Spiritual Formation of Mature Believers:
How Glencairn MB Church Deepened Mature Believers
by Means of Spiritual Memoir Writing

A Portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
Tyndale Seminary

by
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CHAPTER IV:
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH REPORT:
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A
FORMATION TOOL FOR MATURE
BELIEVERS IN THE
LOCAL CHURCH

This in-ministry action research report describes the positive impact of the process of writing a spiritual autobiography on the spiritual formation of mature believers, specifically on their improved relationship with self, others and God. This report also describes how to create an environment that is conducive to spiritual growth.

Existing, already discussed evidence and my personal experience indicate that church-based discipleship programs are often designed for new or growing believers and that mature believers are often spiritually under-challenged in their local church, having to find opportunities for spiritual deepening elsewhere.

Twenty adults participated in a nine-month guided process of writing a spiritual autobiography in a small group setting, sharing their written life stories with one another. Throughout the process, the participants were exposed to teachings on various aspects of spiritual growth and to experiences of new
spiritual disciplines such as retreat and spiritual direction. The gathered research data presented herein consists of my participant-observer notes over the course of the project, participant feedback throughout the process, an intake questionnaire, and results from a group interview at the conclusion of the process.

**Background**

This section begins with the identification of the problem which this research sought to address, along with a brief discussion of the devised solution. Definitions of key terms and matters of permission, and access to the research participants follow.

**The Problem**

As discussed in the spiritual formation model presented in Chapter III, in Error! Reference source not found. section on page Error! Bookmark not defined., Christ-followers progress through distinct stages of spiritual maturity. Error! Reference source not found. on page Error! Bookmark not defined., lists the six spiritual growth stages identified by Hagberg and Guelich (2005).

Spiritual growth for the new and growing Christ-follower is relatively simple to facilitate, and curricula and growth models for this group are plentiful. The challenge addressed by the model that supports this research, resides partly in the fact that many of Christ’s followers never make it past the Growing or Productive Life stage, thus reducing the Gospel into a life of service and of trying harder to be good. The challenge addressed herein also resides in the fact that those Christ-followers who move through the Deepening stage into the Christ-centered life are
often spiritually “under-challenged by the church” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98), and must often look for opportunities for on-going spiritual nurture outside their local congregation.

Yet, those who successfully navigate the Deepening stage to a life centered in Christ make for the most dedicated volunteers, the most generous givers, and the most enthusiastic evangelists. Hawkins and Parkinson in Move, the result of the Willow Creek study of over one thousand churches, describe such believers as: “Christ-Centered…Christ’s greatest workforce, over the heels in love with God, tithing, serving and evangelizing more than anyone else” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 98). As such, this group is highly desirable and necessary for the on-going success of the work of the local church. Ministry to this group of Christ-followers enhances the health and capacity of the church.

Response

This research project therefore focused on the mature believers in the local church, by testing an aspect of a church-based spiritual formation curriculum which aims to invite mature Christ-followers into and through the Inner Journey stage, into a deepening of their life with God, and to the maturity of the Investing and Blessing stages. By means of a prolonged time (9 months) in intimate community (groups of no more than 7), and by means of carefully selected reading material, spiritual disciplines, and the writing and sharing of one’s life story, the research results, discussed in detail below, indicate that such deepening
took place, resulting in formational shifts benefiting the participants and the church community to which they belong.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

This research project was carried out in the context of Glencairn Mennonite Brethren church, as part of the existing Life Tracks (discipleship) program. Permission to run this research at Glencairn was obtained from the board of elders. Supervision and accountability were to the Senior Pastor who took part in the research as one of the participants, and also to the elders’ board by means of regular reporting and report of final summary of findings. The Tyndale Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved this project in accordance to its policies on August 31, 2016.

Access to participants was by means of said permission and an open invitation to the congregation in the Sunday bulletin and announcements.

Definition of Key Terms

The terminology used in this report relates to the progressive maturing of the Christ-follower, as it takes place through the process of inner transformation of the person toward and ever increasing similarity to the character of Christ. While various terms exist to refer to the Christian growth, the following terms are used herein as defined below.

*Discipleship* – the life-long process of being a student and an imitator of the life of Christ, as well as the process of leading others into following Christ.
Spiritual Autobiography – the story of one’s life focused on formative circumstances, events, or people, which answer the question: “How did I become who I am,” and which seeks to understand God’s presence and purpose in the formation process. Herein, also referred to as a spiritual memoir, life story, and life review.

Spiritual Formation – the ongoing and holistic work of the Triune God in a believer’s life, whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the character and actions of Jesus Christ. This change happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others (Pettit 2008, 19). See further discussion on spiritual formation in the section titled Error! Reference source not found., starting on page Error!

Bookmark not defined. above.

Spiritual Maturity – the degree of formation into Christ-likeness.

Context

As one of the pastors of Glencairn church, I led this research project in the context of Glencairn’s church spiritual formation ministry. Glencairn Mennonite Brethren Church in Kitchener, Ontario is an active church and well connected to its Mennonite Brethren (MB) roots. The nature of MB spirituality is defined by a radical Christ-centeredness (see section titled Error! Reference source not found., starting on page Error! Bookmark not defined.). It is a spirituality which is comfortable with being noticeably distinct from the surrounding society, strongly oriented to community, to social action, and to evangelistic mission. A
call to a radical life for Jesus is typically welcomed and appreciated. In addition, the MB congregations have over the years, freely appropriated spiritual practices from other faith traditions (such as Pietists, Charismatics, etc.), while managing to maintain their essential Anabaptist DNA. My experience in the MB denomination indicates that the MBs are generally open to even unfamiliar spiritual practices. The research project curriculum, therefore, confidently applied spiritual practices and disciplines which may not otherwise be readily associated with spiritual formation in an evangelical denomination.

My pastoral experience in this church has further shown an undercurrent of desire to go deeper in the Christian faith. Readiness to receive spiritual direction, to be trained in prayer, to adopt spiritual disciplines hitherto unknown, and the general interest to live vibrantly connected to God, were but few indicators that this context was suitable for this research project.

In addition, the mandate from the elders of the church to design a systematic means to spiritual growth of Glencairn’s people aligned this project with the direction of the organization. Finally, Glencairn church has in 2012-2013 completed an extensive refocusing process which highlighted several developmental desires for the church community, one of which was a desire to be a church which encourages deep life with Christ.

My role as Pastor of Development at Glencairn includes the responsibility for spiritual nurture and growth of the congregants, thus this research fit into my normal ministry duties. My personal passion and experience in discipling others,
including my training in spiritual direction and current studies in DMin in spiritual formation, fit well with the thrust of this research.

In the first two years of my DMin work, I completed my own spiritual autobiography as well as a spiritual formation model and curriculum developed with my local church and broader denomination in mind. This model, titled *Three Years with Jesus*, was embraced by Glencairn’s leadership with the authorization to go ahead and begin implementing the model. This implementation began early in 2016 with a plan to assess the effectiveness of the spiritual autobiography component by means of an Action Research Project.

**Models and Other Course Material**

This research project was born out of my previous work in the field of spiritual formation. As part of the DMin requirements, I studied the concept of a spiritual autobiography and constructed a curriculum for spiritual formation which incorporates the writing of a spiritual memoir as a key element. This section reviews the spiritual formation model detailed in Chapter III, as well as points to some background literature that was consulted in the formulation of this research project.

**The Foundational Model**

This research project was based on the spiritual formation model presented in Chapter III above. The model and its supporting curriculum focuses on mature followers of Christ, defined as those already close to Christ and ready to move beyond the Productive Life stage, likely at middle age or beyond (see section
The model offers a three year intensive guidance through experiences and curriculum designed to encourage spiritual growth in mature believers. See Error! Reference source not found., for an overview of the model. The research focused on the testing out the first year of the model which is structured around the writing of a spiritual memoir. Section Year 1 – Life Overview Error! Reference source not found., offers a discussion of the existing work in the field of spiritual autobiography and the anticipated value this process brings to one’s spiritual formation.

In addition, I found my own experience of writing a spiritual autobiography as part of the DMin requirements profoundly valuable to my spiritual growth, self-understanding and emotional wholeness. My interest to lead others in the process of writing a spiritual autobiography stems out of this personal experience and conviction, supported by the available existing research and writing.

The first year of the Three Years with Jesus model on which this research project centered sought to capitalize on the apparent spiritual benefit of writing one’s spiritual life story. In addition however, the model augments the memoir writing process with a wide variety of devotional readings, community experience, spiritual direction experience, retreats, and other spiritual practices so as to create ample space for God’s transforming work in the lives of the participants. The anticipated result was that at the completion of the first year of the model, the participants would cease to see life as “a collection of pieces and
parts that don’t seem to fit together” (Reese and Loane 2012, 54) and rather would discover their own as well as the lives of others purposefully moved in a discernable direction, guided so by God.

Other Literature

The research material consulted for this research project falls into four categories. The largest category comprises of works that offer instruction on how to write a spiritual autobiography and sources that offer instruction on how to guide others in this process. These works served primarily as resources for curriculum development. The curriculum guided the participants in the process of writing. As well, it delivered teaching elements designed to deepen their self-understanding and their spiritual life practices. Additional relevant resources which are not listed herein are various autobiographical works, such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, which were part of the required reading for the research participants. Appendix D contains the curriculum along with all the resources that were utilized in the process.

The second category of resources consists of works which discuss the value of writing a spiritual autobiography and research already conducted in this field. These works serve as research background information and as material which helped synthesize the research findings. These works also offer some comparison data between other research and the findings of this project. These first two categories overlap in places as many authors speak to both the benefit of writing as well as to the methodology of writing.
The third and smaller category consists of works related to the topic of spiritual formation. However, the only ones listed are those that touch on elements of the curriculum that this research project employs. For example, this research project curriculum addresses early childhood development and attachment patterns, understanding of the role of memory in one’s formation, understanding of false self and true self, as well as understanding of spiritual disciplines deemed helpful to the writing of a spiritual memoir. Therefore only texts which address elements of spiritual formation relevant to this research project, and which were used in its planning are listed in Appendix E Bibliography of Resources Utilized in the Planning of the Research Project.

