect the image of Christ. Such transformation only occurs in the light of God’s presence. Without realizing it, we tend to hide from God in darkened sanctuaries. We believe in Jesus. We come to church. We may even serve in a leadership position. For many, this is enough to quench their spiritual thirst, at least on the surface. For others, there is a longing for something more. In some ways, the church merely distracts us long enough to forget about the deepest needs and desires of our souls for another week.

I often see this longing and emptiness among those who have left the church, and I hear the cries for living water among countless more who are on the verge of leaving or who stay only out of a sense of obligation. I write these reflections both as a pastor who regularly observes this struggle in others and as one who has contemplated and even experienced a rich and fruitful life with God beyond the thick sanctuary walls. I left and returned, though my returning has been out of a sense of divine call more than any real hope of finding the living water I seek within the walls of the church. This study is deeply personal to me precisely because I can identify so closely with those who have left and those who remain thirsty. As they stand outside the doors taking one last glance at what was once a source of life-giving water, I stand just inside the doors looking out, imagining the endless ways God is showing up and offering living water at ordinary wells across Samaria that look nothing like our churches.
As we saw in the previous chapter, Celtic Christians speak of “thin places”, a concept that, despite its pagan origins, resonates well with scripture and Christian tradition. A “thin place”, as we have seen, is where the veil between heaven and earth seems translucent. Like Eden and the New Jerusalem, thin places invite the people of God to rest in the fullness of God’s presence. Both Jacob’s dream and his later wrestling match with God occurred in thin places. For the Samaritan woman, the ordinary well she used every day of her life became a thin place when Jesus and met her there.

Thin places can be found throughout the scriptures, most notably in the person of Jesus, whose incarnation brought the full presence of God to dwell among us in the flesh and whose death tore the veil which separated us from the Holy of Holies where God’s presence dwelt in the temple. John opens his gospel with the claim that the “Word was God” and that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” in the person of Jesus. One of John’s central claims is the oneness of God the Father and God the Son. “When one sees Jesus, one sees God. When one hears Jesus, one hears God.” If the fullness of God’s presence has come near in the incarnation of Christ, then Jesus himself is a kind of “Thin Place” where heaven touches earth. In Christ, “heaven lies open to the world.” Through the lens of Jesus, humanity can see and know God intimately. We are given firsthand access to God’s character lived out in the context of ordinary human

life. As Karl Rahner notes, in the incarnation “God adapts to our smallness.”

> “To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering and loss. It is to love, to grieve, and someday to die. The incarnation binds Jesus to the ‘everyday’ of human experience.”

While the Biblical writers did not use the language of thin places, this image beautifully reflects God’s original and final intent to dwell among those God created and loves. The streams of living water we find winding their way through the Biblical narrative and throughout church history tend to bubble up in such thin places, offering healing and hope to those wandering in the wilderness. In Revelation, John sees the headspring is the very presence of God (Rev. 22:1-5). In our desperation for institutional survival and maintaining control, we have built walls so thick that they tend to dam up the rushing river of the Holy Spirit.

Our thirst for a taste of this living water is as great as it has ever been. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are the woman at the well. We are standing outside of Eden. We are parched and wandering in a dry and weary land. Josh Packard observes that many who leave the church have not rejected God. They are spiritual refugees whose thirst for a deeper connection with God has forced them out from the thick walls

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41 Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 15–16.  
of the church in search of the thin places where they might more fully encounter God’s Holy Presence.

The invisible God can be seen in the life of Jesus through the incarnation. In Christ, the world may encounter and be reconciled with God. For Chrysostom, the “how” of the incarnation remains a mystery. What is central to our salvation is the union between the Divine Logos and the flesh. If Christ came to make the Father known and to reconcile the world with God, then the church as the Body of Christ has inherited that same purpose. In Ephesians, Paul describes the church as God’s temple in the world, a people who are “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21-22). “Do you not know,” he writes to the church at Corinth, “that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). Like living stones, we are built into a spiritual house with Christ as the cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:4-6). Just as God chose to dwell in the tabernacle among the Israelites in the wilderness and later in the Jerusalem temple, God now dwells among the people directly through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the faith community becomes “the locus of God’s love in the world, just as the incarnate Logos was that locus.” Immanuel, or “God with us” cannot be contained by buildings or holy sites. As the dwelling place of God’s presence

43 Packard and Hope, Church Refugees.
in the world, the people of God serve as a primary point of access to the river of life so that the world may continue to drink freely from the spring of God’s restorative and healing presence. The church is nothing less than the temple of the Holy Spirit both gathered and scattered in the world. We are called to extend the same invitation to the world that the Samaritan woman extended to the people of her village: “Come and see…” We as the body of Christ must be a “thin place” through which all people can see the glory of heaven and the mercy of God in their midst, just as the villagers saw when they finally encountered Jesus for themselves.

The late Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, tells the story of the “Keeper of the Spring,” a man who lived in the forest above a quaint Austrian village in the Alps.46

The old gentle man had been hired many years earlier by a young town council to clear away the debris from the pools of water that fed the lovely spring flowing through their town. With faithful, silent regularity he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt from the fresh flow of water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal-clear spring, farmlands were naturally irrigated, and the view from restaurants was picturesque.

Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semiannual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, one man’s eye caught the salary figure being paid the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, “Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? For all we know he is doing us no good.

He isn’t necessary any longer!” By a unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man’s services.

For several weeks nothing changed. By early autumn the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A couple days later the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was detected. The millwheels moved slower, some finally ground to a halt. Swans left as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.

Embarrassed, the council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they hired back the old keeper of the spring . . . and within a few weeks, the river began to clear up.

This story paints a beautiful picture of the church’s role as keepers of the spring of living water. Sadly, the church tends to act more as a gatekeeper restricting access to those who we deem worthy of a drink. Why do we feel the need to ration a limited water supply for the sake of our own survival? Have we failed to recognize the abundance available to us and to the world in God’s eternal spring? Like the exiles in Jeremiah’s day, we in the church today have “forsaken [God], the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for [ourselves], cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jer. 2:13). As it has throughout history, the life-giving water Christ offers will spring forth in the deserts beyond our walls, and even the deserts within our walls.
3.6 Paying Attention

The emphasis on encountering God’s presence in the ordinary found throughout Celtic Christian writings is a central theme in Scripture. Throughout much of Israel’s history, God’s presence was located primarily in the tabernacle and temple, yet not limited to these sacred sites. As we see in the example of Jacob’s story, among others throughout the Biblical narrative, God shows up in various forms and in various places, especially in “in-between places” of vulnerability or crisis. God came to Hagar promising care for Ishmael in the wilderness and God’s presence protected Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. God spoke to Balaam through a donkey, to Jonah in the belly of a large fish, and to Elijah in a still small voice. The methods and locations of God’s encounters with humanity are endless. What they all have in common is that they are acts of God’s gracious initiative. For the church to live out her mission as a locus of God’s presence or a primary point of access to the spring of living water flowing forth from God’s throne, we must learn to become more aware of God’s presence, especially in the most unexpected places.

Consider the example of Moses. God chooses to be present in the flames of a burning bush on the mountain in the Sinai wilderness. In this way, God takes the initiative to make possible a divine encounter with humanity. Like Jacob, Moses was not seeking an audience with God. In fact, one might say he was running away in fear after having murdered the Egyptian taskmaster. Also, like Jacob, Moses found himself
in an “in-between space.” Such liminal or transitional spaces tend to be some of the most “thin places” in our lives. For Moses to encounter God’s presence in this divinely created thin space, he simply needed to pay attention. Tom Schwanda, Associate Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College, observes three key elements of this encounter. First, Moses “recognized the unusual nature of the bush.” Noticing that the bush would not be consumed would require paying attention to the phenomenon over an extended period of time. Second, Moses was not engaged in a particular spiritual activity. He noticed the bush while at work, going about his ordinary daily tasks. Finally, Moses acts upon what he sees. He did not simply notice the bush and return to his routine. He stopped what he was doing and drew near to observe more closely. It may well be that this final piece is what the church lacks most.

We have grown so accustomed to coming in and out of what we consider the “holy ground” of our places of worship week in and week out often with little impact on how we live our lives the rest of the week. Have we grown numb to God’s presence, as though the burning bushes in our lives have become so commonplace that we barely notice they are still burning and inviting us to draw near?

As God’s children, we must cultivate a fresh awareness of the Divine presence in our everyday, ordinary lives. Such awareness is crucial to our identity as the church and

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vital to recovering the rest and abundant life Christ offers. We must drink deeply from the spring of living water flowing forth from heaven’s throne. We turn now to the practical means by which we might cultivate such an awareness of God’s presence. Could it be said of the church, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and we didn’t know it.”? 
4. SILENCE AS A THIN PLACE

But the LORD is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.

Habakkuk 2:20

Jesus’ very presence among human beings in the flesh invites us to fully enter the presence of Almighty God. In Matthew’s gospel his invitation is explicit when he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). In the Message paraphrase of this passage, Eugene Peterson interprets Jesus as saying something like: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

True rest and walking in the rhythms of grace are found only in God’s presence. Theologically we know God is present, always and everywhere, yet too often we lack a clear awareness of God’s presence throughout the ordinary routines of life. Therefore, we must work to intentionally cultivate sacred space. All creation can be a “thin place” where we might encounter God and drink from the springs of living water, yet the springs do us no good if we do not realize they are there.
Like the people in Jesus’ audience, we too can get burned out on religion. We work so hard to keep our churches alive, and with good intention. We believe the church is God’s house and we want people to enter this holy sanctuary. Too often we are consumed by our desperation to get more people in the pews and money in the plates. How much time do we spend in the wilderness striking rocks in anger and frustration trying to quench our thirst when God simply invites us to speak, to pray, to breath in the Holy Spirit, and to receive the life-giving gift of God with us? (Num. 20:2-13).¹ Our religious life is often too busy and tiring to experience the rest Jesus offers.

The Celtic saints, like the desert mothers and fathers before them and countless monastics and mystics since, have taught us that communion with God requires practice and intentionality. We pray, “Holy Spirit Come,” though we know full well that God has never really left.² Karl Rahner reflects on how easy it is to become distracted with the things of this world, and yet how God may still be found in everything. “If it is true,” he prays, “that I can lose you in everything, it must also be true that I can find you in everything.”³ We may think that being present with God would be easier if we could just get away from it all and live like those solitary monks behind the walls that keep the

¹ Based on the story in which God commanded to Moses to speak to the rock so that water might spring forth for the people. Instead, Moses chose the more familiar method of striking the rock, as he had done before, demonstrating both distrust in God and his own need to feel in control.
² Karl Rahner, Encounters with Silence (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 86–87.
³ Ibid., 48–49.
pressures of everyday life at bay. Such a holy life, we imagine, can only be attained by priests, monks, nuns, and hermits.