The final and smallest category consists of works which explain research methodology, research practices, and research ethics. These were consulted to ensure a scientific approach to the research, the use of methods and terminology appropriate to the project, and to ensure the highest standard of ethics for research in a ministry setting.

While there were many other works consulted for increased proficiency in the field of writing a spiritual memoir and in the area of conducting research in ministry, the bibliography contained in Appendix E consists of works that bear directly on this research project. The noted works are arranged in the appendix according to the above listed categories.
Methodology and Methods

This section describes the participants who took part in the research, the exact time-frame of the research, and the scope to which this research aimed to limit itself. Details of data collection and the data analysis process also follow.

Field

As already stated in the Context section above, the context of the research was Glencairn MB Church in Kitchener, an evangelical church with a Sunday morning attendance, at the time of the study, of about 170 adults and about 80 children. The participant group was limited to adults over the age 45, who are confessed followers of Christ, connected in some way (members, adherents, occasional attenders) to the Glencairn church congregation. The age restriction was due to the fact that this study focused on mature believers with adequate life experience, who would be able to assess their life story over a longer period of time. Since the project involved considerable amounts of reading and writing, the participants also needed to be adequately literate (about a grade 10 reading and writing ability) in order to be capable of completing the assigned tasks. As the Glencairn congregation consists primarily of the middle class, this requirement was not seen as resulting in undue exclusion. It ought to be noted, however, that two potential participants who registered for the research did not actually begin the process. Hence they are not included in the results discussed herein. Both of these potential participants indicated the reason for dropping out as the busyness
of life. For both of them, English was a second language, and it is likely that they would have struggled with the amount of reading and writing that was expected.

There were no other restrictions; both male and female participants of any ethnic or racial background were invited to participate. A total of 20 participants joined the study, which represents about 34% of the total adult church population and nearly 60% of the eligible adult population. Only 5 out of the 20 participants (25%) were male. All the male participants were married, three joined the research along with their spouses. Three of the female participants were single. Table 1 below shows a summary of the participants’ age profile.
Table 1 – Participant Age Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 75</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The youngest participant was 48 at the start of the study and the oldest was 79 at the start, and celebrated her eightieth birthday during the study. The average age of the participants was 62. Eight of the 20 participants were employed full or part time while part of the research. The participants joined the research project in response to an open invitation to the congregation, communicated through the normal communication channels of the church such as the bulletin and Sunday morning in-service announcements, and word of mouth encouragement from others. Four of the participants were not part of the Glencairn church community. They have been connected to me in the past through Bible studies and spiritual formation events, and heard about the research through personal communication with me. Since the Glencairn community at the time of the research had over 100 people who have been in the church less than two years, none of the participants expected to know everyone in the group. Hence these four participants nicely fit into their group and quickly formed close relationships with others.

The twenty participants who embarked on the process, all gave their verbal consent and understanding that they were participants in a research project (see Appendix F for content of the informed verbal consent). The informed verbal consent process was more appropriate than a formal written consent due to the
nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the
conversational tone of the group gatherings. The verbal style of the consent also
allowed for immediate response to questions and comments. My relationship to
the participants was that of pastor and congregants, perhaps better stated as a
relationship of trust in one with whom the participants have experienced spiritual
guidance in the past, and whom they accepted as their spiritual authority from the
outset of the process, and under whose guidance they were willing to commit to
the duration and the rigor of the process. While the participants were fully aware
of the fact that their participation in this group was part of a research project, they
related to me primarily as their pastor and spiritual guide. Only rarely over the
course of the 9 months did questions regarding the research come up. The
influence of this relationship of trust on the outcomes of this research was one of
the key factors contributing to the positive results reported by the participants.
The details of the impact of this dynamic are discussed in the Interpretation
section, starting on page 38.

Due to the large number of respondents, it became apparent in the first
meeting that equal participation and intimate community would be difficult to
realize in a group of 20. Therefore, at my request, the participants were divided
into three smaller groups so as to facilitate a more intimate community. These
smaller groups formed themselves based on scheduling convenience. The groups
met on Wednesday afternoon, Wednesday evening, and Thursday evening, over
two consecutive days. Each participant attended only one group meeting, though
the groups were open to letting people switch groups in case of scheduling
conflicts. Therefore, on occasion, someone from the Wednesday afternoon group might have attended the Thursday evening group and so on. Such moving around between groups happened only occasionally during the summer months, because, for the most part, the participants preferred to attended their normal group. In addition, due to the challenges of a summer schedule, I offered a makeup group for anyone who was on vacation during the scheduled session week. This group met on a Wednesday evening the week following the normally scheduled sessions. The data showed no evidence that this movement negatively impacted the study. In fact, it provided further research data on the community dynamic, which is discussed in section titled Others on page 30, and it offered data comparison across groups shown in Appendix H. The scheduling flexibility likely also contributed to an usually high attendance record – average 95% attendance, only 8 absences out of a total possible 208 over the course of nine months.

I initially intended to limit the findings of this research to only one of the three groups, the Wednesday afternoon group, which consisted of seven participants and had the most consistent group makeup and attendance. However, each group desired to offer input and considered the opportunity to reflect on the experience in the exit interview to be a valuable part of the whole process. Hence, three group exit interviews were conducted and the data analyzed herein is based on all three interviews.

The research project spanned a period of 9 months, with meetings at the Glencairn church facility taking place about once per month, lasting about two hours each. In addition, the project included two day-long retreats at retreat
centers, one about one half-way through the project (July 2016) and the other toward the end of the project (October 2016). Appendix L lists the exact meeting dates and locations. One of the participants in the Wednesday afternoon group offered her home as a meeting place for reasons of comfort and transportation challenges, the group agreed and met at this participant’s home for the remainder of the sessions.

Three participants dropped out of the study about half way through the process. One due to a flare up of cancer, the other due to personal matters, which necessitated sick leave from work. The third participant was a spouse to one of these. He withdrew from the study in order to provide adequate care for his spouse. These participants were not part of the exit interview process, though their feedback while part of the study and discussion regarding the reasons for dropping out are part of the field notes data.

Scope

While the existing literature and the researcher’s personal experience indicate a long potential list of benefits to writing a spiritual autobiography, this research chose to restrict the scope of inquiry, to the below listed anticipated benefits. This list was included in the research proposal as:

1. Increased sense of **integration of life experience**, indicated by terms such as connecting the dots, making sense of the life journey, coherence, etc.;
2. Increased level of *self-acceptance*, indicated by terms which point to the acceptance of the whole of the life experience, such as coming to terms, forgiving self, understanding one’s choices, etc.;

3. Perception of increased *sense of God’s presence* over the course of the writer’s life, indicated by terms which speak to a sense of understanding of the purpose of the various formative factors, and the contribution each made to the overall formation of the person, new perspective, seeing the course of one’s life in a new light, increased sense of consciousness, discerning God’s presence or providence in the events of life, etc.;

4. *General usefulness* the participants ascribe to this process as a tool in Glencairn’s spiritual formation program as perceived in the assessment of the participants’ own growth.

The collected data however revealed additional benefits as well as some risks. The results of the findings are discussed in section Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes starting on page 25.

Methodology

This project was a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, based on the principles of action research as defined by the Tyndale DMin program guidelines. The first defining feature of PAR relevant to this project is that the researcher also acts as a change agent, introducing intentional change into the ministry environment while observing the effects of the change. A second key
feature of a PAR relevant to this project is that the participants themselves contribute to the shaping of the details of the process which is being observed. Details of the characteristics of Participatory Action Research are contained in the Research Methods lectures (Chapman 2016, Aug 18, 2016 Lecture).

This project conformed to the design of a case study, defined by Saldana as “focused in-depth study and analysis of a unit of one – one person, one group, one organization, one event” (Saldana 2013, 269). Creswell, in addition, suggests that the case study can be viewed as “a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research…as well as a product of the inquiry” (Creswell 2007, 73). This project aligned with these definitions as it explored a bounded system (one group) over time. The case study design lends itself to in-depth data collection which involves multiple sources of information such as field observation records, interview transcripts, as well as document or other artifacts (Creswell 2007, 75). Appendix J contains a summary of the detailed phases and timetables of the research project.

Data Collection

The data collected as part of this research project aligned with the data collection practices suitable for the case study method referenced in the Methodology section above. The data collected in this research project consisted of the following:

1. Intake survey – this survey sought to understand various aspects of the participants’ spiritual practices, view of God, view of self,
perception of emotional wholeness etc. This data also captured the gender and age of the participants.

2. Researcher Field Notes – the researcher made observations of the behavior and responses of the participants throughout the research project, with the aim to assess appropriateness of process, level of enthusiasm, emotional responses, group dynamic, the understanding and value the participants ascribe to the various elements of the process, etc.

3. Participant feedback – the researcher invited periodic informal reflection on the process from the participants, which addressed their comfort level with the process, the quality of their experience, the effect of the experience thus far, suggestions for going forward, etc.

In addition, the participants at times provided unsolicited feedback to the researcher either verbally or via email. This feedback is included under the Field Notes category of data.

4. Exit interview – the researcher interviewed each of the three groups to more formally assess the value the participants placed on the factors listed in the Scope section above. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours and each was audiotaped in order to create a conversational atmosphere with which note-taking would interfere. The exit interviews make up 75% of the gathered data used for analysis for the anticipated outcomes of this study. Appendix I Thematic Proportionality of Data by Source shows the distribution
and proportionality of the data as collected from the four major sources. Appendix G

Concluding Interview Process and Questions contains the details of the exit interview process along with the planned questions. Sensing suggests that “open-ended and informal questions” (Sensing 2011, 86) are best suited to qualitative research. Hence the exit interview questions allowed for free-form, conversational reflection on the process in a way that did not lead the participants toward a pre-determined conclusion. The interview, therefore, opened with a “Grand Tour Question” (Sensing 2011, 86). To facilitate the desire to address the specific research question as identified in the Scope section above, the interview also posed a few “guided tour questions”, interpretive questions and opinion questions (Sensing 2011, 88) again with as little leading of the participants as possible.

All research data was kept electronically on the researcher’s password protected laptop, which is always in the researcher’s possession (i.e., it is not left in the church office). Any paper research materials will continue to be kept in a secure, locked location in the church facility. In addition, a few of the participants gave the researcher permission to make their sample spiritual autobiography excerpts public, by request from the researches, in order to demonstrate the quality of reflection and self-analysis by the participants, as well as evidence of the understanding of the formational effect of the described life event and God’s role in it. These samples of writing do not contribute to the collected data.
Data Analysis

Creswell suggests that the case study approach for Participation Action Research may utilize “a holistic analysis of the entire case or an embedded analysis of a specific aspect of the case” (Creswell 2007, 75). In addition, the methodology allows for the data analysis to be deductive, that is, looking for evidence of the anticipated effect, or inductive, that is allowing the themes to emerge out of the data. Though the goal of this project was to assess the usefulness of integrating the writing of a spiritual autobiography into a local church setting, the data was not analyzed deductively with this goal in mind. The coding of the data was entirely inductive. Only after the data was coded did I look for evidence for the elements noted in section the Scope section above. The coding process involved reading the Field Note and Exit Interview data repeatedly, looking for key words and themes. For example, any statement containing the word “affirmed” as referring to self, or the idea of being affirmed, for example “permission to be me” would be labeled by the code “affirmation of self.” There were initially 31 codes, or groupings of data. These groupings were then analyzed for common factors and were further grouped into five larger categories. After further analysis, some of the codes were found to be unnecessarily distinct for the purpose of this study. For example, I initially separated references to an “awareness” of God from references to an “experience” of God as reported by the participants during the course of the research project. However, as all experiences led to an awareness of God, and each instance of awareness of God was in fact an experience of God, the distinction became
unnecessary. For the purposes of this research, capturing a sense of God’s presence, whether termed as awareness or experience, was sufficient. Therefore the data in these codes was collapsed into one grouping. Table 2 below lists the final data codes and categories as discussed in this report. The code number was assigned arbitrarily and therefore is not meant to imply any significance.

The project proposal indicated that I intended to invite some of the research participants to assist with the coding and interpretation of the data. The sheer amount of data, the challenge the data coding process presented, along with the time-line restrictions of this project proved to make such participation impossible. While it is likely that such analysis would facilitate further reflection and thus would have provided further benefit to those involved, in the end the data was coded and analyzed solely by the researcher. Data summary charts were, however, shared with the participants via email along with an invitation for questions and feedback which was received and addressed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key Words and Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>S1. Increased self-awareness</td>
<td>Realized (about self), aha moments (about self), motives etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S2. Increased self-acceptance</td>
<td>Acceptance, authentic, coming to terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S3. Sense of healing</td>
<td>Sense of closure, healing, painful events have less power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S4. Sense of affirmation</td>
<td>Permission to be me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>O1. Community bonding</td>
<td>Desire to hear others’ stories, increased trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O2. Acceptance of others</td>
<td>Non-judgmental, accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O3. Honouring of others</td>
<td>Expressions of grace, careful treatment of others, patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O4. Influence of the group</td>
<td>Expression of encouragement, triggers to remember, positive peer pressure, encouragement to reflect deeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O5. Gratitude to those in the past</td>
<td>Expressions of gratitude, newly realized appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>G1. Increased Trust in God</td>
<td>God can be trusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G2. Shift in God image</td>
<td>God is good, expression of changed understanding of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G3. Experience of God</td>
<td>Awareness of God or experience of God during the research process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G4. God’s presence</td>
<td>New realization of God’s presence in past events, God was there, God had a purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>L1. Integration</td>
<td>Connecting the dots, seeing a cohesive whole, all belongs, understanding how A led to B, embracing all of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L2. Purposefulness</td>
<td>Seeing purpose in life events, purposefulness in the progression of life events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Key Words and Concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>P1. Phenomenon</td>
<td>References to what happened in the process of writing or sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2. Setting</td>
<td>The role that the setting played in the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P3. Intimidating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P4. Struggle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P5. Growth</td>
<td>Challenge with how to write, how to process difficult past event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P6. Curriculum Challenge</td>
<td>Perceived movement in one’s formation, perceived growth, acquiring new practice, new skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P7. Curriculum Content</td>
<td>Expressions on difficulty with keeping up with the assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P8. Suitability</td>
<td>Positive references to material offered as part of the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment of who is likely to benefit from writing an SA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

This project involved minimal risk to the participants in the area of potentially harmful power dynamics and lack of anonymity. Though my role brings a formal power relationship between me and the participants, this risk was mitigated by the fact that all activities of this research project were conducted in groups. Based on my experience with the culture of Glencairn, it is likely that any inappropriate exertion of power would be recognized and immediately challenged by the rest of the group. The consent text clearly stated that participation in any elements of the study was voluntary, and I continually communicated the option to not participate in any element of the program that may feel uncomfortable to the participants. In addition, the participants were aware of the fact they were able
to appeal to either the Lead Pastor of the church or to a representative of the Tyndale Ethical Review Board in case of concerns with the conduct of the research. Finally, it was, in fact, the already established relationship of trust and the expectation that the researcher would offer spiritual guidance and enrichment to the participants, that was fundamental to the willingness of the participants to embark on a process of this length of time and this depth of commitment.

The risk associated with a lack of anonymity was likewise minimal, as the participants were familiar with the experience of a small group in which learning and personal sharing takes place. Glencairn’s culture continually communicates confidentiality of the sharing and happenings in a small group. In addition, as the groups met and personal sharing took place I repeated the request to keep personal information confidential.

Finally, this research project contained an element of risk due to the fact that the participants would be encouraged to explore past, at times undoubtedly painful, life events. This risk potential was highlighted to the participants at the outset with the offer of one-on-one follow-up with the researcher or the Lead Pastor. In addition, all participants were encouraged to meet with a spiritual director for the duration of the project. As earlier stated, the research project was reviewed and approved by the Tyndale Research Ethics Board.

**Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes**

This section of the research report contains first the details of the gathered data, followed by an in-depth discussion of the interpretation of meaning. The
discussion will follow the data categories as outlined in Table 2 above, that is, impact on a relationship with self, others, God, and an impact on the sense of life integration. The Process data category which describes the participants’ experience of being part of the memoir writing process is also discussed herein. Each of these data categories is comprised of several elements (sub-categories) which will be discussed in order; however, particular attention is paid to impact on the elements listed in the Scope section above, which were:

1. an increased level of self-acceptance,
2. an increased sense of perception of God’s presence in past life events, and
3. an increased sense of integration of life experience.

In addition, since the gathered data revealed notable findings in areas outside the original scope, these findings will also be explored in the discussion below. These findings are organized under the following sub-categories:

1. a perceived sense of healing,
2. the personal experience of God in the process,
3. a shift in the understanding of God,
4. the role of community in writing a spiritual autobiography, and
5. the contribution of the setting to the effectiveness of the process.

The findings section will conclude with my own reflection on the experience of being the conductor as well as an active participant in this research project along with a summary of outcome.
Findings

The first four categories of data as shown in Table 2 above (Self, Others, God, and Life Integration) all represent reports of impact on the participants’ perception of and relationship with self, others, God, and a perception of the cohesiveness and purposefulness of their life experiences. The fourth category of Process differs from these three as it is a category of reflection on being part of this research process. This data captured the participants’ description of the experience itself, that is, what it was like to be part of a group that wrote and shared spiritual memoirs, experienced community around this activity, worked through the prepared curriculum, experienced change and challenge as a result. The findings in the first four categories of impact will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the data in the Process category.

Figure 1 below shows the relative volume of data collected in each of these five data categories. This information is shown for reference purposes only. The importance of the data is not necessarily reflected by the volume. Therefore, the discussion in the Interpretation section below considers the qualitative factors more so than the data volume. The Interpretations section also addresses the possible reasons for the volume of data collected in the Process category to be considerably larger than in the four impact categories.
The research observed the effects of writing a spiritual autobiography in a community setting on the participants’ sense of self-acceptance. Any references to shifts in self-perception or relationship to self by the participants were grouped into the Self category. These references, while all relating to a perception of or a relationship with self, were divided into four sub-categories (S1 through S4) as shown in Table 3. The data shows that in the Self category the perception of increased self-awareness (S1) received the most mention by the participants. This data consists of new realizations about the self, about personal motivation, realizations about deeply imbedded beliefs or fears, “aha moments,” and other references to a new self-understanding.

Figure 1 - Data Volume by Code Category

Self
Table 3 – Data in the Self Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>S1. Increased self-awareness</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S2. Increased self-acceptance</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S3. Sense of healing</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S4. Sense of affirmation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>145 out of 776</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sub-categories S3 and S4 (sense of healing and sense of affirmation) evidence a desired positive outcome in a spiritual formation model. The sense of healing data group contains the second highest number of occurrences in the Self category, surpassed only by an increased sense of self-awareness. Data in the healing category consists of reports of closure, or a release from negative past experiences, for example: “Writing about rejection was therapeutic, there was releasing of guilt and releasing of that rejection…it is not with me anymore.” The sense of affirmation sub-category equals in data volume to the self-acceptance category. It is comprised of data that speaks to a sense of being affirmed as a person either by the group or as a result of writing a spiritual autobiography. Increased sense of self-acceptance (S2) received equal mention to affirmation (S4). The data in the S2 sub-category speaks of a new way of being authentic, accepting and embracing all of self, especially aspects of self that were previously hidden or rejected.