The key to this spiritual life, however, is not the vocation or even the isolation such saints have chosen. The spiritual life flows from the intentional rhythms they have built into their days, weeks, months, and years which regularly turn their attention toward God. Just like the annual festivals and weekly Sabbath established by God in the Hebrew Scriptures, those who seek to live with a constant awareness of God’s presence have ordered their lives around the daily office through which they are called to prayer seven times during a twenty-four-hour cycle. The hours are marked by the natural rhythms of the day that we all experience: the quiet of the night, dawn, the beginning of work, noon, sunset, and compline, or the completion of the day. A small signal like a silent alarm on a smartwatch or phone may be enough at these regular intervals, reminding us to pause and reflect on the ways God has been present with us over the past few hours and to commit ourselves to pay closer attention to the Spirit’s movement in the upcoming segment of time. No matter how busy our lives may be, we can all learn to be more attentive to God’s presence in everything we see, everything we do, and in everyone we meet. As Esther DeWaal puts it, “Absolute attention is prayer… If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a
stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place. Something is given…”

What is given is nothing less than the grace of God and the gift of awareness that God is with us. We need not live in a monastery or isolate ourselves from the world to pay closer attention to a God who is always near. We only need to carve out those moments in the day where we intentionally turn our attention to God. A call to prayer or a notification on our calendar functions like a morning alarm, awakening us to the reality of the Spirit saturated world in which we live and breathe.

Though we can cultivate sacred space in different ways, we must be intentional about doing so if we are to grow in our awareness of God’s presence. Many people find sacred space or “thin places” on a walk in the woods or along the beach or lakeshore. For others it may be a few minutes of silence in the car on the morning or afternoon commute. Providing such a space in the church building offers a valuable transition from the hectic pace of the week to the stillness of being in God’s presence. Others struggle to find space to be alone with God. For those who spend most of their lives in crowded and chaotic spaces, it is valuable to remember that sacred space need not be a physical space at all. One vital form of sacred space both within and beyond the walls of the church is silence.

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Before examining the nature and practice of silence as a means of grace and holy encounter, a word of caution is in order. It should be noted that, while silence is a valuable and essential spiritual practice, it has also been horribly misused throughout history to force already oppressed persons into submissive obedience. For women, persons of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups whose voices in many places have yet to be heard, even in the church, silence may indeed be uncomfortable and even threatening or dangerous. In her Social History of Silence, Jane Brox describes the ways women who spoke too much, or in ways others found uncomfortable, were literally bridled and walked through town to be publicly silenced and humiliated. 5 “The mere threat of being bridled,” she writes, “could be enough to mute a soul.” Her silence was intimately linked with obedience.

The silencing of women in history and in the church is only one of many ways the practice has been abused and caused great harm. Silence cannot be forced upon someone, nor can anyone be forced to enter. Those who choose to practice silence, both alone and in community, often find it a safe space, much like a sanctuary, where they can be fully present with the God who is already present with them. The discussion of silence in this chapter is intended to be life-giving, not soul-crushing. Contemplative silence can be arduous, terrifying, and even mentally, emotionally, and spiritually

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agonizing as it exposes the deepest truths of our souls like nothing else, but it is never forced, restrictive, or punitive. It is a silence that is willingly chosen, never imposed. Its purpose is not to limit a person’s voice or agency, but to center and ground the individual and the faith community in the love of Creator God. It does not negate the need to speak out, especially on behalf of justice for the oppressed. It is a silence in and through which God gives us both the wisdom and the power to speak. Contemplative silence is nothing less than the gracious invitation of a loving God into a thin or sacred place where our souls may find rest.

One method of practicing healthy contemplative silence is through centering prayer, developed by Father Thomas Keating. As Keating describes it, centering prayer is a form of silent contemplative prayer intended to cultivate a sacred space in which we may “experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself.”  

An individual in a recent centering prayer time described the experience as “curling up with God on the couch.” Another reflected on her regular practice of silence as a time of being wrapped up in God’s arms like a baby resting in her mother’s lap. In her description, the silence wrapped her in a womb space while God’s Spirit gently shaped and formed and prepared her once again to be born into the world.

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Silence is only one among many contemplative practices. I offer it here as a primary practice for increasing our awareness of God’s presence and creating space from which to drink deeply from the spring of living water.

4.1 Entering God’s Presence

Ruth Haley Barton understands silence as “an invitation to communication with the One who is always present.” It is about cultivating a “listening life” to grow in our awareness of God’s Spirit around and within us. As a teenager in youth and college groups, I often sang a popular worship song based on Psalm 84:10, “Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere.” It was a captivating and inspiring idea, so long as the song lasted, but the feeling rarely lasted beyond the moment. The idea of dwelling in God’s courts felt more like a dream reserved for an eternity in heaven. Apart from the music, I had no way of connecting this heavenly experience to life here and now. Not having a framework through which I could taste and see the goodness of God’s presence on earth made me question if it would really be so good in heaven. What would we do in God’s presence? Would we just sit there and pray and sing all

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8 Tracy Balzer, Thin Places: An Evangelical Journey into Celtic Christianity (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2007), 122.
day? Would it be boring? Was there truly no other place more enjoyable than a single
day in a heavenly throne-room?

The concept of being in God’s presence felt too abstract, and these questions
haunted my imagination. By God’s grace, I have experienced a real sense of the Spirit’s
presence on numerous occasions throughout my life since that time, and each one has
increased my spiritual thirst. I have come to understand that, while such unexpected
Spirit-filled moments are beautiful gifts from God, they rarely reflect our normal
everyday experiences. If we genuinely believe that a moment in God’s presence is
greater than anything we can imagine, than entering intentional silence is one way we
can put this belief into practice.

Creating sacred space through silence is far more difficult than one might
imagine. We can turn the radio off in the car or even take a hike in the woods to be
alone with God and we find that the voices of our own mind and heart grow even
louder and more distracting. Robert Cardinal Sarah reminds us that interior silence
requires a “genuine taming process.”¹⁰ For this reason, the Celtic Saints, along with
many other monastic groups throughout history, have fled to the desert, both literally
and metaphorically. It is commonly said among the desert saints that “the cell will teach

¹⁰ Robert Sarah, Nicolas Diat, and Michael J. Miller, The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of
you all things.”¹¹ They go to these solitary cells in part to actively battle against what Sarah calls the “parasitic noise” within; the noise of our ego, the noise of our memories and our past, the noise of our temptations, the noise of our anxieties, and every other internal voice that distracts us from truly resting in the presence of God.¹² We may not have the luxury of retreating to a monastic cell to be alone with God, but we can enter into the cell of our hearts. Indeed, we must enter this quiet and often fearful place if we are to truly encounter God and our own selves.¹³

One famous Celtic legend tells the story of Saint Kevin who stood silently in a cross vigil, arms outstretched, when a bird began constructing a nest in his hand. According to tradition, Kevin remained motionless for weeks until the bird’s eggs could hatch, and new life came forth.¹⁴ Whether Kevin literally stood in silence for this long is not as important as the larger lesson of the legend; that silence and stillness is productive and life-giving work. In silence, we release control so God can do the transforming work. Resurrection is always God’s doing. In silence, we do not get burned out because we allow God to do the work. When we are still, we invite Jesus to remove the heavy yoke of our striving and place his yoke upon us, a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

¹¹ Harmless, Desert Christians, 227.
¹⁴ Balzer, Thin Places, 115. This legend is found in most anthologies on the lives of the Celtic Saints.
While silence is often practiced in solitude, there is immense joy and strength in walking the rhythms of grace together with others. As we will explore more thoroughly in the next chapter, the community of faith is essential to developing and sustaining the spiritual practices necessary for cultivating sacred space in which God’s presence can be known. I personally find tremendous value and strength in practicing silence in community. Alone, I am easily distracted by my inner voices. It is tempting to give up altogether. Working on my to-do list is much easier than struggling to quiet my mind and soul. In community, however, each member of the group holds sacred space for one another. Even in silence, our shared presence keeps us accountable and reminds us that there is nowhere else to be and nothing else to do. The presence of a group practicing silence together reminds us that the most important thing in this moment is to be still and sit at the feet of Jesus. As the psalmist writes, our primary task is to “Be still and know that God is God” (Ps.46:10). In the New American Standard translation, “be still” is translated, “Stop striving.” “Stop,” God says. “Cease striving. I am God, and you are not.”15 The world can wait. Our lives will not fall apart during the twenty minutes we have set aside. The work God can do in us during that time is far greater than the work we could accomplish on our own. It is in the rich soil of silence that the fruit of the Spirit takes root and finds nourishment to flourish.

Dallas Willard observes that “silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life… It reminds us of death,” he says, as it “cuts us off from the world and leaves only us and God.” We worry, he says, that in the end we may find “there is very little between us and God.” We may not want to admit that we are afraid to be truly alone with God. There are things in our lives we would rather pretend God does not know, but this is only a form of self-deception and denial to protect us from the pain of our guilt and shame.

Deep down we are all like the prophet Isaiah. We know we are not worthy to enter God’s heavenly court; and so we have two choices. The easier choice is to do whatever we can to “wake ourselves up” and get back to our normal lives where we do not have to think about our brokenness and sin. Yet in avoiding intimacy with God, we are not “waking up” at all, for God is our ultimate reality and in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). When we choose to avoid God’s presence, we are not snapping ourselves back into reality. We are falling asleep to the more soothing reality of our dreams where we are always in control, or so we think. The second option is to pray like Isaiah, “Take the coal, cleanse my lips, here I am.” We cannot know God until we know ourselves as God knows us. We cannot learn to love, accept, and forgive

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others until we can accept ourselves with honesty and forgiveness.\textsuperscript{18} Love and mercy are among the many fruits that grow out of silence.

If silence, as I have argued, functions as a sacred space where we encounter God’s presence, it is no wonder the idea of intentional silence is unsettling. Yet, as uncomfortable and frightening as silence can feel, it is far more natural than we might imagine. Any moment which forces us to consider our own physical limitations, weakness or mortality moves us to silence. An entire stadium filled with raucous fans will fall silent in an instant when a player is injured. We are at a loss for words when we or a loved one are diagnosed with a terminal illness. Then there are those holy moments of silence in the face of death. I have been in hospice and hospital rooms when people have taken their last breath and, while the time frame differs from family to family, there is almost always a period where even spoken prayer would be an unwelcome interruption to the sacredness of silence. On the other side of the coin, we naturally fall silent before things of great beauty. Perhaps it is in gazing out at the sunset over the ocean or contemplating eternity from the natural grandeur of a mountain overlook. Maybe it is in the moment of holding a newborn baby or simply sitting on the front porch in silence with the person you hold most dear. Whether tragic or joyful, such moments invite and almost demand silence. They are the moments for which we have

\textsuperscript{18} De Waal, \textit{The Celtic Way of Prayer}, 95.
no words to describe and in truth, any attempt to speak into those moments would diminish or even desecrate their holiness.

If these sacred moments disrupt our ordinary lives and strip us of words, how much more must we fall silent before the Lord of all Creation? When we are caught up in the Holy Mystery of God, how can we speak? As the Psalmist writes, “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him” (Ps. 62:5). There are simply no words to describe being in God’s presence.

4.2 The Value of Silence in a Culture of Noise

There is no question that silence is both terrifying and beautiful. At the same time, silence guides us as we cultivate an awareness of God’s presence in our everyday lives. Yet we live in a world where words are everything. Silence in any form is a hard sell.

Some question the virtue of silence on the basis that we can too easily become self-absorbed in our inner spiritual life. When a pastor in the church office spends time in silent prayer or even a moment of quiet reflection while writing a sermon or bible study, a member of the congregation may interrupt without a second thought because it appears the pastor is not doing anything. In our culture there are few things more insulting than the perception that we are doing nothing. Busyness is a sign of
productivity and good work ethic. Quiet space and stillness are the opposite of busyness and is therefore devalued, even in the church.