Figure 2 below, shows the data gathered in the category of Self along with a comparison to the God, Others, and Life Integration categories.
This data comparison shows that out of the four categories of impact, the participants referred most frequently to an impact on their perception of and relationship with self.

**Others**

Figure 3 below, shows that the second highest category of impact was the category of data which pointed to an effect on the relationship with others. This data category was an unexpected finding in the study, unanticipated in the research proposal. This data almost exclusively points to the relationships within the research groups, which for many of the participants offered an unprecedented and positive experience of community.
Table 8 below summarized the sub-categories which make up the Others category, along with the volume of data referring to each.

**Table 4 – Data in the Others Category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O1. Community bonding</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O2. Acceptance of others</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O3. Honouring of others</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O4. Influence of the group</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O5. Gratitude to those in the past</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>144 out of 776</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest data sub-category (O1) speaks to the love and appreciation the participants quickly developed for one another. 100% of the participants reported, as a highlight of the process, the community experience, hearing the life stories of others in the group, as well as the support and bonding they felt in the group. Sub-category O2 contains references to the freedom to accept others in the group, but also a newly found willingness to accept others in general. This data speaks of an
acceptance of individual struggles, shortcomings and the particularities of the personal journey. Sub-category O3 is partly descriptive of the experience in which the participants felt honoured by others, often simply due to the time and attentiveness they received as others listened to their own readings. Sub-category O4 speaks to positive peer pressure, direct encouragement, at times a challenge by the group members to reflect deeper, or simply the perception of group expectation which led to deeper participation.

Gratitude to others in the past perhaps surprisingly received a negligible mention. I considered whether it would be more appropriate to absorb this sub-category into another grouping, however these mentions of gratitude were very specific in wording therefore though the sub-category is very small, it is nevertheless a distinct part of the data. The interpretation of these findings is discussed in section Relationship with Others below.

**God**

The research proposal anticipated that the process of writing one’s spiritual memoir, augmented with practices designed to deepen one’s awareness of God, would facilitate the participants’ ability to perceive God’s active presence in the past events of their life. Indeed, as Figure 4 shows, the category which captured data pertaining to the relationship between the participants and God comprises 114 occurrences, which is 25% of total occurrences in the four impact categories.
The God category consists of four sub-categories shown in the following table.

Table 5 – Data in the God Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>G1. Increased Trust in God</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G2. Shift in God image</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G3. Experience of God in the process</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G4. God’s presence in the past</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>114 out of 776</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the four sub-categories, the participants referred the most to the one that speaks to an experience of God or an awareness of God’s presence or guidance during the course of the research (G3). This data represents references to a sense of God’s leading, God “speaking,” an experience of God in prayer or gospel imagination exercises, etc. The second most mentioned sub-category (G4) is the one which speaks to expressions of new realizations, new understanding,
increased perception, or a deeper appreciation of God’s presence in the past life events. The participants frequently and quite naturally expressed this newly acquired sense that God was not only present, but actively involved in the decisions, changes in life direction, and in the provision as perceived in hindsight. Perhaps the most profound of these realizations were those connected to God’s sovereign and purposeful presence in the experience of suffering.

Sub-category G3, shift in God image, speaks to a change in the participants’ understanding of the character of God or ways of God, shifts in perception of how God relates to his creation, and an increased love for God. The shifts in God image uniformly speak of a more positive view of God, a more generous view of God, and a resulting increased desire for intimacy with God. The specific data grouping which reports an increase in trust in God (G1) is closely related to the God-image data.

**Life Integration**

The research proposal anticipated an increased sense of integration of life experiences (see Scope). Figure 5 shows the data volume for this category was the lowest of the four impact categories. However, the impact in this category was unmistakable. See discussion in the section titled Life Integration, starting on page 63.
The Life Integration category is made up of two distinct sets of data as shown in the table below.

**Table 6 – Data in the Life Integration Category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>L1. Integration</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L2. Purposefulness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td></td>
<td>45 out of 776</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The L1 data set speaks of increased sense of life cohesiveness, the new realization of logical connections, and a new clarity of how A led to B. The L2 sub-category speaks of a new realization of purposefulness to all past life events, along with an increased sense of purpose to previous considered insignificant or negative events, along with a new ability to accept or embrace of all of life.
The Process

The sheer amount of data collected in the Process category (Figure 6) speaks to the structure of the exit interview structure, which began with a general invitation to reflect on the experience of writing a spiritual autobiography. However, the themes that emerged in this data are very helpful in understanding the reasons behind the positive impact of the experience. See section titled Experience of the Process below, for a detailed discussion of the implications of these findings.

![Figure 6 – Data Volume by Code Category](image)

The data in this category, though varied, all describes the way the participants perceived the experience of being part of this research project. Table 7 below, shows the eight sub-categories and their respective contribution to the overall Process data volume.
Table 7 – Data in the Process Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>No. of Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>P1. Phenomenon</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P2. Setting</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P3. Intimidating</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P4. Struggle</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P5. Growth</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P6. Curriculum Challenge</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P7. Curriculum Content</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P8. Suitability</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>268 out of 776</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Growth sub-category (P5) contains the greatest volume of data. This data group speaks to perceived personal growth as a result of being part of the study or while being part of the study. This growth included a sense of increased inner strength, stronger faith, a movement toward God, a transformation of an aspect of the self, and the acquisition of a new spiritual practice, or skill, such as a new way to pray. The P7 grouping which contains the second most data speaks to the participant’s comments on the content of the curriculum. This data contains positive references of appreciation and value. Participants expressed that the new material brought important content that enriched the groups’ understanding of spiritual formation, and facilitated deeper reflection. The comments regarding the curriculum difficulty, or challenge, were captured by the P6 data grouping. These comments primarily speak to the high demand on time necessary to accomplish the assigned readings and writings, along with a few mentions of reading that was too difficult (such as Augustine’s *Confessions*), or needed more time to grasp (such as the role of desires in spiritual formation). There were four data instances
in the P4 category which captured instances of struggle with knowing how to proceed (lacking the necessary skill), or an inner struggle with the willingness to write about difficult memories. This difficulty was not related to the curriculum, rather it represented a challenge with the skill or willingness to write reflectively about one’s life.

Additional three data instances in the P3 grouping speak of aspects of the process feeling intimidating, due to a risk of vulnerability or personal exposure. The sub-category of P1 and P2 are of particular interest as they point to two unexpected findings. The first was the experienced phenomenon in the writing process. That is the phenomenon the participants experienced as they put pen to paper and started to write, or as they read their story out loud to the group. The second (P2) contains an equal volume of data regarding the importance of the setting, or the contribution of the environment to the overall experience. The Setting data contains references to the tone of the group gatherings, to the pace, the modeling of interactions, the style of listening, the structure of the time together, and the safety. All of these created an atmosphere consistently noticed and mentioned by the participants. Finally, sub category P8 captures descriptions of the kinds of people the participants deemed would be most suited or would most benefit from this kind of a process.

Interpretation

What follows is a discussion of the data, with a focus on the meaning and importance of the findings. While it is my intent to consider the collected data
objectively, as a participant observer I approach this section with a bias that comes out of my close relationship with the research participants, out of my desire for their on-going spiritual formation, and out of the background data that I acquired as part of the experience of this research. As this research project delved into such intensely personal matters, much of the interpretation necessitates the use of direct quotes from the participants in order to more precisely convey the answer to the research question: “What impact does writing a spiritual autobiography in a community context have on the spiritual formation of mature believers?” The discussion will follow the five data categories of relationship with self, others, and God, impact on the perception of life integration, and experience of the process.

**Relationship with Self**

As Figure 2 above points out, of the four impact categories, the participants mentioned impact on their relationship with, and their perception of, self the most. The spiritual formation model which forms a basis for this research acknowledges that self-awareness and self-acceptance are key indicators of spiritual maturity. Scazzero (2015, 25) identifies the lack of self-awareness as a key trait of emotionally unhealthy Christians, which is especially damaging when present in Christian leaders. The lack of self-awareness extends to “their feelings, their weaknesses and limits, how their past impacts their present, and how others experience them” (Scazzero 2015, 25). Michael Scanlan (1974, 51-52) speaks of six manifestations of deeply ingrained, attitudinal broken-heartedness. That is, the
sense that very center of love within is shattered, which makes the receiving of love and the giving of love impossible. These six symptoms are:

1. a judgmental spirit that is harsh and demanding on self and others,
2. a strong perfectionist attitude demanding the impossible from self and others,
3. a strong pattern of fearing future events,
4. a sense of aloneness and abandonment especially in times of decision,
5. a preoccupation with one’s own guilt, and
6. a compulsive reaction to compete for position or success.

(Scanlan 1974, 51-52)

Payne suggests that the overarching issue behind each of these patterns is the inability to accept oneself and that every one of these symptoms points to the lack of self-acceptance in one’s life (Payne 1991, 27). Payne adds that the inability to accept oneself prevents us from moving on “to emotional and psychological freedom” (Payne 1991, 27). Furthermore, the lack of self-acceptance is, in fact, a barrier which hinders the believer’s ability to respond in obedience to Christ’s commands. Romans 15:7 commands Christ followers to “accept one another as Christ also accepted us.” Trobisch suggests that the ability to accept others as they are, depends on our own self-acceptance. The less I, as a Christ-follower, am able to say yes to my gifts, my limits, my family and financial situation, to my past and to the whole of who I am, the less I will be able to say yes to the whole of anyone else (Trobisch 1986, 48). Quoting the psychologist Groeger, he adds:

…there is in man no inborn self-love. Self-love is either acquired or it is non-existent. The one who does not acquire it or who acquires it insufficiently either is not able to love others at all or is able to love them only insufficiently. The same would be true for such a person also in his relationship with God. (Groeger in Trobisch 1986, 49)
Therefore, in order to love one’s neighbour (Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39), one must first acquire adequate self-love and self-acceptance; and to truly love God, one must first receive his transforming love for the self.