We find this pattern of interruption in many contexts. In trying to offer even thirty seconds or a minute of silence during a prayer time in worship, I have rarely had a time when someone did not interject to start the ball rolling on spoken prayer requests before it was time. I have even had a few people interrupt the silence with announcements that had nothing to do with prayer. Beyond worship and prayer, we have all likely sat in meetings, classes, or seminars, whether in church or in other parts of our lives, where a challenging question makes the room go silent. The silence creates a necessary space for the deep thought the question or problem deserves and requires, yet there is inevitably at least one who is quick to break the silence with an answer to keep the conversation going but rarely offers any deep insight or wisdom. Susan Cain describes a preference in our society toward those who are quick to put their ideas on the table which she calls the “Extrovert Ideal.” 19 In many group contexts, those who are more thoughtful and slower to speak tend to be discredited or overlooked. 20 Her research reflects on the importance and value of those quieter voices to the larger conversation. Sadly, the interruption of silence in meetings and other public group settings has become commonplace. How many introverts, I wonder, are made to feel

20 Ibid., 4.
“less than” simply because they do not speak as quickly as their more extroverted counterparts?

Sometimes the disruption of silence is far more overt and harmful. I recall one late night sitting with a church member and her family in a hospice room immediately after her husband died. I had been with them for nearly an hour when their son’s pastor came into the room. Until that moment it had been a quiet and prayer-filled space broken only by the occasional whisper of pleasant memories, smiles, and soft laughter. It was truly a sacred space as the family processed and wrestled with the painful mystery of death and celebrated the joy of love and the hope of eternity. The other pastor entered without any introduction or pause. His voice boomed in the quietness of that space, and he offered no word of encouragement or sympathy to the family for the loss they had just experienced. His first words were, “Let’s all get up here and pray.” Everyone looked hesitant, as if they had just been jolted out of a deep sleep, and he reached out to grab the hands of the two family members closet to him and drew them to stand in a circle. Then he prayed. It was a loud and celebratory prayer about the deceased standing in the presence of God in heaven and about how we should not mourn because the body that remained was only an empty shell, and our hope was in heaven. While there was much to be said about his presence with God in heaven, there was little sense of God’s presence here with us on earth. It seemed that was something we would all have to look forward to after death. With a hearty “Amen” and a squeeze
of the hand, he left as quickly as he had come. Everyone stood numb. A minute or so later the son said, “I guess we better go,” and with that the wife thanked me for being there, grabbed her purse, and slipped out to let the nurses know they were finished and would be leaving. They would have left soon anyway, but this departure felt abrupt and forced in a way this family did not deserve. The sacred space of their shared silence had been desecrated.

Whether in a meeting, a class, a time of prayer or study, or even a holy or sacramental moment, it seems to me that the one who interrupts the silence is more narcissistic or self-absorbed than those who choose silence. I am not saying they are inherently narcissistic or that they are intentionally trying to turn the attention of the moment to themselves, yet this is inevitably the outcome of their interruption. Their own discomfort in the silence, no matter the reason, disrupts others from the blessing of experiencing God’s presence in those sacred spaces. “The talkative person is far from God… for he no longer has the time or inclination to recollect himself, to think, to live profoundly.”21 It is as if we worry that God is unable to speak on God’s own behalf. As Solomon writes, “The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?” (Eccl. 6:11).

Silence offers us a way to actively fight against our selfish and narcissistic tendencies. It requires surrender and letting go of control. It is a means of practicing

self-denial as we invite God to silence our own inner voices and agendas, even our “demons”, until all that remains is the voice of unconditional love.

4.3 The Wisdom of Silence

Another objection is the misconception that silence weakness, passivity, or even ignorance.22 The practice of silence should not be understood in opposition to activism and prophetic speech. Rather, it can and must serve as a source or a wellspring of wisdom from which the most right, true, and powerful words flow forth. Sarah warns of the danger of the “unbridled activism” of our day in which we are always called to fight against and destroy our enemies. The devil, he says, “sows discord and incites us to pour out our hatred upon each other.”23 Sarah commends the practice of silence as that which gives us both the patience and wisdom necessary to speak truth to power. It is through silence and stillness in the presence of God that we draw on the divine strength which Paul tells us has the power to tear down the strongholds of this world (2 Cor. 10:4).

In the wisdom writing of Job, we find a situation which screams injustice, and what is worse, it appears that God is the cause of these horrific unjust acts. Job is convinced that he has committed no sin which would warrant such harsh punishment

23 Ibid., 154.
from God, and so he finally confronts God with his accusation of injustice. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, God’s first speech reminds Job that God is free and beyond human judgment, and it is impossible to comprehend the reasons for God’s action.  

Job responds with silence. “I had better lay my hand over my mouth,” he says, I have spoken... I shall not speak again... I have nothing more to say” (Job 40:4-5). His silence marks a new kind of humility and surrender which moves Job toward a renewed trust in the God he had previously accused of being unconcerned with his life. In his silent contemplation, Job comes to understand that “justice alone does not have the final say.” He discovers that God is not driven solely by justice and certainly not by punishment or retribution, but by love and freedom. Human freedom then, is a gift of God’s love, and despite its goodness, it tends to hinder the “rigid moral order” many might prefer. Job’s contemplation moves him from a place of self-pity and righteous indignation to a new awareness which placed him in solidarity with the poor and showed him God’s “special love for the disinherited, the exploited of human history.”

Without silence, even our prophetic voice against injustice is tainted by personal agendas. Like Job, we may be more motivated by our own sense of suffering than by the suffering of others. The truth that needs to be heard often gets lost in the noise of

\[25\] Ibid., 87.
\[26\] Ibid., 88.
\[27\] Ibid.
violence, anger, hatred, pride and selfish ambition. Job, Solomon, and James all warn about the danger of speaking to quickly and the wisdom of silence before any word is uttered.

- When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise (Prov. 10:19).
- Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him (Prov. 29:20).
- O that you would be completely silent, and that it would become your wisdom (Job 13:5).
- You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger (James 1:19).

Certainly, such wisdom would have been beneficial for Job’s friends who were more interested in rational explanations and bad theology. Job’s friends surround us every day. We may even hear their thoughts in our own heads and their voices in our own mouths. They / we say, “Everything happens for a reason,” and then go on to pretend they / we know exactly what the reason is.28 “If you would only keep silent,” Job cries… “Will you speak falsely for God?” (Job 13:5, 7).29 If the church is to be a thin place in the world, we would do better to create space for people to come into God’s presence on their own than to offer explanations and defense on God’s behalf. What is

28 Kate Bowler, Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved (New York: Random House, 2018).
29 In Job’s response to his friends in chapter 13, his argument is simple. Essentially, he says “Be quiet. I don’t want all your explanations about God. I don’t need your defense of God. I need to speak directly with God.”
needed more often, particularly in suffering, is a soul friend or friends who will not seek to explain away the pain, but who will sit with us in the ashes and by their very presence remind us of the only truth that matters. As Kate Bowler puts it, “God is here. We are loved. It is enough.”

Solomon reminds us that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Eccl. 3:7). Without speech, silence may indeed turn to apathy and reinforce the status quo of oppression and injustice. On the other hand, if we “speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, [we] are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (2 Cor. 13:1). Such love is only matured in us as we encounter God in the “interior desert” of silence. “It is vitally important to withdraw to the desert in order to combat the dictatorship of a world filled with idols… a world that flees God by taking refuge in the noise.”

4.4 Silent Prayer

What do we do in this “interior desert” or “cell”? How does this silent space open our hearts toward God and become thin? The answer is simple. Pray. Prayer is the primary means of communication across the thin veil between heaven and earth. Prayer is among the most central and universal practices of the spiritual life, and one of the most misunderstood. The disciples recognized their own misunderstanding when

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30 Bowler, Everything Happens for a Reason, 21.
31 Sarah, Diat, and Miller, The Power of Silence, 64.
they said “Rabbi, teach us to pray” (Lk. 11:1). We must do the same. Certainly, we should follow the model of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. We must glorify our “Father in heaven” through praise, humble ourselves in confession, intercede for the needs of the world, and seek the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. We traditionally do a lot of talking when we pray, and one of the primary concerns I hear raised by those who struggle with prayer is that they don’t feel like they are good public speakers. They are afraid of “saying the wrong thing.”

In truth, we should all be afraid of saying the wrong thing. As Dr. Lauren Winner says, there are dangers in every Christian practice and prayer is no exception. It is easy to twist and manipulate prayer to speak our own will, rather than God’s, into existence. Clement of Alexandria warns that praying to obtain what we don’t have is “probably a bad idea because unvirtuous people are likely to ask for the wrong things.”32 Another danger in spoken prayer, particularly in public, is that it can become primarily a way of communicating with others rather than with God, or as Winner puts it, “glossing gossip with piety.”33

This is not to say that we should abandon spoken prayer. We must come to understand that there are many ways to pray, each one offering some corrective or, at least, bringing balance to other forms. In all our stumbling with prayer, one form we

33 Ibid., 68.
often neglect is that of contemplative or silent prayer. This is the prayer Paul speaks of when we do not know how to pray. It is the prayer of the Holy Spirit within us with groans and sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26). Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds us that all prayer is God’s initiative.\(^{34}\) We do not pray out of our natural will, but only in response to the word God has given to us by grace. This word is given through the Holy Spirit, made possible by the manifestation of the truth of the Father in the incarnation of the Son.\(^{35}\)

Abraham Heschel observes that “prayer begins where expression ends.”\(^{36}\) Renita Weems describes the times we want to pray but our souls are “engulfed in silence.” “Sometimes the most effective prayers,” she says, “are the ones that never get formulated into words… sometimes the closest we can come to praying is simply staring into space.”\(^{37}\) Our silence in prayer is not, as in other forms of meditation, for the purpose of reflecting on ourselves for the sake of deeper self-knowledge or moral improvement. “The person who fixes his gaze on himself… will certainly not encounter God.”\(^{38}\) We can find our truest selves only when we fix our gaze on God, in whose image we are made.

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\(^{35}\) Ibid., 42.


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 68.

We must also remember that silent prayer is not an escape from reality into the mystery of an interior monastic cell. Rather, the work the Spirit does within us when we surrender to silence has a tremendous impact on the way we live out God’s will in our daily lives. Contemplative prayer functions as a spiritual communion which takes on sacramental form, offering a real encounter with the Living word even when we are not physically present at Christ’s table. The person “who devotes some time each day to contemplative prayer may well, in spite of his ordinary occupations, maintain a truly liturgical outlook and a genuine transcendence of self.”39 In other words, staying connected to the living Word through this spiritual communion changes our perception of the world around us. The line between sacred and secular blurs and we begin to see the world as the Celtic Saints saw it, as a place where every bush is aflame with the fire of God’s Holy Presence and every person animated by the divine spark of God’s incomprehensible love. Those who “approach their daily occupations” with the mind of Christ will share in Jacob’s vision, “fully conscious that the world and its work are directly bound up with the work of heaven.”40

39 Ibid., 95.
40 Ibid., 98.
4.5 Echoes of Creation

In an age of social media, everyone has a voice or at least everyone thinks they do. Years ago, when I first considered starting a blog, I came across a saying that read, “Never before have so many said so much about so little to so few.” In our desperation to add our voice to the conversation, we must be wary that we do not simply add to the noise. If our words are to have any power or meaning, they must come from a place of silence. Without this, we are merely echoing the noise of the world that reverberates in our minds and souls.