The research data indicates that, in this particular group, the process of writing a spiritual autobiography, especially in a community setting, resulted in a notable experience of healing, along with a notable impact on one’s self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and one’s sense of affirmation. The data sub-categories contained in the Self category are all closely interrelated. While an experience of affirmation does not necessarily lead to greater self-acceptance, the connection between the two is intuitively expected and psychologically argued (Payne 1991, 38-48). Self-awareness, the sub-category with the highest data points, is in fact a pre-requisite for self-acceptance. A sense of affirmation further contributes to self-acceptance. Healing of past wounds, guilt or shame likewise facilitates self-acceptance. Hence, the sub-categories point to factors that are interlinked, because as a person increases in self-knowledge and with it the willingness to live out of the true self.

The expectation that exploring one’s life, as this research encouraged, always necessitates such results is not however in order. The totality of the data indicates that the increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, the sense of healing and affirmation resulted from the process as a whole, which included a certain setting (see section on Experience of the Process below), a caring community involvement, an intentional curriculum, and spiritual resources to direct the reflection. One participant commented that this process led to more self-
understanding, self-acceptance and healing than many years of therapy. I attribute the difference to the fact that this process modelled and expected a very purposeful approach to reflecting on one’s life. The point was not simply to write about all that happened in the past. Rather, the assignment was to look for formative influences and reflect on these in such a way, so as to understand their influence at the time, as well as their on-going effect on the person. At times, such understanding was brought into consciousness for the first time. Another participant reflected on the purposeful approach to exploring one’s life story as follows:

I have often been challenged by people to write about my life and it just…it just looks black to me and overwhelming and just not something…I did try once [writing a life story] and…I just couldn’t do it…I needed it to be more than just rehearsing the past and running my fingers through all the baggage. And this is the first time I haven’t felt that in my writing.

The impact on self also included data that spoke to a perception of healing from past wounds or shame. My observations lead me to conclude that this sense of healing was partly realized though the experience of the setting (discussed below) and partly due to the fact that painful or shameful episodes in life were opened up, analyzed through the process of writing, and relived in the presence of a sympathetic community. Plass and Cofield assert that this is precisely the way one can reprogram the effect of painful memories:

The act of telling our story to someone who listens well is one of the ways by which our relational blueprint becomes more endurable and available to us. In sharing our story our implicit memory is recalibrated and changed. An empathic listener helps us access and expand our understanding of our emotions and thus our conscious identity. The relationship with a listener becomes a new way of connecting and understanding old patterns. The
listener gives us a healthy emotional response that we will unconsciously begin to mimic. (Plass and Cofield 2014, 52)

Though in this instance the process yielded largely positive results, the data also revealed a potential risk of emotional or mental trauma brought on by sifting through painful life experiences. There were two out of a total of 776 data instances that pointed to this risk. Such possibility was identified in the research proposal, highlighted to the participants at the outset along with instructions to begin meeting with a spiritual director for the duration of the process, and to access the Glencairn pastoral team for help if the risk is realized. None of the participants reported experiencing trauma during the process. To the contrary, the data contains 34 references to healing. One participant observed: “this group was very important to me, it brought about much healing, courage to open up painful moments and to find peace that I didn’t have before.” Another likewise expressed the opportunity to explore the painful past as welcomed and helpful:

For me, it was a healing process for me…I just couldn't go back to my past because, I have been struggling with so much adversity and I just… I needed this…in order to open up and share my past and deal with it.

One participant even experienced a positive physical benefit, which was expressed as follows: “Since I started writing my life story my blood pressure has decreased. As a therapist I know the cause and effect.” Birren and Deutchman (1991, 3) point out the therapeutic role of a guided autobiography group, not as formal therapy, but as having therapeutic value nevertheless. Just as exercise, friendships, gardening, and playing a musical instrument have “healing powers” so writing an autobiography in a group has “healing powers” (Birren and
Deutchman 1991, 3). Their work in leading guided autobiography groups for older adults report healing benefits such as:

...sense of increased personal power and importance, recognition of past adaptive strategies and application to current needs and problems, reconciliation with the past and resolution of past resentments and negative feelings, resurgence of interest in past activities or hobbies, development of friendships with other group members. (Birren and Deutchman 1991, 4)

Another key factor to self-acceptance is the experience of being affirmed as a person. 31 data instances speak to the participants’ sense of affirmation which was offered, not for what they accomplished or productively contributed to the society, but simply for who they are. In the first three sessions, the participants read and analyzed the spiritual autobiographies of Augustine, C.S. Lewis, Bunyan and other more contemporary writers (see Appendix D for curriculum details). In preparation for the fourth session, the participants were given the template shown in Appendix K to aid them in the writing of the first story from their own life. In the fourth session, the participants were invited to read an excerpt from their own autobiographical writing. About one hour of each subsequent group meeting was dedicated to listening and responding to the newly written life stories. This exercise was reported as a highlight by 100% of the participants. The community experience this kind of reading created is discussed in section titled Relationship with Others below but it was this practice that also contributed to the sense of affirmation. Each reading was followed by a moment of silence during which all were instructed to reflect on what they heard, to focus on the person who just shared a piece of their life with them and then to respond either with a follow-up
question or a word of affirmation without turning the conversation to someone or something else. One participant, who is a deep introvert, enthusiastically reflected on the value of being heard in this way:

…space to be heard and honoured - that's true …you don't really get that captive audience and there's something very, something really special about of having that captive audience like nobody's in a hurry, no one's on their phone, no one is watching TV…I was humbled, like there's still a word that is escaping me …honor? Yes I'm honored that someone would let me spend these minutes talking about myself and these small details, …little incidents that you know who else would care about that? …and I don't have to pay anyone … a counselor who is watching the clock …so yes…that's very novel…for me as a quieter person who in a chaotic situation I probably wouldn't bother even starting my story, knowing nobody would probably…hear it out and I would be cut off anyway…so it was an opportunity, a safe place to just talk about myself, which is not my natural way to be in public or even just like socially, culturally.

Secondly, the sense of affirmation came simply out of the opportunity to participate in a spiritual formation program designed for mature adults. This comment was made by a participant in the oldest age category:

I think the way we ignore this older generation, and my church has made it clear we are about seekers, so some of us older people had to be very graceful and loving to even stay in our church and find a niche to serve. Writing this really helped me to get a new handle on growing old, seeing that I could. …Writing all this and seeing the Lord’s hand in my life gave me that encouragement and confidence that I'm still of some value.

Finally, the sense of value of each person came out of the many readings which comprised the curriculum. One participant reflected on a reading which led to a new appreciation for the value of all people due to the subtle influence we have on one another, of which we are usually unaware: “I never thought of it that way but we all have influence on each other.”
In summary, the data offers strong evidence to support the claim that the process successfully facilitated a positive shift in the participants’ view of self and relationship to self. There was a notable exception in the group, however. One participant, I will refer to her as Kathy (not her real name), reported minimal impact in the relationship with Self category and in the relationship with God category. Kathy explained that she had no need to process life in this way, since that has been her habit all along. In addition, she habitually responds to God in obedience in the moment, that is, as soon as she feels conviction for sin she repents and if necessary makes reparations. Kathy felt that these two factors facilitated living a life which did not leave anything buried and in need of later reflection. The group patiently attempted to explain the difference between obedience and healing that comes from purposeful reflection, but without success. Kathy was also experiencing unusual life circumstances, which kept her from completing most of the assigned readings and writing. She did not begin writing her spiritual autobiography until late in the process and her writing style did not follow the given guidelines, in that it contained minimal reflection on the formative impact of the events about which she chose to write. Kathy reported an impact in the Others category, in that she felt a new appreciation and patience for others. Likewise she reported an impact in the Life Integration category, as she expressed a value in seeing a new connectedness of her life events. However, she was not able to report a shift in her self-acceptance, self-awareness, affirmation, or healing. Although there were others, who, on occasion, confessed that they had not completed all the readings, or that they only wrote a little between sessions,
all other participants expended at least some effort in applying the curriculum. My assessment is that Kathy gained the benefit related to the community experience (discussed in Relationship with Others below), but not in the area of increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance, since the process of writing and reflection is a necessary component toward this benefit.

As mentioned earlier, all four sub-categories within the impact on Self data category are closely related. This data category is made up of 145 data occurrences (32% of total impact categories). Each is represented with statements such as those quoted above, which reveal the perception of transformative impact on self-understanding and self-acceptance. The final combined effect resulted in a more gracious view of self, more love and appreciation for the self, which led to a new freedom to be authentic. One participant expressed this reality with these words: “I guess I feel I have a bit more permission to be who I am, which is big. I have been kind of apologizing all my life [for who I am].” Hence, many of the previously cited benefits of writing a spiritual autobiography, as they impact the self, that have been observed in the referenced literature, have been realized by this group.

**Relationship with Others**

The second largest volume of data comprised of references which spoke to the authentic and supportive community experienced in the groups. This category contains 141 references (31% of total impact categories) to the bonding experienced in the groups, the vulnerability and trust evidenced in the deeply
personal sharing, the value the participants placed on being able to share their stories with others and to hear others read, the grace and honour the community offered each participant, and the positive peer pressure experienced in the groups. The appreciation for the community experience was so overwhelming in the data and so readily observable in the groups that it is worth considering the key ingredients that contributed to the formation of such authentic and caring community. These key factors are: a shared desire for Christian spiritual formation, life maturity, the modeling of authentic sharing by the leader, clearly stated rules of engagement in the group, and a common quest. Following is a discussion of each of these factors.