A mentor said to me, “Now you are an echo, but one day you will find your own voice.” Though I deeply respect and admire the person who spoke these words to me, and I understand his intent, I wonder if perhaps we could use a few less voices in our deafening world of self-made echo chambers. The desire for unique self-expression carries our voices further than we ever dreamed. At some point, the noise drowns out all but the loudest and most obnoxious words. Rather than seeking to find “my voice” and shout it loud enough to rise above the noise, what if we sought to add our voices to the centuries of voices who sing the songs of our Creator in perfect harmony?

41 Source unknown.
Silence reminds us that it is not our voice that matters, it is God’s. What if our calling in life is not the pursuit of originality, but to be an echo of the still small voice of the Spirit that speaks life and healing into our broken world? This is the reason I have chosen the title “Echo” for my own website and as a theme for my life and ministry. On the “About” page, I offer the following prayer:

I seek to echo the WORD of the Father who spoke light into the darkness and form into the void.

I seek to echo the WORD of the Son who became flesh and dwelt among us to reconcile us with the Father.

I seek to echo the WORD of the Spirit who takes on flesh through the Church, the broken body of Christ in every age.

May my words and reflections, in writings, image and speech, echo the WORD through whom all things are created and re-created, until all of Creation is restored.42

No matter how original we like to think our voice may be, we are all echoes of the many voices which have spoken into our lives. In silence we seek to discern the voice of our shepherd from the countless other voices echoing in our heads, for it is God’s voice alone we are called to echo. “How many priests walk toward the altar of sacrifice while chattering, discussing, or greeting the people who are present instead of losing themselves in a sacred silence full of reverence?”43 How can we faithfully

proclaim the Word of God when our thoughts are consumed with the words of everyone else?

“Silence is God’s first language. Everything else is a poor translation.”\(^4^4\) In this commonly quoted saying, Father Thomas Keating reflects on the words of St. John of the Cross when he writes, “The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must It be heard by the soul.”\(^4^5\) Out of the eternal silence God spoke forth all that is created (Gen. 1:3). “For God, speaking is creating.”\(^4^6\) As we have seen, words spoken into silence are often disruptive and destructive. Words spoken from the silence call forth light from darkness and raise the dead to life. Silence is not the opposite of words, it is the source of the Living Word which alone has the power to heal, to transform and to restore. Just as God speaks out of eternal silence and gives birth to all of creation, so the words we speak from the pregnant silence of God’s Holy Presence have the power to create and give birth to new life in countless ways.

It is only in the sacred space of silence that the noise of our echo chambers fades away and we can truly discern the voice of our Creator speaking life and love into the


depth of our souls. Silence is not the place to which we retreat from the world. It is the place in which we are renewed, restored, and made whole. It is the place from which we are sent forth to speak the Word of Life.
5. CULTIVATING THIN PLACES IN COMMUNITY

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Matthew 18:20

The contemplative life is often understood as a solitary life, cloistered away in the inner cell of one’s own mind and soul. While there may indeed be a danger to isolate oneself in silence and solitude, I have found that silence and other contemplative practices in community are far more valuable to the Christian life. There is something truly holy about holding sacred space for one another so that together we are better able to discern the whispers of the Holy Spirit in our silence. The church, or *ekklesia*, is the community of faith called out to be the Body of Christ and proclaim the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in word and deed. Despite the centrality of the church or “called out Christian Community” in the New Testament, more and more people of faith are questioning the need for church in their spiritual lives. I have wrestled with the appeal of a more individualized or isolated spirituality in my own life, and through that struggle, I have come to a place of deeper appreciation of and dependence on Christian community or “the church,” though not always in its traditional denominational or institutional forms.
5.1 The Need for Christian Community

Christian community, in my experience, has been challenging. There have been many times I wanted to leave the church entirely. As a young adult, I did leave for a few years. I believed that if I was “saved”, then there was no reason to put up with the kind of negative and judgmental people I had encountered in so many churches across denominational lines. In my early 20’s, I became part of a group Josh Packard would later refer to as “church refugees.” Church refugees, he says,

...feel they’ve been forced to leave a place they consider home because they feel a kind of spiritual persecution and it would be dangerous, spiritually, for them to remain. They tell stories of frustration, humiliation, judgment, embarrassment, and fear that caused them to leave the church. They remark time and again that they worked diligently for reform within the church but felt the church was exclusively focused on its own survival and resistant to change. If they stayed, they would risk further estrangement from their spiritual selves, from God, and from a religion they still believe in... The church, they feel, is keeping the from God.\(^1\)

I could tell countless stories like these and, if I’m honest, such experiences have only escalated and multiplied since entering full-time ministry.

At some point, however, I came to realize what Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”\(^2\) What I heard from God in those early days before I answered the call to ministry was not so

\(^1\) Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015), 15-16.

theologically articulate. After a few years away from the church, my conversation with God sounded something like this:

**God** - “How can you call me Father and refuse to live at home with your brothers and sisters?”

**Me** – “Why should I? They have treated me horribly. They have hurt me. People are nicer outside the church… less judgmental and arrogant… more open to honest questions. I believe in Jesus. Isn't that enough?”

**God** – “Living in the same house sometimes means having to share a bedroom or a bathroom with siblings who will keep it a mess. It means not everyone will agree on what movie to watch on the one TV or what to have for dinner on any given night. It means always being around people who will argue and fight, though it breaks my heart to see them do so. Nevertheless… they are my beloved children. They are your family. You cannot grow in unconditional love unless you are willing to live with those who may be the most difficult to love.

Foolishly I mumbled back some sarcastic comment about at least putting me in a place where I could have some influence get things cleaned up in this terribly messy house we call “church.” God obliged. The Spirit’s call into ministry has never been easy, but for me it has always been undeniable and inescapable. I am compelled to remain in the church because it is Christ’s body on earth. As part of that body, I am a
part of the church whether I like it or not. Even a monastic cell does not remove a Christian from their familial responsibilities as children of God.

A story is told of a pastor who trudged through the snow to a rustic log cabin where a parishioner lived. It had been several months since this hermit of a man had stepped foot in the church, though church members often saw him around town. The man welcomed the pastor in, offered him a hot cup of coffee and they sat down together in the warm glow of a crackling fire.

Following their brief but cordial greeting, silence settled over the space. Not an awkward silence, mind you, but a holy silence, filled with the whispers of the Holy Spirit to both pastor and parishioner alike. After a while the pastor reached out and with a set of wrought iron tongs, he pulled a burning ember out of the fire and placed it carefully on the stone hearth. The light from the tiny wood chip faded and smoke began to rise. In no time, this little isolated fire had gone out.

The pastor then carefully placed the smoldering ember back into the fire and in an instant, it glowed brighter than before.

As he stood up to leave, the parishioner finally broke the silence. “Thanks for the sermon, preacher. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Just like the man hidden away in the warmth of his secluded cabin, there comes a point where our isolated embers will burn out. We are indeed the church scattered as

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3 Source Unknown.
we live out our faith in our everyday, individual lives, and we must be the church gathered, remaining in the Holy Fire of God’s love expressed through the love of one another in community. There is a great need for contemplative Christian community today, but it must overcome the dangers of isolation. Contemplation and silence are as much corporate practices as they are individual. As Father Basil Pennington says, even “the contemplative community cannot live apart from the church.”

### 5.2 Welcoming Christ through Hospitality

We know the living Word of God is present with us in the person of Jesus, both individually and corporately, but we must also remember that Jesus does not force himself into our lives. Consider Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35). Like those who have felt cut off from the church, these disciples had been cut off from the physical body of Jesus in his death. Lost in thought and in grief, I can’t help but wonder if they just wanted to be left alone. Sharing your story with a stranger fresh after losing a loved one is not generally a top priority. Nevertheless, they walked and shared their pain and confusion with this stranger on the road. After a long journey alongside the very one whose lose they were grieving, they still did not recognize their own teacher right in front of them. When they arrived, Jesus did not ask for an

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invitation to stop and rest. In fact, he seems to insist on continuing his journey alone. He neither expects nor demands their hospitality, and he does not intend to impose himself upon them. Their space is their space and while he is grateful for their company along the journey, he respects the privacy behind the door of their home.

I cannot help but wonder if, in the same way, Jesus respects the private space behind the doors of our church buildings. When we speak of the church as “God’s house” and the communion table as “Christ’s table,” we may inadvertently convey the image that God waits for us in our sanctuaries and the Son sets the table for us when we come to eat on Sunday mornings. When church buildings were closed in the beginning of a global pandemic, many cried about the infringement of religious freedom because they could not gather in the building, as if God was waiting there for us to return. Far too much of our Christian life has come to revolve around being in a particular building or space for one hour a week, as if that is the one time we are explicitly invited into the Spirit’s presence, at Christ’s table, in God’s home. The encounter at Emmaus reminds us that the opposite is true. God is not waiting for us in a temple built by human hands. Rather, God is waiting to be invited into our homes, into our private dwellings, into the places of our lives that we prefer to keep safely locked tight.

Physical proximity in a building does not make a church, let alone an authentic community of faith. We must consistently extend hospitality to the strangers on the
road, always ready to prepare a sacred space for God to show up wherever even two or three are gathered.

5.3 Temenos – Defining Communal Sacred Space

In his book, *Recovering the Sacred Center*, Howard Friend describes a Greek understanding of communal sacred space called “temenos.”

When a village is founded in Greece, the elders and wise ones discern where the temenos ought to be, where the ground is holy. Nothing is built there – no houses, no public buildings, not even a church. It becomes community space. Villagers may bring plantings or wooden benches, perhaps stepping-stones or small statues, but only to nurture the sacredness.

When villagers feel discouraged, upset, or confused, they go to the temenos, sit quietly on the grass or by the stream, and find that their mood suddenly shifts. When people from the community find themselves arguing or speaking harshly to one another, they move their conversation to the temenos, sit on a bench or walk a path together, and find themselves speaking with greater respect. They begin to talk and listen more carefully, and soon their conflict resolves. When people have a decision to make or feel uncertain or torn, they go to the temenos. After a quiet, solitary moment in an open field or under the shade of a stand of trees, their mind suddenly becomes clearer.

Whether such space is found by a stream in a community park, in a coffee shop, bar or restaurant, at a friend’s home, in a recovery meeting, or even in a church building is inconsequential. What matters is the quality of this space and time where people are gathered. Friend describes temenos moments as places marked by “peacefulness and

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unhurriedness, attentiveness and mutual respect, openness, and trust, caring and compassion, forthrightness and integrity, genuineness and trustworthiness, safety and protection, a celebration of commonality and diversity, laughter and tears, sound and silence, a sense of God’s presence, being present to each other, mindfulness.”

These are the qualities we expect to encounter on Holy Ground. In many ways they align with the fruit of the Spirit Paul describes in Galatians 5. As I have shared this description of temenos with friends and colleagues, they often sigh with a tear in their eye and say, “That’s what the church should be.” Most people can describe moments or places in their lives when they have experienced this quality of sacred space where the presence of God almost seemed tangible. Sometimes it is at the beach or in the mountains. Sometimes it is at a regular gathering with close friends. Sometimes they come in quiet walks or bike rides or long drives without the radio. Temenos moments occur anywhere and everywhere in our lives, but many in my experience, and in the groups that Howard Friend has worked with, rarely encounter such moments in the church. “‘When I am at church, or with church people,’ someone will typically comment, ‘I feel more on guard, less open, more careful.’ They confess, tragically, that they find church an unlikely place to nurture such experiences.”

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6 Ibid., 65.
7 Ibid.
“Every once in a while, ‘it’ happens at church,” one woman observes. “Someone starts to be personal. Share something. Risk something… But then someone will change the subject. Or someone will give some answer or solution to what was being talked about. Or someone will make a joke. Or say we were getting off topic. And ‘it’ will end.” In my own experience, as in this woman’s story, church tends to be the last place people are willing to be vulnerable. Rather than a space of hospitality and healing for the broken, we have cultivated in many churches a culture of shame and hiding. Our suits and dresses and even our smiling faces function as designer fig leaves because we are afraid to admit to one another that we know we are spiritually naked, even though they are too. Howard Friend reminds us that time and space are not neutral. They have both quality and substance which can be either nourishing or toxic. As I sit here on the deck at one of my favorite retreat centers watching the leaves fall and listening to the birds in the distance, I can breathe deeply, and I instinctively know that the qualities of temenos are tangible in this space. It is not only the nature and beauty of creation itself that makes this a holy place, but the regular memories and experiences of sacred moments in community; of sharing the depths of our souls with one another time and time again at this very table, or of sitting in silence practicing centering prayer with two

8 Ibid.
9 Metaphor based on Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve cover their shame with fig leaves to hide from one another and from God.
10 Friend, Recovering the Sacred Center, 68.
dozen other people all holding silence for one another as we rest in God’s loving presence.\(^\text{11}\)

Other spaces, often including the church sanctuary, do not feel so light. The wind of the Spirit does not seem to blow so freely. There are times in those places where sharing honestly from the heart is not as welcome, where people are uncomfortable with answering the simple question from my own Wesleyan tradition, “How is it with your soul?” Perhaps we do not know how to answer. Perhaps we have never been taught in the church to truly examen our own hearts. Or perhaps we are afraid of the judgment that may come in response; worried about the ways revealing our own doubts and fears may impact our reputation with those we have sat with in the pews all our lives. Nevertheless, we all need sacred spaces in our lives where we can be free in the arms of grace. Like the Samaritan woman, no matter how many times we come to the well to draw water, we are all thirsty for places of living water that will not run dry. This is God’s call upon the church. As the body of Christ, we are to be a spring of living water, 

\(^{11}\)“Starrette Farm Retreat — The Lydia Group,” accessed October 29, 2021, https://www.thelydiagroup.com/starrette-farm-retreat. I wrote this section while sitting at my favorite outdoor table at Starrette Farm Retreat Center in Statesville, NC. I have been involved with several spiritual formation programs at this retreat center, both as a participant and co-facilitator. Starrette Farm is a special place for many members of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order as it is often through the programs here, such as The School of the Spirit or The Sacred Invitation, that individuals discover the need for a small community to support one another in their regular contemplative practices. These are both 1-year spiritual formation programs that center around small groups or circles where honesty and vulnerability are nurtured and where together people learn how to truly answer John Wesley’s famous question, “How is it with your soul?” To extend this experience as part of one’s rule of life, many form Wesleyan style bands under the umbrella of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO).
a sacred space, a thin place, a temenos, where people can truly rest in the presence of their creator. “If the church is not first sacred space and sacred time... little else matters.”12

5.4 An Ecclesiology of Presence – The Church as a Thin Place

Temenos spaces or thin places, as we have seen, have a quality which significantly enhances one’s awareness of the divine presence. They are places where the Spirit of God moves most freely. Such places or moments do not occur by accident. Like the disciple’s home at Emmaus, they become temenos or sacred spaces through intentional acts of hospitality to others and to God. While people often encounter God in such spaces through solitude, the church can never be defined in terms of individuals. If God is love, then relationships are the necessary channel through which that love is expressed and known. The contemplative life is not about isolation from relationships, but about emptying ourselves of all but the love of Christ so that our relationships with both God and neighbor may be truly holy.

Those who have little understanding or experience in contemplative prayer and silence tend to view it as a fruitless practice or a waste of time when there is so much active and external work to be done. On the other hand, one might ask if any time spent in the presence of God can truly be wasted. Father Basil Pennington addresses this very

12 Friend, Recovering the Sacred Center, 68.
tension by acknowledging that, in terms of tangible outcomes, the contemplative life is indeed difficult to explain or justify. And yet, like the protected forests throughout our world, there is tremendous value in their mere existence.

The contemplative life cannot be justified. In terms of what it produces, what it achieves, how it “relates,” it is of no use whatsoever… Perhaps it can be compared to ecology – forests are necessary to the world, just to stand where they are; by their mere existence they keep the air pure and breathable. So, the monk stands before God for the life of the world. And the strange thing is, that such “trees” rarely remain alone; they grow in groups, in communities.¹³

One could say that the trees would be worth more when cut down to use as lumber or the land itself may be more valuable for construction if the forest was removed, and almost nobody in good conscience would say that a forest is entirely useless except for what we can create from its destruction. In some cultures, “forest bathing”, or spending time in the woods, is encouraged as a regular practice for the benefit of one’s mental health.

The early Celtic saints, like the desert mothers and fathers before them, understood the value of the communal contemplative life for its own sake. Thomas Cahill observes that since Ireland had no cities, the monastic communities formed across the countryside grew rapidly into hubs of “unprecedented prosperity, art, and learning.”¹⁴ While acknowledging some problems of spiritual elitism, perfectionism and

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¹³ Pennington, Contemplative Community, 185.
extreme asceticism among these communities, Ian Bradley suggests that other aspects of these early Celtic communities may serve us well in our increasingly post-denominational culture. Regular disciplines of prayer, mutual support of an intentional community, and the ministry of pastoral presence and hospitality, he believes, will be foundational for the church of the future.\textsuperscript{15} In following the model of such monastic and contemplative traditions, the intent is not to cut ourselves off from the world, but rather to form “colonies of heaven” in the world which point to the values of Christ’s Kingdom while remaining deeply rooted in their own unique local environments and cultures.\textsuperscript{16} Sacred spaces, including church sanctuaries, still hold great value as temenos or thin spaces where people might ponder the mysteries of faith and the beauty of the Divine. That being said, Bradley suggests that churches may better fulfill this essential role when they are “quiet and empty” rather than when they are “filled with the noise and busyness of worship.”\textsuperscript{17} Whether small communities of faith gather in church buildings, at retreat centers, in homes, or even in coffee shops and other public spaces, there is a clear need to return to the kind of flexibility we see in the Celtic tradition, open to fresh expressions of worship, prayer, and discipleship which rise out of local contexts without

\textsuperscript{15} Ian C Bradley, \textit{Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2020), 142.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 145.
the trappings of static institutions which so often impose both financial and geographical limitations on where the wind of the Spirit might blow.

Like the forest and the contemplative community Pennington describes, Celtic Christians practiced a ministry of presence, “witnessing to the Lord not just by rushing around proselytizing and preaching but simply by being there, available when needed.”\(^{18}\) Scottish theologian John Macquarrie describes the Celt as a “God-intoxicated” person whose life was “embraced on all sides by the divine Being.”\(^{19}\) They embraced the paradox of God’s transcendence and immanence, acknowledging that, though God remains invisible, we are invited to “perceive the eternal word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal and every man and woman.”\(^{20}\) By being fully present as God’s people on earth and extending hospitality, prayer, counsel and healing to the world beyond their communities, the Irish monks practiced what Bradley calls an “ecclesiology of presence.”\(^{21}\) In other words, the very mission of the church and the reason for her existence is nothing more or less than to make known the presence of the inbreaking Kingdom of God through Christ. Von Balthasar describes the church as “an eruption of eternity into time.”\(^{22}\) When we live and worship in communities of faith truly intoxicated with the presence of God’s spirit as we see in the

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 82.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 85. Quoted from a catechism attributed to Ninian of Whithorn.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 90.
early Celtic communities, the church herself becomes a thin place, a temenos, a window to heaven, through which all people are invited to Christ’s heavenly banquet in the full presence of God. As the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, so through the Holy Spirit the divine logos continues to dwell in the flesh of God’s people, the body of Christ called the Church.

5.5 Anam Cara – A Community of Soul Friends

Like contemplative or monastic communities, the church is a community which seeks to help one another “grow in love and responsiveness to God… in every detail of daily living.”23 In the Celtic tradition, this role is assumed by an Anam Cara or Soul Friend. St. Brigid of Kildare is famous for her statement that a “person without a Soul Friend is like a body without a head.”24 A soul friend is one who stands alongside, “combining the roles of mentor, confessor, spiritual guide, buddy, and companion in adversity.”25 In today’s professional terms we might call this person a spiritual director, a counselor, or even a coach, but relatively few are able to afford or willing to risk such relationships, even among members of the church. In our highly individualized society, we tend to be uncomfortable with the idea of accountability. We answer to no authority but ourselves. Our prayers and confessions, if we choose to offer them, are between us

23 Pennington, Contemplative Community, 10.
and a God who remains invisible and often silent. The Celtic Saints understood the danger and arrogance in such a position. Recognizing that, in many ways, the spiritual journey can and does lead us along wandering, solitary, and perilous roads in the wilderness, Irish priest Hugh Connolly reminds us that people are “also morally weak, fragile, and incomplete... [we need] support and sustenance.”

When an Anam Cara received confessions from weary pilgrims, it was not out of preoccupation with sin or judgment, but as a “life-giving, curative and healing” means of hospitality. Sin and brokenness were understood “primarily as a disease” and penance as the “medicine.”

My own childhood experiences in Roman Catholic confessional booths left me scarred by fear and drove me deeper into spiritual isolation. On a recent silent retreat, however, a Jesuit Priest helped me to see firsthand what these early Irish Saints knew so instinctively. I went to confession partly because it was offered as a segment of the retreat and partly because I knew I had much of my own baggage with the idea of accountability and confession to deal with. I admitted my struggle with the whole concept of confession and my questions about whether I should even be there as a lapsed Catholic, fully expecting that the priest would have nothing to offer, or at the very least would gently refer me to my own denominational tradition. I was surprised,

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27 Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way*, 101.
28 Ibid., 102.
however, to find more grace in this confessional room than I had experienced in years of church attendance across several denominations. “Confession,” he said, “is never about punishment. It is always about a way forward.”

Neither in the Methodist church where confession tends to be liturgical and corporate in the context of Holy Communion, nor in the Baptist church where I spent my teenage years learning that confession was a once and for all prayer at the moment of salvation, nor even in my childhood Catholic experience where I felt nothing but the weight of guilt and punishment in the tiny confessional booth, had I ever heard such a beautiful and compelling explanation of this challenging and often controversial Christian practice. This Jesuit’s understanding of confession resonates deeply with the Celtic understanding of an Anam Cara’s role. In the context of this trusting and loving relationship, confession and vulnerability is always about a way forward. It is always, as Bradley says, intended as a life-giving and healing practice.

While soul friends represent a particular kind of spiritual relationship, I am convinced that the blessing and healing offered in such relationships should at least to some degree be reflected in one’s relationship with the church. Spiritual directors, mentors, counselors, pastors, and others have a vital role to play in providing deep and personalized spiritual care and healing to pilgrims along their journey with God. In talking with many individuals called to these vocations, however, I find that much of their work involves offering a place of refuge from the church. Often those who seek
out such spiritual friendships are already in the church, or even in vocational ministry, but, like Josh Packard’s “church refugees,” have repeatedly found that thin places are hard to come by within the thick walls of the church buildings where they worship. Like those who describe temenos moments everywhere but church, people seeking spiritual guides or soul friends are often exhausted from hiding their fears and doubts and struggles at church. They need a place to be real, to be honest, to be vulnerable, even if they must pay or file a claim on their insurance for mental health services. They need to know the rest that only Jesus offers.