The participants joined the research group with the anticipation of being spiritually challenged to growth in Christ-likeness. The in-take questionnaire data indicates that the participants already enjoyed a vibrant prayer life, daily Bible reading habits, and enjoyed active participation and service in church life. Hence, this was a group of Christ-followers who were already intentional and conscientious about maintaining an intimate relationship with God. My introductory comments to the group, as well as on-going conduct in the group, clearly communicated that we were here to grow together and that Christ was at the center of our reading, writing, and all other group activities. Having Christ-likeness as the common goal and desire, contributed to the quick respect and comradery demonstrated in the group. Secondly, each participant brought to the group considerable life-experience, and it was soon apparent that each of us experienced our own version of loss, betrayal, failure, joy, success and sorrow.
Birren and Deutchman speak of the “Oh, that’s nothing” phenomenon (Birren & Deutchman 1991, 51) when sharing life stories with other mature adults. This phenomenon describes a moment of confession of shame or guilt, with the expectation of judgment, or at least shock on the part of the listeners. Among mature adults however, there are few life experiences that illicit shock. While the group members often wept when listening to stories of abuse, deep loss, or painful rejection, there were never any expressions of condemnation. Early in the process, I clearly stated what kinds of responses to the readings of personal accounts were appropriate. I modelled these responses until the groups demonstrated the capacity to respond in a thoughtful and affirming way. Each reading was followed by a moment of silence during which the others were encouraged to listen to God’s heart for the person who read and to share out of that listening rather than share a personal opinion or a similar personal experience. Hence, the group practiced sustained focus on the reader offering a word of encouragement or scripture, expressing how the reading impacted them, asking a follow-up question or commenting on the writing style of the reader. The silence after the reading was expressly appreciated by the participants and comments to that effect were captured under the Process/Setting data category. The silence created a sort of holy space, a moment to honour the life story that was just shared, to honour the courage to share, and to give God space to work in the hearts of everyone in the group. One participant commented: “The sharing has purpose. Talking about our past has purpose…and then you share it, it's like, it's like that sacred moment…you're sharing with another person - your life.”
In addition, I contribute the success in having authentic sharing to the early modeling by the leader. In the very first session, I read a short story from my own spiritual autobiography about having to walk all alone to the doctor’s office, fevered with mumps at the age five. I invited questions and comments, along with guesses on how that experience might have formed a little girl. I then read my own reflection on that account and invited further analysis. The participants were able to observe how the sharing of a painful, and potentially shameful, part of my life could be opened up to others without any threat of diminishing me as a person, without any threat to the good opinion that others have of me, and without causing me emotional harm. Rather, I demonstrated how the understanding of the formational impact of that account helps me, today, to understand who I am, to understand the source of my strengths and weaknesses, and to be able to more intentionally invite Christ’s redeeming love into these places. The community experience was true not only within the small groups, but also when all three groups gathered on the retreat days, where the participants were teamed up with those from other groups. One participant expressed amazement at the “openness that was in my [retreat] group, how freely and intimately and vulnerably people shared at the retreat…how different this experience is from the normal Life Group experience!”

The final ingredient was the sense of a common quest among the group. Unlike a typical small group which meets week after week mostly for the purpose of getting together, the participants in this study were true sojourners. They together embarked to try something new, something that was at times demanding,
at times difficult, at times exhilarating, and at other times frustrating. Without realizing it, they were on a mission together and they encouraged each other to keep going, sharing tips along the way on what was working for them, expressing confidence in those who felt discouraged, praising those who demonstrated commitment. This common quest formed a community that may be described by Turner’s description of *communitas*, that is, a group formed around a rite of passage, often sacred in nature, which brings about a change in the members of the *communitas*, who while part of the process experience temporary separation and liminality from the wider community, but who eventually integrate back into normal society, always for the society’s benefit (Turner 1969, 94-97). Such an experience of a common bond is often shared by those who experience significant victory or loss together, those who go on mission together, etc. As an observer, I did not realize this concept of a common quest until later in the process, as I observed the group members appreciate the depth of others, as I observed them pat each other on the back, pick up those who were straggling and arm-in-arm keep moving forward on the quest to understand how we each came to be who we are. As the writing journey went on, they interacted more as a band of brothers, than members of a typical small group.

In summary, the factors of a shared desire for Christian spiritual formation, life maturity, the modeling of authentic sharing by the leader, clearly stated rules of engagement in the groups, and a common quest contributed to an exceptionally positive community experience.
There was a slight exception to this sense of community in the Wednesday evening group. This group had the most inconsistent attendance, in that members from this group most often attended other groups. This was also the group from which two participants dropped out. One of the members of this group was not a regular attender of Glencairn. The other group members also felt the transient nature of their group, but they nevertheless felt a bond with one another. In fact, after the conclusion of the research project, chose to be in the same small group together to continue the newly forged friendship. The non-Glencairn person did not feel as great a sense of bonding with the group, yet it was this person who most strongly expressed an observed value of community building that this process would bring to a local church.

…you who attend the same church…for you hearing each other’s stories…you get this insight into what God is doing in other people that are part of your church family, and so I think that really not only does it bring that church family together and strengthens it, but I think it teaches- upon you seeing God working through other people's lives…you are more apt to extend grace, you know. So it is it is a vehicle that I would imagine would really strengthen your church body. I feel like an outsider because I don't go here…but I know you did some story sharing in church and that's great idea, because I think that's a benefit that can definitely come out of this process that would not happen otherwise. When I think of, you know, people in my church - I don't know their inside stories, I just don’t know. So there is a benefit to that.

In contrast to this one exception, each group had at least one non-regular Glencairn attender and each of those formed close bonds within their groups. One of the non-Glencairn participants, in fact, chose to make Glencairn her home church toward the end of the research project. Hence, the experience of this one person was not typical of the rest of the participants and could be attributed to
several personal factors such as unusual trauma in that person’s life during the research process which made genuine bonding with others difficult, a more private personality type, and a less ideal group dynamic than was true in the other groups.

The second sub-category in the impact on Others is the increase of acceptance of others. While much of this is evident in the discussion above, this acceptance of others extended to those outside the group as well. One participant expressed this acceptance as increased patience for the seemingly slow growth in others:

When I listen to others’ stories it makes me realize that even in little things that happened that God is in it [tears]. And so when we are encouraging new believers and you know they falter, and you think, “Oh, I wish they would do more of this or whatever” then you think, “No, that's God’s business, you know. I gotta release them, and they'll have a story, you know”, and he brings people into our lives just like he's done in all of our lives to continue to grow us. So this has helped me see that.

As discussed in section on Relationship with Self on page 39, self-acceptance is a pre-requisite for the acceptance of others, both a necessary and desired quality in the body of Christ.

The fourth sub-category in the impact on relationship with others speaks to the positive peer pressure within the group. I have already touched on this observation above, under the discussion of the common quest phenomenon. There were 37 data instances which spoke to this positive peer pressure and three instances which expressed it as negative peer pressure described as discomfort with being exposed around a vulnerable issue, while feeling the expectation of the group for transparency:
I found this exercise intimidating actually; there are things that I have [pause] buried...is the right word, but I didn't want to go there again and I certainly didn't want to share that with anyone...you know to be in this group means that you're committing to be transparent and I didn't know how to balance that.

The same participant however also commented: “I enjoyed the stories, I didn't particularly want to read my stories but you know, it's the price of admission...”

and later stated: “all through my life I've always wanted you to see me with a mask that [looked] good, but here you have to...if you want to be real, you have to share it all and that's the value of the group - is to is to be open.”

Though participation was always explained as voluntary, it is evident that this is not how, at least at times, the participants felt. The above quote also indicates that the peer pressure, although not always perceived as positive, contributed to greater openness and to deeper reflection, and could be viewed as contributing to the overall impact of the group. The vast majority however perceived the peer pressure as positive and encouraging:

I think listening to each one’s stories as we've gone through these sessions has given, I know for me, it has given me the courage to look back and given me the courage to write and to speak the stories. So I think we give each other - I don't know - courage and permission - I think it is, yeah we give each other courage to speak about things that are hard.

There were two other benefit factors that came out of the community sharing process. One was a periodic “aha moment” which happened as part of the reading. That is, as a person read their story out loud, a new realization or a new understanding came. At times, this realization came out of the comments of the group, and at times immediately after the reading. For example, one participant read a story describing how she felt, when at age four, her brother told her she
was too small to carry a stool, and ordered her to set it down. As soon as she finished reading, with eyes wide open, she exclaimed: “I just had an insight! That stool incident started an on-going adversarial relationship with men in positions of authority – doctors [she was a nurse], pastors, my husband…all of them!” There are 40 data instances which speak to such phenomenon of realization in the process of writing or sharing. This data is captured under the Process/Phenomenon category P1 and is with further discussed in the Experience of the Process section below.

Gratitude to others in the past, perhaps surprisingly, received a negligible mention. Since the research data was primarily gathered in the exit interviews which reflected on the impact and the experience of being part of the research project, it is understandable that specific mention of others in the past would be in the minority. Such expressions of gratitude were, however, frequently present in the autobiographical writings where the participants processed life events and described the people who were part of these events. It is in these writings that the relationships with others from their past would be explored, and where further acceptance of others, expression of grace and forgiveness, as well as appreciation for the impact of others would be found. One of the participants decided to spend the months following the completion of his memoir to connect with the many people who had been instrumental in his formation.

Birren and Deutchman (1991, 54) identify a final benefit gained from writing a spiritual memoir in a group as the antidote to isolation which is a common experience for older adults. As children move out of the home, as
parents, friends or spouse dies, loss of intimate relationships becomes a frequent experience for mature adults. Writing and sharing one’s life story in community fosters new “late-life relationships and confidant relationships” (Birren and Deutchman 1991, 54). Such formation of friendship was evident in the groups that were part of this research, as the group members began connecting outside of the group meetings, sharing health tips, recipes, and simply spending time together.