This is truly the invitation of a Soul Friend, but it should also be the invitation of the church herself. Religion should not be the source of our burnout, but a place of hospitality, grace, and rest. When we do not know how to pray, the church prays on our behalf. When doubt and anxiety overtake us, the faith of the church holds us before God’s throne. When we are too tired, hungry, or weak to come to the table, the church extends the Holy Sacrament to us wherever we are. Lauren Winner suggests that even when we cannot pray, our Christian life is sustained by other people praying for us and on our behalf. As Von Balthazaar observes, it is not our individual prayers and contemplation alone which fill us with divine power. Rather, God’s power and mercy

are mediated through the millions of isolated cries and prayers throughout all time and space gathered up into “the one all-inclusive prayer of the Church.”

5.6 Silence in Community

Finding a quiet space in the chaos of our world takes tremendous effort. Quieting our mind and soul before God requires far more. The church, when she is at her best, offers such a place. Renita Weems reflects on the communal practice of Sabbath from her childhood. She writes, “I miss living around people who keep me accountable to sacred moments.” An ecclesiology of presence implies that not only the church buildings, but also the people of God’s church scattered throughout their everyday lives, should be safe places where anyone can find peace in their moments of greatest crisis, pain, sorrow, guilt, shame, or weakness. The church is a people who must hold one another “accountable to sacred moments.” As followers of Jesus, we are called to continually extend our Shepherd’s invitation to one another and to the world… Come, all you weary and heavy laden… and you will find rest.

30 Balthasar, Prayer, 82.
For many, setting aside time for listening to God’s “still small voice” has become a luxury rather than a necessity. In her book, *All Ground is Holy*, Jeanette Angell writes, “People cannot suddenly find the inner resources to begin to do, alone, that which they have never done before.” Christian practices, means of grace, spiritual disciplines, or whatever else we might call the things which sustain our life in Christ and keep our hearts open to the presence and prompting of the Holy Spirit, cannot be maintained in isolation. Tragically, however, the church has not excelled at teaching and cultivating a culture of quiet rest in Jesus. Often the shalom of our churches is shattered by the same busyness and desperation we find elsewhere in the world. Like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, many Christians today almost seem afraid of the idea of Sabbath. It is as if our very existence depends on endless striving. We want to have the answer for every question and every problem we face, and when we do not, we keep ourselves busy on civic projects or fellowships or endless business meetings, so we don’t have to deal with our lack of vision, imagination, or hope. A full church calendar at least offers the illusion of effectiveness, even if we don’t really sense God’s presence at a single event.

Even our spaces of worship are driven by the energy of sound and words. Music, preaching, prayer, liturgy… all spoken aloud. Each of these have their place, but never at the expense of creating space to be still before God. As we saw in the last

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33 Ibid., 11.
chapter, people are instinctively uncomfortable with silence and stillness, and our discomfort becomes more pronounced in a corporate or group setting. Even people who like sitting quietly with a cup of coffee on their porch in the morning listening to the birds tend to fidget more when they are in a room with others where nobody is speaking.

The problem, of course, begins even among clergy, who have been trained in the importance of not having “dead space” or “dead air.” Our move in recent years toward more digital offerings for worship, study, and other gatherings has only heightened the challenge of silence and stillness. A second or two of dead air on most media or online outlets can lead to the loss of countless viewers or listeners, especially if they tune in during one of those moments of silence and assume nothing is happening. We have been trained far more by contemporary media than by the Holy Spirit when it comes to leading and holding the attention of an audience.

One of the “sacred cows” in many churches that was shaken during the pandemic was the “meet and greet” time where everyone mingles and shakes hands during the worship service. People need an opportunity to connect and converse with one another, yet it often seems as if fellowship is all we do when we gather. Clergy tend to be evaluated more by how social they are before and after worship, or even during the meet and greet in the middle of the service, than by their prayers, sermons, or any other act of worship they are called to facilitate. Week after week, pastors, priests, and
other religious leaders approach the sacred altar while stopping to chat and catch up with parishioners along the way. Covering every issue from a person’s health to the weather to yesterday’s sports scores, ministers are often more absorbed in “greeting the people who are present instead of losing themselves in a sacred silence full of reverence” and leading the people with them to the throne of grace.34

A.W. Tozer famously observed, “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, ninety-five percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, ninety-five percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”35 People were drawn by the thousands to the church in Acts not because of the amazing social skills or charismatic personalities of the apostles, but because the presence of God’s Holy Spirit was fully visible in everything they said and did. We love the scene in the upper room when the Spirit swoops down in a blaze of glory with tongues of fire and rushing wind. We laugh at the misunderstanding of the crowds who thought the apostles were simply drunk so early in the morning. We celebrate with the 3,000 added to the membership rolls on Pentecost Sunday, though our celebration is admittedly tainted with discouragement and envy given our own present decline.

But how quickly we forget about the 50 days before. How much time do we take to sit with the disciples in their doubt and fear in the days and weeks following the resurrection? How much time do we spend staring up at the sky with them after the ascension, hoping and imagining Christ will return any moment before life without him gets too hard and before too much sacrifice is required of us? During that 50-day period we know they had one council meeting to replace Judas, but little else is recorded of how they spent their time together. All we know for sure is that Jesus’ final word to the disciples was “Wait.” “Wait for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Wait for the Holy Spirit to descend upon you, fill you, and show you everything you will need.

Fifty days the apostles waited for the Holy Spirit. Forty years the ex-Hebrew slaves waited in the wilderness of Sinai. Seventy years the people of Israel waited in Babylonian exile. Forty days Jesus waited and prayed in the desert before beginning his public ministry. Forty days St. Patrick fasted and prayed upon a mountain on the Irish coast before beginning a movement through which the power and grace of the Triune God consumed the entire nation, and the Celtic saints made their mark on the history of the world. Both in Scripture and throughout Christian history, God is a God of waiting. God never seems to be in a rush. Often it is we humans who catch just a glimpse of a burning bush in some corner of our lives and are ready to go proclaim the news to the world without ever pausing to ask the bush what it requires of us.
Unlike the God of all eternity, who is and who was and who reigns forever, we are not good at being still. We are even less skilled at being quiet. “Sometimes,” Cardinal Sarah says, “it seems that our many words are more an expression of our doubt than of our faith. It is as if we are not sure that God’s spirit can touch the hearts of people: we have to help him out and, with many words, convince others of his power.”

If the church is not a place where we can sit quietly before the burning bush and listen, if it is not a place where we can sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus, if it is not a place we can mourn the years or decades of lonely exile we so often experience in our lives, then where else can we go? From where shall our help come? If the people of God are not a people who can sit with us in sack cloth and ashes, who can lament with us in our grief, who can hold space for us to sit quietly before the Lord and wait, who else is there who might hold that space we so desperately need?

5.7 The Wesleyan Contemplative Order – A Model of Communal Sacred Space

For the past few years, I have served on the council of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO), a ministry that began in 2010 as an outgrowth of Davidson United Methodist Church in Davidson, NC. While Davidson serves as our “anchor” church, we are an ecumenical ministry scattered across the greater Charlotte /

Statesville region. Our focus is less on the theological nuances and institutional differences which tend to divide churches and denominations and more on the ancient contemplative spiritual practices which all Christians hold in common as we seek to grow as disciples of Jesus and be transformed more into the likeness of Christ through the ever-present grace of the Holy Spirit. “Though diverse in denominational expressions, we strive to unite in love, availability, and vulnerability to God and one another.”

Gathering regularly in bands of 4 to 8 people, we participate together in silence, centering prayer, *Lectio Divina*, holy listening, and other contemplative practices. Our primary role is to hold space for one another as we learn to be still before the Lord and grow in our awareness of God’s presence in our everyday lives. As such, this ministry offers a practical model which could help the church better fulfill her role as a Thin Place where all people might find rest as they encounter the presence of God and drink from the living water Christ so freely gives.

The word “contemplative” stems from the Latin root *cum templum*, meaning “with temple.” The implication is that contemplative practices such as silence are primarily about being with God. The temple represents the traditional and historical place of God’s presence with us. Encountering God’s presence is not something we manufacture through contemplative practices, but the Spirit readily offers God’s

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38 Ibid.
presence to us as a gift. We must simply make ourselves available. The contemplative
life must not be distinguished as separate from Christian action. Rather, it is the
underlying awareness and responsiveness to God’s presence cultivated through a
contemplative attitude of the heart which enables us to love God and neighbor in active
ways. Some worry that contemplative practices can lead to self-absorption, but when
done well in the context of Christian community, God uses this sacred space to open our
hearts increasingly toward others. Sometimes our greatest act of love and service is to
be fully present to the needs of others, in the same way we learn through contemplation
to be fully present before God. Our ability to rest secure in the loving presence of God
in silence is an exercise in trust which is necessary for every other aspect of the Christian
life.

At its core, the Wesleyan Contemplative Order is a group of people who seek to
live by a Rule of Life, ”participating in the relationship with God through the means of
grace.”39 Most ancient and modern monastic communities have come to understand
that such a Rule is difficult, if not impossible to live out apart from community. Despite
our best intentions, we naturally tend to neglect time with God in prayer, study, and
reflection. This is how I, and many others, stumble into the WCO. My regular Sabbath
Circle group did not begin as an official WCO band. We were a small group of pastors
and church leaders, several of whom had been immersed in the contemplative life

39 Ibid.
through School of the Spirit, a year-long spiritual formation program led by WCO co-founder, Ann Starrette. Many WCO members come out of School of the Spirit because in that program we spend a year connected to a small group in which we learn and cultivate contemplative practices together. When the program is over, most do not want it to end. What we have discovered is that these groups have become essential components of our own Rules of Life and the churches of which we are a part rarely offer these kinds of groups. A similar formation program called “The Sacred Invitation” also serves as a feeder for forming new bands.

Many churches have small groups, but they are often more in line with a traditional Sunday School model or Bible Study. They tend to emphasize learning information about God and the Bible rather than transformational engagement with God through ancient spiritual practices. To be sure, there is much value in this kind of Christian Education, but it can often fall short when it comes to helping people deepen their faith through a growing awareness of God’s presence and grace in daily life. New WCO bands are formed by both clergy and laity who are hungry for something more out of their small group experience. They do not just want to be taught the Bible. They want to learn to pray and live the Bible with others who will truly hold them accountable on their journey. Bands may have a facilitator who sends out meeting reminders or prayer concerns, but most bands share leadership equally among all their

members. We are not looking for another teacher, but a group of people who will hold space for us to sit directly under the teaching of the Holy Spirit through silence and through listening to each other and the ways the Spirit speaks to each of us through the Living Word.

We now have 16 Bands and counting affiliated with the WCO, more than doubling our membership in less than two years. Before the pandemic, most bands were localized to the Charlotte and Statesville area, but over the past year we branched out through online Zoom meetings out of necessity and people far beyond our geographical area began to show interest. With little promotion on our part, the ministry of WCO continues to multiply in ways and places we could have never imagined. Hearing the stories of those who have found our ministry and either joined or even started new bands, the same theme emerges. They have been in churches all their lives and yet they are spiritually starving. The church offers a lot of activity: teaching, worship, mission, fellowship, and many other good things. What much of the Western Church lacks today, however, is space for inactivity. In our overly crowded and busy lives, we need a space where we do not have to be busy. In a world filled with noise, we have forgotten how to be silent. The church does a lot of good things, but it is often not great at creating space to “be still and know that God is God” (Ps. 46:10).