One participant wanted to join the research group but not participate in the community experience. She wanted to work through the curriculum on her own. I explained that I would be happy to give her curriculum, but that that the research included the experience of the whole process to which the community was key. She chose not to join. I suspect that in writing a spiritual memoir in isolation this person might have gained some benefit in the impact on Self category in increased self-awareness, but gain minimally in the increased sense of affirmation and not at all in the benefits that impact the relationship with others. Kathy demonstrated that one can realize a benefit in being part of this kind of a group even without much reflection and writing, but not without the community experience.

Finally, the impact on community as a result of this research is evident in two spin-off groups that started as the research groups were disbanded. One is a “reading group,” that is, a group which is continuing to write their life story, meeting together once per month just to listen and to respond to what others have written. This is a group open to all who were in the research group. Second is a men’s discipleship group, led by one of the men in the research group and
attended by the other men from the research group who have become quite close through the process. This group is open to other men from the wider church community.

In summary, the experience of writing a spiritual autobiography in a group experience such as was designed in this research project, led to a valuable community experience which benefited not only the group members for the duration of the group, but also others in their circles of influence on longer term basis.

**Relationship with God**

The third largest volume of data contained references relating to a perceived change in the participants’ relationship with or understanding of God. 114 data instances (25% of the four total impact categories) make up this category. Of the four sub-categories in this data set, the largest is the one that speaks to an experience of God or an awareness of God’s presence or guidance during the course of the research (see Table 5 above). This finding is understandable as the participants were exposed to various spiritual practices together (for example on retreat) and individually (for example meeting with a spiritual director). The retreats were particularly designed to facilitate an experience of God by means of silence, guided reflection, imaginative prayer, gospel imagination exercises, and more. The experience of, and movement toward, God was reported by majority of the participants, and none expressly reported a lack of such experience or movement. One illustration of this
experience is a gospel imagination exercise using Mark chapter 10, which the
groups experienced together on retreat day. The text used in this exercise
describes Jesus blessing the children. A number of the participants reported
profound experiences with Jesus during this exercise. One previously underwent a
similar exercise using this text. At that time she had seen herself as a rock in the
field where Jesus held the children on his lap. She reported with amazement that
this time she saw herself as a little girl on Jesus’ lap and was able to whisper,
“scared” into his ear. In the exit interview, all but one participant affirmed the
value of the retreats in the overall curriculum. The one participant who did not,
however, stated that the retreats provided a meaningful experience of connecting
with God and others, but he felt this experience was not directly related to the
skill of writing a spiritual autobiography. Others, however, considered the insights
about self and God which they gained on the retreat day as key to further self-
understanding and reflection. The same participant who felt the retreats were not a
necessary component of the process expressed his new insight into his
relationship with God in these words:

    I think there’s lots of other people like me who in the church community
    are doing great things in their own strength and not aware of the lack of
    their connection with God…and when you come here you have to figure
    that out.

Since the intent of the spiritual formation model, on which this research project
was based, is to employ the writing of a spiritual memoir is as a tool for the
Christian spiritual formation to which an experience of God is essential, I would
continue employing the various spiritual practices, including the retreats, in future such groups.

The research proposal also anticipated a perception of increased sense of God’s presence and insight into how God worked in the past events of the writer’s life (see the Scope section). 38 data instances captured the participants’ expressions of this newly acquired sense that God was not only present over the course of their life, but was actively involved in the decisions, changes of life direction, and in the provision as perceived in hind-sight. Perhaps the most profound kinds of these realizations were those connected to God’s sovereign presence in the experience of suffering, even deep and prolonged type of suffering. The new awareness of the formative importance of the suffering resulted in a new found acceptance of the pain, perhaps even its necessity. The following comment illustrates the realization and the acceptance, even appreciation for the suffering: “I realize that I had to go through it, without this suffering I would have been a spoiled child, no good to anybody. I'm a better person for it.” Dillon’s research found that those who wrote a spiritual autobiography were “almost unanimously agreed (82%) that writing their story put them in touch with a dynamic and resonant force behind and within their lives that helped give their lives new meaning, coherence, and direction” (Dillon 2011, 147). In the case of this research, the participants identified this “dynamic and resonant force” in their lives as the gracious will and merciful providence of God. When listing benefits of being part of this group, one participant explained that “it is a method to do some unlocking and discovery of where God is working and has
been working in one’s life.” Another expressed with depth of emotion the fact that writing about her life not only helped her to see God’s mercy and faithfulness in her own life, but also in the lives of others in the group who shared their stories:

You know, you can read scripture like in Lamentations, you know, you remember the bitterness and gall, and the wanderings and then it says, you know, I have hope, because of the Lord’s mercy [tears]. You read that in the Bible but when you listen to the stories, then, that comes to life, you know, his faithfulness and his unfailing love that brings that to life, and then, you know, when it says in Corinthians about looking at the unseen not seen, I mean we lived it! And we didn't even see it back there. So this [process of writing and meeting together] helps us to see the unseen.

This increased sense of God’s presence and insight into how God had worked in the writer’s life is also expected by , ministries such as the Navigators, who offer a guide to writing one’s spiritual autobiography in order to “examine your life in order to understand the ways in which God has been active there” (Peace 1998, 7). They claim the following two key outcomes of this process:

learn…how to notice the activity of God in your life and in the lives of those around you (the spiritual discipline of noticing), and how to share with others what God has been doing in your life and your responses to God’s activity – the good, the bad, and the ugly! (Peace 1998, 7)

The findings make evident that participants in this research project also realized these benefits.

The new experiences of God during the research process, along with the new realization of God’s presence over the course of the writer’s life, naturally lead to a shift in how the participants understand and relate to God. Two sub-categories shown in Table 5 above, G2 (shift in God-image) and G1 (increased trust in God) capture the data pertaining to these shifts. Some of the participants who have not previously processed past suffering in the light of God’s love
seemed to have felt uneasiness about reconciling suffering with a good, caring, powerful God. The reflection, however, led to an understanding of the valuable formative impact of the suffering along with God’s mitigating or redeeming presence. One participant reflected that in writing she realized “how he [God] protected me from the rat poison, from all the things that happened in my life and how he protected me over and over and over again. To me that was like monumental to see how much God loves us that he saves us and protects us.” Another participant realized that the credit for the fact that her life had “not gone off the rails” was not hers to claim. Rather she explained: “I thought I was making good choices, but really in hindsight I could have gone off the rails all kinds of times. God was the one who kept me on the [unseen] rails all along.” Others expressed a sense of being “overwhelmed by God’s generosity” toward them, or that God was indeed good despite the suffering in life: “I didn't have objections to the existence [of God] but merely to the caring, to being a loving God; that I think has changed.” The data also revealed that the participants’ view of God affected their view of themselves. One participant shared that she: “felt the joy of the Lord and the delight he feels over her, and is beginning to like herself.”

Birren and Deutchman (1991, 1) speak of the value of a new perspective gained by the writers of spiritual autobiographies. The reality of a new perspective gained by looking at life from the perspective of the present and looking at life from the perspective of God was evident among the participants in this research. The following quote expresses the value of writing one’s life story
from a new perspective – God’s perspective and retelling of the story to a caring community in this new light:

I liked reading my own story [to the group] because I felt actually like I was reading God's version of my life. I think that's what was one of the highlights for me… I really felt like I was seeing and hearing my own life in God's eyes … So that's why I liked [reading] because it was comforting for me to hear it spoken in God's eyes… because it's another perspective that's different from my own, which is often not always healthy and positive and it's just one perspective… So each time I had this need to read it - not, not for other people but for myself. There is a real healing in reading my story out loud to someone and it felt like a safe place to do it.

This participant experienced perhaps the most profound shift in God-image which she explained to the group by means of a sketch reproduced in the figure below.

![Image of God and My Life Before & After]

**Figure 7 - God and My Life Before & After**

The first image shows how she saw her life before writing her spiritual autobiography. Her life was the line that attempted to stay as close to God as possible as God was supposed to be the center of her life. The arrows represented the suffering that barraged her life and with each arrow she sought to find a way closer to God, for comfort, protection, understanding and healing.

The second image is how she sees God relative to her life now. She now sees God as encompassing all of life – she truly lives and breathes and has her
being within God. The arrows still come, but they are filtered by God and since she lives all of her life in him, they have less power and lesser, if any, negative consequence.

Such new perceptions of God contributed to an increased sense of being loved by God, an increased trust in God, which contributed to an increased desire for a vibrant relationship with God. One participant affirmed: “Writing has helped me resolve the trust issue. I know what I know - God is trustworthy.”

In summary, the data indicates a positive shift in the participant’s understanding of God, a heightened sensitivity to God’s Spirit, an improved image of God, an increased desire for God, and an increased trust in God. As the process of writing a spiritual memoir in this instance is part of a larger model of spiritual formation designed to stimulate spiritual growth in mature adults, the findings in this data category validate that the model is suitable for this purpose. As the experience was similar across the groups, it is likely that groups in other local church settings would experience the same benefits in the area of relationship to God. However, additional research is required to study cross-contextual application.

**Life Integration**

The research proposal anticipated an increased sense of integration of life experiences (see Scope section). In fact, based on previous research in this area, primarily the research conducted by Dillon (2011) as described in Chapter III, points to this sense of life integration as the greatest potential benefit of the
writing of a spiritual memoir. Figure 8 - Data in the Life Integration Category below, indicates that the participants in this research mentioned impact in this area, pointing to a new perspective, a new sense of purposefulness to their life direction, and a new sense of the whole, however, considerably less frequently than in the areas of relationship with self, others and God.