For me, the WCO serves as a regular thin place where I can simply be still in God’s presence. While I can do this on my own, there is a special grace in knowing that
others will be holding that space together with me on a regular basis. The group is like a tether that keeps me from straying too far from my Rule of Life. No matter how far I slip into the distractions of my everyday life, the contemplative community is always there to keep me from going too far without doing the most important thing: sitting at the feet of Jesus in silence and listening.

5.8 A Sacred Invitation for the Church

Whether we use the language of thin places, sacred space, temenos, or simply being in the presence of God, there is a deep longing for such spaces in our spiritually thirsty world. Tragically many who have left the church have left not out of a rejection of their faith or of Jesus, but rather in search of such spaces where the longings of their soul will truly be nourished. Brian McLaren calls it “The Great Spiritual Migration.” When our religious institutions fail to create space for deeply formed lives animated by the goodness, rightness, beauty, justice, joy and peace of God’s presence, the Spirit “simply moves around them, like a current flowing around a rock in a stream.”41 The challenge remains, however, where else can we go except into exile?

Both in our church buildings and beyond the walls, David’s prayer holds true. “Where can I go from your presence, O Lord” (Ps. 139:7). A colleague in the Wesleyan

Contemplative order recently observed that there is one thing God does not know how to do. God does not know how to be absent. God may indeed be silent, but silence is not an indication of absence. The Spirit is always present. The question is whether we are aware of it.

I have shown three ways the church can help her members and the larger community grow in their awareness and responsiveness to God’s presence in their everyday lives. First, we can set apart quiet sacred space and support such spaces in our communities like parks or retreat centers. In some cases, we may be able to carve out sacred spaces in coffee shops, homes, and even bars and pubs where fresh expressions of church or Christian community have thrived. While the Christ-filled life must be lived in community, part of the community’s role is to encourage and preserve sacred space where individuals and groups can learn to be still in God’s presence. Even Jesus sought out quiet space throughout his ministry, and during his final hours in Gethsemane he depended on others in the community to hold that space with him. “I am deeply grieved,” he told his friends, “even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me” (Matt. 26:38). Holding sacred space for one another in our faith communities and developing rhythms of seeking out quiet space with God in our daily routines is crucial to increasing our awareness and responsiveness to God’s presence.

Secondly, the church should work toward prioritizing small group ministries which move beyond education to formation. If the church is to be a thin place in the
world, we must allow for honesty and vulnerability. Small groups in The School of the Spirit and The Sacred Invitation are modeled after the 12-Step program, beginning with a foundation of trust in one another to hold space for each participant to fully express their truest selves before God. They become like a group of soul friends providing space for confession and extending healing through the sharing of mercy, love, and grace. Confidentiality is essential, which is perhaps one reason such groups struggle to flourish in some church cultures which function more like families where everybody wants to know everything. Gossip in the church, especially in the form of public prayer requests, may indeed be one of the deadliest threats to authentic community, vulnerability, and trust.

Finally, the church is not the end goal. Spiritual formation does not occur primarily through church programs. It is, as James Wilhoit observes, about our whole “approach to life.”42 The church has the responsibility both to teach the ancient spiritual practices which have supported the life of faith throughout the centuries and, at the same time, cultivate a culture by which those practices learned in small groups or other church programs overflow into their everyday lives where they may be truly formed by the Spirit into the image of Christ as they grow in their love of God and neighbor. We must become less concerned with getting more people into the church for the sake of our

42 Jim Wilhoit, Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 75.
own institutional survival and instead become more intentional in providing the resources people need to keep Christ at the center of their everyday lives the rest of the week. Jesus did not gather disciples to form isolated communities protected from the dangers of the world. Those he gathered were always sent out, often with nothing but the clothes on their back, to proclaim the Good News that God’s Kingdom had come and to model by their way of life what it looked like to live as citizens of this new Kingdom. What purpose does the church fulfill in the world if the everyday lives of her members are not visibly marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Gal. 5:22-23a).

It is true that thin places are traditionally understood as places of solitude, often hidden in the quiet beauty of nature. What makes such places thin, however, is not the solitude or even the beauty and wonder of creation itself. It is the way such spaces invite people to let their guard down, to shed the cares and worries of their hectic lives, and to breathe deeply the fresh wind of God’s Holy Spirit. It is not the physical space which makes a place thin. It is the presence of God, which as we have seen, is not bound by location. If God’s presence took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and if the Spirit of Christ dwells in the church which is his body on earth, then every follower of Christ is by nature a thin place through which others may become more keenly aware of God’s presence in their midst. This is the church, an incarnational ministry, an ecclesiology of
presence. This is a people formed by grace, who once were not a people, now living as thin places both gathered and scattered throughout the world.
6. AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF PRESENCE, THIN PLACES & THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:30-31

In every generation there are countless people like the Samaritan woman, going about their daily routines trying to collect enough water to get by. In our consumerist and tech driven culture, we have created an endless array of wells to temporarily satisfy our thirst. Yet, no matter how many wells we drink from, we are always thirsty for more. The worst possible scenario for marketers is for consumers to believe that they have enough. If you are trying to sell bottled water, the last thing you want is for people to find out that there is a fresh head-spring right in their own back yard.

Tragically, much of the church in Western society has bought into these marketing principles. We offer just enough water to keep people coming back to the well for more. When our current programs grow dull, we simply give them a face lift, luring our “consumers” with the illusion that we are offering something new that they cannot live without, even if it is just the same old product in new packaging. In reflecting on this consumer-based model of church, Elmer Towns notes that many Americans “choose churches based on what affirms us, entertains us, satisfies us, or
makes us feel good about God and ourselves.”  

Church programs and worship styles then become like restaurant menus and consumers, or “worshippers”, pick and choose whatever suits their taste. “Consumerism,” writes William Cavanaugh, “is not so much about having more as it is about having something else... it is not simply buying but shopping that is at the heart of consumerism.” The church plays into secular marketing strategies by promising a sense of meaning and identity, not so much in the person of Jesus, but in the programs offered and in one’s affinity with the type of people in a particular congregation. “The restlessness of consumerism,” Cavanaugh says, “causes us to constantly seek new material objects.” In the same way, our religious consumerism causes us to constantly seek out new religious experiences that will never satisfy our deepest spiritual need. An ecclesiology rooted in the singular presence of God over and above the myriad of methodological and theological distinctives we are given to choose from offers a cure to the restlessness and dissatisfaction of consumerism. As Augustine says, our hearts will be restless until they come to rest in God alone.

1 Terry Teykl and Lynn Ponder, The Presence Based Church (Muncie, IN: Prayer Point Press, 2003), 34–35.
3 Cavanaugh, 49.
6.1 The Embodied Sacramental Word

The Church should be the primary place where one finds rest in God’s presence. It is here, through the sacramental presence of Christ, that the Word of God is both spoken and embodied in the life of the community. When Jesus walks with us down the roads of our daily lives through the Holy Spirit, he is often, as Henri Nouwen says, “too close for reflection.” When Cleopas and his friend are joined by the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus, they are unaware of the identity of their traveling companion. Jesus explains to them the words of the Holy Scriptures which were fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection, and finally, in the breaking of bread at the table their eyes and their hearts were opened to the truth of his presence. “Were not our hearts burning within us,” they declared as they realized that that the Living Word of God was fully present in communion with them (Lk. 24:32).

In our culture, words are cheap, precisely because they are so proliferous. They move and flash around us in every size and color with the primary intent of providing information, some useful and much that we never sought or needed. It is no wonder that so many of the words spoken in church are understood primarily as informational. It is far easier to speak and listen to words about God than to listen to the Living Word of God. When the Word is spoken and received as purely informational, a religious

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how-to as it were, it loses its sacramental quality. “The full power of the Word,” Nouwen says, “lies not in how we apply it to our lives after we have heard it, but in its transforming power that does its divine work as we listen.”6 The Word of life, received in the Eucharist, lifts us up into the great story of redemption and opens our eyes to the truth that our ordinary lives are, in fact, sacred precisely because of who we are in God’s love. “Without the Word, we remain little people with little concerns who live little lives and die little deaths.”7 It was not merely the exposition of the word which lifted the hearts of the disciples at Emmaus. It was the embodiment of that Word in the Eucharist which reminded them of their place among God’s beloved and chosen people and gave meaning to their lives and hope in the face of their grief and suffering. Words alone were not enough until they recognized the Word fully present with them in the flesh.

6.2 Communion and Community

Henri Nouwen suggests that “God not only became flesh for us years ago… but becomes food and drink for us now at this moment of the Eucharist.”8 Incarnation and Eucharist, he says, are both expressions of the “immense, self-giving love of God” who seeks both to instruct and inspire us, and to “become one with us” in full communion.9

6 Ibid., 46.
7 Ibid., 49.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 68–69.
The Eucharist offers us a rich image of consumption in that we are “consuming” the body of Christ, and we are consumed by it. As William Cavanaugh says, “In the Eucharist we are absorbed into a larger body.” Our individual selves are “decentered and put in the context of a much wider community of participation in the divine life.”

This is not to say that we lose our unique identities, but rather as the apostle Paul says, that each member of the body is uniquely valued and necessary as part of the whole (1 Cor. 12:12-17).

In this way, community is formed through communion. Just as we have been included at the table with Jesus, so this circle of love must grow as we extend the same hospitality to every lonely traveler along the road. If Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the outcast, and the stranger, and if, as we saw in Matthew 25, that whatever we do for the least is done for Christ, then such hospitality is an essential part of the sacramental life. Communion does not begin at the table, nor does it end there. It begins on the road with the stranger. As we share our stories along the way, we come to see the miraculous gift of love already present in one another. Just as the unborn John the Baptist leaped in Elizabeth’s womb in the presence of his unborn Messiah, so also our hearts burn within us as we encounter the presence of Christ in the other (Lk. 1:44).

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10 Cavanaugh, Being Consumed, 54.
11 Ibid., 55.
Through such encounters, love and grace are multiplied as more and more places are set at the table.

Admittedly this does not always translate to what we call “church growth.” Every stranger we walk with along the road will not become a good tithing member of our local congregation. Perhaps none of them will. That is not the point. Communion is not about what happens in our church buildings. It is always about what happens on the road. We gather at the table to celebrate the harvest that God is sowing and reaping in the fields. Then we go forth to extend the hospitality we have found to others.

Nouwen reminds us that,

[The] Eucharistic life is unspectacular, like the yeast, mustard seed or a smile on a baby’s face… It keeps faith, hope, and love alive in a world that is constantly on the brink of self-destruction… It is often a small event that few people know about. It happens in a living room, a prison cell, an attic – out of sight of the big movements of the world. It happens in secret, without vestments, candles, or incense. It happens with gestures so simple the outsiders don’t even know that it takes place. 

Eucharist happens wherever and whenever people choose gratitude over resentment and hope instead of despair. “In communion with Christ and with one another, we are reminded that life is stronger than death and love is stronger than fear.” In this Holy Communion shared with our fellow travelers along the road, we experience the miracle of joy.

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12 Nouwen, With Burning Hearts, 92.
13 Ibid., 91.
6.3 The Sacramental Life – Becoming a Living Thin Place

Immediately after the bread was broken and their eyes were opened to the truth of his presence at Emmaus, Jesus disappeared from their midst. “It is good that I go away,” Jesus tells his disciples at his final Passover meal (Jn. 16:7). It is only then that full communion will be possible through the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and transforms us into the likeness of Christ. As Paul writes, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me” (Gal. 2:20). Consider for a moment the prayer we offer over the elements at the communion table:

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.14

The sacramental life is our calling as followers of Christ. It is not optional for those who gather at the table. We are consumed by the body and blood of Christ even as we consume the bread and the wine into our own bodies. We become the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. We are made one with Christ and one with each other as we extend the table to all the world. Christianity does not exist apart from communion,

both the communion that happens at a table in our sanctuaries, and the communion with Christ and one another that extends into every facet of our ordinary lives.

Like the ancient Celtic Christians, modern day Quakers believe that all of life is sacramental. The key to experiencing life in this way is a spirit of expectation or anticipation. For the Quakers, silence “anticipates the real presence of Christ coming in a sacramental way among us and within us” in the same way we anticipate Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist.15 Quaker author Bill Brent observes the ways the Eucharist “anchors Christians securely in the world and enables us to live well in it” because when we encounter the real presence of Christ, we are compelled to seek salvation and reconciliation and we are humbled and empowered to live and love as Christ modeled for us.16 In the same way, silence too is a sacrament, as it is a thin place where we encounter the real presence of Christ and are transformed for the sake of the world. In community, silence requires the full participation of every person in the room, sharing in the hope of becoming something more than a mere group of individuals. Though we remain distinct, in our communal act of worship we become the body of Christ.

16 Ibid., Loc. 1001.
6.4 Returning to Galilee

"There’s a great market for religious experience in our world; there’s little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."\(^\text{17}\) In our constant search for new experiences and more information, perhaps we have forgotten two of the most central practices of our Christian faith, returning and remembering.

“Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus said. We do not take communion for some new spiritual experience, but rather to remember the one who called us and transformed our lives by making us a part of his own body. When the women went to the tomb after Jesus was crucified, the angel said, “… go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mk. 16:7). To encounter the risen Christ, they were invited to return to Galilee, the place where they first met him, the place where it all began.

To go to Galilee, says Pope Francis,

...means rediscovering our baptism as a living fountainhead, drawing new energy from the sources of our faith and our Christian experience. To return to Galilee means above all to return to that blazing light with which God’s grace touched me at the start of the journey. From that flame I can light a fire for today and every day and bring heat and light to my brothers and sisters. That flame ignites a humble joy, a joy which sorrow and distress cannot dismay, a good, gentle joy... returning to Galilee means treasuring in my heart the living memory of that call, when Jesus passed my way, gazed at me with mercy and asked me to

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follow him. To return there means reviving the memory of that moment when his eyes met mine, the moment when he made me realize that he loved me.\textsuperscript{18}

In the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer, Father Thomas Keating suggests the use of a sacred word to call to mind which helps us return from our distracted thoughts to find our quiet center in God’s holy presence. Simply observing our own breathing may have the same effect. Though our thoughts may wander a hundred times or more over a twenty-minute period of silence, those who practice centering prayer are taught to think of it as at least one hundred opportunities to practice returning to God. The point is not the silence itself, or some other meditative method to free us from distractions. Rather, the silence and centering are ways of disciplining our thoughts to naturally return to God. Like the disciples returning to Galilee, breath prayers throughout the day and countless other ways of cultivating sacred space or thin places in our daily routines are ways of returning to the place where it all began, caught up in the love of a God who sought us out long before we were even aware of our need.

In the same way that a sacred word or our breath may return our thoughts to resting in God’s presence during silent prayer, so participating in contemplative prayer, \textit{Lectio Divina}, holy listening, and even communion with a WCO Band also functions like

a tether that keeps me and others returning to that sacred center. If it is so easy to get 
distracted during twenty minutes of silence, how much further from God do we tend to 
wander off the course of a week or two? The band keeps us accountable and holds 
sacred space for us, so that, no matter how many times we have lost our way, there is 
always a path readily available for us to return. We are all prodigals many times over, 
but like the father in Jesus’ story, God rejoices every time a beloved child comes home. 
Thin places are like markers pointing the way, reminding us of where and to whom we 
belong.

6.5 Final Thoughts

Contemplative groups like the Wesleyan Contemplative Order provide 
intentional thin places to keep us anchored and to consistently draw us back into God’s 
presence. The call of the church is to do the same.

"Contemplatives are like great subterranean rivers, which, on occasion, break out 
into springs at unexpected points, or reveal their presence only by the plants they feed 
from below."\textsuperscript{19} For the Celtic Saints, such springs of life were called Thin Places. In 
Scripture, we find them consistently popping up in the wilderness and in places one 
would least expect to encounter God. In our noisy and distracted world today, as in 
every generation, silence and stillness may well be two of the most accessible doorways

into the sacred spaces where we can drink deeply from the living water of God’s presence. Silence is not easy. Alone, it is virtually impossible. Even if we find a quiet place, we cannot quiet our minds. We need the Body of Christ to pray with us and for us. We need the church to sit with us at Jesus’ feet. We need the anchor of Christian community to hold sacred space for us to be still with God. And yet, as we have seen, silence is tragically undervalued and even feared, both in our culture at large and in the church. Just as he said so many times in the scriptures, Jesus says to us, “Do not be afraid.” “Come, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest.”
APPENDIX A: AN OVERVIEW OF THE WESLEYAN CONTEMPLATIVE ORDER (WCO)

The Wesleyan Contemplative Order is an inclusive non-denominational Order open to lay and ordained individuals of every gender and race who seek “through contemplative practices and community to experience the transformative process of Christ that leads to a life of devotion, service and love. Our mission is to stay awake, stay present, and support each other so that our lives may abide in Christ and express His loving compassion in the world.” ¹ The WCO strives “to be a safe, encouraging place where those who are noticing God’s call to a deeper life in the Spirit can gather around the presence of Christ, using ancient practices, to find Christ anew in community, silence, and service.”²

The Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO) began as an outgrowth of the spiritual formation ministries at Davidson United Methodist Church in Davidson, NC. Though the order officially started in 2010, the core of small groups began with Ann Starrette who directed the Spiritual Formation program at Davidson. These groups, called Trust Circles, function like twelve-step programs, especially in their emphasis on confidentiality and vulnerability. In this way, sacred space was created where people

² Ibid.
could feel safe in honestly answering John Wesley’s famous question, “How is it with your soul?”

In the beginning they held a three-week training for those interested in being part of a Trust Circle. This process would help people discern whether the vulnerable nature of such groups was right for them at the time. Now we ask that participants in WCO bands participate faithfully for at least six months before becoming a “vowed member” and covenanting with the group to remain accountable to their band and their Rule of Life. Annual information sessions help people discern God’s invitation regarding their involvement in the WCO. Out of the twenty-one people invited to the first welcoming retreat over ten years ago at St. Francis Springs in North Carolina, twenty responded and started on the ground floor of this new ministry.

Co-founders Ann Starrette and Don Carroll regularly remind us that spiritual practices such as centering prayer, *Lectio Divina*, holy listening, and silence, among others, do not change us, they only open us to God to do God’s work with us. Drawing on the Celtic language used throughout this work, I would say that the practices cultivate thin places where we become more aware of God’s presence in our midst, especially in the context of bands or other small contemplative groups.

Even before the WCO officially formed, the work of the Holy Spirit was palpable in the early Trust Circles. People who never thought they could pray were learning how to pray, simply by speaking a sentence or two into the group in response to the
invitations they sensed from the still small voice of the Spirit within them. The anonymity and trust formed among people from many different churches across different denominations created fertile ground where honest confession and reconciliation began to take root. Participants began to recognize and name their own selfishness, bitterness, and other places where they were bound. One woman committed herself to a hospital for eating disorders she had hidden for so long. A professor of philosophy at a Christian university began reconciling with his brothers and sister at age 73. Family and friends of many participants encourage them to keep going to band meetings because they are “nicer when they come home.”

In 2010, the WCO officially began with three bands, averaging 6 to 8 people each. Today we are up to sixteen bands with over 125 vowed members and counting. Some people participate in bands for a year or more before becoming a vowed member and official membership in the WCO is not required to be a part of a band. We have recently expanded to include virtual bands due to the pandemic. Through this expansion, people from other states and even other countries have discovered our ministry online and helped start new bands.

New bands need nurturing, and they are always guided by an experienced facilitator, at least in the beginning. However, we believe in a shared leadership model where different members will bring lectio readings and facilitate group sharing at each gathering. Many bands are fully lay led, though some like my own Sabbath Circle
consist of mostly clergy or ministry leaders. Unfortunately, the lack of clergy in most bands limits our ability to include Holy Communion at every band meeting, though bands with clergy members often do share the sacrament regularly. Nevertheless, Eucharist is central to the WCO as a whole and we regularly gather around the table at retreats at special contemplative chapel services throughout the year.

The WCO is not a social group, nor is it disconnected from the church. We do have some participants who are not active in local congregations, though most are, but many WCO members find opportunities in their bands to discover and develop their own gifts which they then take back to their local churches to serve others. We light a candle at the beginning of every meeting to remind us that we are there primarily to encounter God’s presence. We learn to see with the eyes of our hearts as the ancients did, through silence and contemplative spiritual practices. Together we are becoming aware of where our lives do not line up with God’s character. We learn to listen and wait, recognizing that when we come before God to be changed, God is patient and gentle with us because we cannot take it all at once. Transformation does not happen in an instant. As we learn to rest in God, we learn to love ourselves and recognize that we are beloved by our creator. In turn, God changes us from the inside out, enabling us to truly love others with compassion and mercy.

Cultivating thin space where we can rest and be in God’s presence should not be limited to ministries like the WCO beyond the walls of the church. Being a thin place in
the world where people can encounter God’s presence and drink freely from the wellspring of living water is the responsibility of the church. The model of small confidential bands gathered around the express purpose of participating in ancient spiritual practices together can and should be taken more seriously by local congregations and spiritual communities. John Wesley understood that strong small groups or bands for discipleship are the glue that hold the entire church together. They provide safe spaces where those seeking a deeper relationship with Christ can cultivate a Rule of Life and strengthen their spiritual practices in community. A renewed emphasis on cultivating similar groups in the church today may help us all “to stay awake, stay present, and support each other so that our lives may abide in Christ and express His loving compassion in the world.”
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BIOGRAPHY

As an Elder in the United Methodist Church, Rev. Craig J. Sefa presently pastors Shiloh UMC in Granite Quarry, NC. Beyond the local church, he serves on the Board of the Wesleyan Contemplative Order (WCO) and assists with several related retreats and contemplative chapel services throughout the year.

Craig holds Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Asbury Theological Seminary. He also attended the University of Florida and later earned a Bachelor of Visual Communications from American Intercontinental University Online. He is the author of *I Arise Today: A 40-Day Journey through St. Patrick’s Breastplate Prayer* and maintains a regular devotional blog called “Echo” at https://craigsefa.org.

His wife, McKenzie, is also a United Methodist elder and serves as faculty and project manager of *Creating a Culture of Renewal (CCR)*, a three-year cohort helping church leaders grow in emotional and congregational intelligence, craft a kingdom-oriented vision and shift the culture of their churches toward renewal. They have one daughter, Ariana, born in 2014.

Craig is a husband, father, pastor, teacher, writer, musician, and amateur photographer / graphic designer with a passion for Spiritual Formation and discipleship who seeks to use his gifts to echo the still small voice of the Holy Spirit in our noisy world.