Yet comments expressing new realizations of how pieces of life, previously thought to be insignificant or needlessly negative, formed crucial links in the chain were expressed throughout the duration of the research. Comments such as, “I did not see before how that was such an important experience in my life” were common but not always captured in the field notes. I attribute the reason for the relatively low frequency of mentions of impact on life integration to two reasons. The first is the fact that only one participant completed his spiritual autobiography by the last session. Since the participants wrote through their life in chronological order and much of the writing revolved around
childhood years, by the end of the research project most participants were writing about experiences in their 30s and 40s. Since most of the participants were in the late 50-70 age range, many have therefore reflected on only about half of their life at the time the final data was collected. It is understandable then that the sense of seeing all of life as an integrated whole could not have yet happened to the full extent possible. Certainly pieces were falling into place, but the whole of life had not been examined by the time the research ended. In fact, 100% of the participants reported an increased sense of life integration or purposefulness, a “belonging” of all the pieces of their life, though the participants referred to this outcome to a lesser degree relative to the impact on the relationship with self, others and God.

The second reason why the data volume in this category is considerably lower than the others, is that the concept of life integration is far more elusive, more difficult to grasp and to express than one’s perceived understating and relationship with self, others, and God. As was discussed in the section reporting the findings on the Self category, the high occurrence of data relating to self-acceptance is closely related to a sense of self-understanding and affirmation. However understanding of the self and acceptance of it comes as a result of understanding and accepting the shaping influences of life, the purpose for which God brought people, events and circumstances which formed the person and guided the direction of his/her life. It is possible therefore that the effect of increased life integration is actually captured in the data relating to self-
acceptance. The following quote is illustrative of this very close connection between life-integration and self-acceptance:

For me the value is that it's connected to a lot of dots...I could start to see the picture and it made sense, and it helped me understand that, you know, in my times of suffering I developed compassion, I developed strength, I developed my sense of who I am, and the gift that I have of being with people as a nurturer, and so it kind of all fit together in that, like, the really exciting thing for me is that God was there through it all so it just feels so much better. It's like God was making this puzzle and all the pieces fit together, affirmed of who I am and it all fits - that's a big value.

This comment shows that as the person “connected the dots”, understood the positive formative effect of her suffering, perceived God’s presence and purpose in it, she experienced healing “it just feels so much better,” and the end result was an affirmation of the big-hearted, passionate person she is. At the start of the research project, this participant saw her big-heartedness and depth of feeling as not always a desired character quality, leading to inner turmoil, at times conflict, at other times plunging her into despair. Coming to terms with the formational effect of her ethnic heritage and her life circumstances led to an acceptance of these qualities. Hence the above quote, though speaking more to the effect on the self, demonstrates that this effect was actually the result of increased life integration. Dillon argues that the process of writing a spiritual autobiography can be understood as a person’s attempt to bring a greater degree of consciousness to a “story that has been struggling to realize itself in one’s life over time” (Dillon 2011, 149). Though this research did not demonstrate this reality as the primary outcome, the experience of this increased ability to understand and accept the whole of one’s life was nevertheless profoundly present.
...before this I've looked back and looked at my life in pieces or sections, that weren't related and this has help me see a bigger picture the overall picture and connect the dots together to understand the purpose of my life till today and I feel like it's helped me, I understand myself.

Kathy, whose writing contained very little reflection on the formative effect of her life events, nevertheless illustrates that even without such reflection, the sheer process of putting the story together leads to a renewed appreciation of one's life as a whole, and as a spiritual whole:

I found it virtually impossible to look back and see this [an event in life] was a spiritual thing – I just didn’t see anything in spiritual terms before I was converted. I saw my life in terms of promotions…But when you start looking back…you see what was really going on. Before I would say a story here and there, but I did not see the connecting flow. So I found it really helpful to for the first time in a lifetime to sit down, catalog and to take the random story here and there, but I didn't see…the way the pieces were fitting together….So what I have enjoyed and I'm still enjoying is that once you start getting into a theme it's sort of like layers of your brain open up and then you remember other things, you know what I mean, you remember the big thing you wrote and you go oh yeah, now that's the same as I that thing and I never saw that before.

Wakefield refers to this effort of making sense of all of one’s life as highly valuable, suggesting that perhaps the spiritual autobiography is actually a “holistic autobiography”:

...such autobiographical writings come from the deepest part of oneself, that attempts to see and make sense of one’s life and experiences in the most complete and meaningful context. Such an endeavor tries to view life not in the separate compartments into which we so often separate our experience, like romantic, economic, professional, physical, mental, or emotional, but as a whole, and in relation to the whole of creation. Perhaps this manner of writing might also appropriately be called “holistic autobiography.” (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 395/2821)

In summary, though the volume of data in the life-integration category is lower than in the other categories, the impact was nevertheless noteworthy and
reported by 100% of the participants. For some, the life-integration realization was profound, for others less so, but each experienced a positive change in this area. If the research sought to study only this benefit of writing a spiritual memoir, then the field observation and exit interview questions might be constructed in such a way as to gather data pertaining to this factor more intentionally.

**Experience of the Process**

The largest volume of data relates to responses offering descriptions of the experience of being part of this research group. 268 (35% of total) data instances touch on the eight topics grouped under the Process category (Figure 9). It is likely that the large amount of data related to the description of the experience was generated due to the style of the exit interview which opened with a general invitation to reflect on the experience of being of this research group (see Appendix G). It is also easier to describe an experience, than to assess its specific impact on the relationship with self, others, God and on one’s sense of life integration. In addition, since the research took place over the course of nine months, the participants had the opportunity to incorporate the shifts in the four impact categories, hence by the time of the exit interview, the incremental changes that occurred in the inner person months ago would be more challenging to detect.
The following discussion will address sub-category P1 (the phenomenon of writing and sharing), P6 & 7 (curriculum), and P5 (perceived growth). Sub-category P2 (setting) was already addressed above, as part of the discussion of the significance of impact on the Relationship with Others.

The Phenomenon of Writing and Sharing

As part of the startup kit, each participant was given a lined notebook for keeping meeting notes and for composing their life stories. The participants were instructed to write their spiritual memoirs first using pen and paper and then transcribe what they wrote into an electronic format. The benefits of writing with pen and paper, versus typing on a keyboard, are known to educators and therapists who employ them to increase the learner’s focus, for better information retention, as therapy for certain learning disabilities and for other benefits (Bounds 2010 and Gayomali 2015). It was the benefit of greater focus and better quality of writing that was important in this research, hence the instruction to begin with pen and paper. In addition, the participants were instructed to ask God to help them see
their past and to give them courage to be explorers of themselves each time they set out to write. Several of the participants reported a phenomenon which happened as part of the writing. The writing seemed to have created a focused meeting space with God, it was a time of something like written praying focused on the self. One participant expressed this phenomenon in this way:

I think it is also a kind of visitation almost, you know, the presence of God that takes place when you are writing those deep hurtful things, you know God meets you in it, that's, that's how I felt, the presence of God just kind of dropped down into it and you just began to write and…that sound so simplistic but, but I really do think that's what happens.

Another expressed the therapeutic effect experienced in the act of writing in God’s presence in this way:

I was able to have breakthrough after breakthrough while writing my history and God visited me with revelation after revelation of the issues that had been part of my formative years that I was hiding from.

Hence the act of writing assisted by the Holy Spirit and focused by the use of pen and paper, not unlike reflective journaling, created a holy ground on which the writer and God could meet and sift through the writer’s life together. The writer offered memory, emotion, and at times confession. God offered a new perspective, often a new memory, comfort and assurance. The writer and God therefore re-wrote the life event together. They were co-authors of the new story, offering a new narrative to the writer. Wakefield comments on his own observation of this phenomenon as follows:

What I saw now was that the past can actually change. By remembering and writing down our past from a spiritual perspective (that is, taking into account its meaning in the context of our life’s journey) and then reading it aloud to others, we can sometimes see and understanding it in a way that makes it different. Since our past experience only exists now in the our
own mind, it only “lives” in our recreation of it – our changed experience of it becomes the reality, and it that sense we really do have the power to change our own past. (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 570/2821)

One participant habitually asked God to give her his opinion of an account as she completed writing about it. For example, she talked about a time her dog was lost for a few days and then found in the woods. At the end of the story, she would write what God had told her about this incident in her life. Each time, the response from God was lengthy, written from God’s point of view to her, fully affirming, at times offering interpretation of the formative impact, at other times assuring her of God’s presence in the incident. There was no formula to this response, and each time the participant read it, the group was deeply affected. The significance of the event often became apparent to the participant in this response from God, not from her own analysis of the effect. Spiritual formation works with the assumption that the presence of God brings healing and abundance of life. The data supports this assumption. I believe that the use of pen and paper and the invitation to God to join the writing process are key ingredients in realizing this benefit. Wakefield observes: “Writing is itself a form of medication, which we all know is good for the body and mind and soul” (Wakefield 1990, Kindle 193/2821). The phenomenon extended to the process of reading the written story to the group. The impact of such sharing was already discussed in the Relationship with Self and Relationship with Others sections above. Here I’d like to only add that this sharing provided yet another such space with God and with sympathetic community, both healing influences on the reader.
The Curriculum

Data related to the content of the curriculum contained 51 data instances of appreciation and positive feedback, plus an additional 22 instances which pointed to the challenge the curriculum offered. Appendix D Curriculum Summary list the resources brought in to support education and reflection to each of the group meetings. A glance at the list in this appendix reveals that the participants were given a rich diet (one participant chose the words: “such a rich banquet of materials”) of classical Christian writings, extensive thought on spiritual formation, and some psychological understanding of the make-up and functioning of a person. The material was chosen to supplement reflection in particular stages of life. For example, when writing about childhood and family dynamics, the participants were introduced to attachment theories, the forming of memories, family systems, and the Enneagram personality assessment. The topic of the role of suffering in spiritual formation was introduced when writing about later life. Though the outline of the curriculum was completed before the groups started to meet, on occasion I introduced material in response to the apparent group need. The following comment reflects that the intentional structure of the curriculum was noticed by at least some of the participants: “I have never experienced anything that has brought me to the inward workings of ‘me’ than this. Every last detail has been an extraordinary strategic exercise to take us inward and upward.” Selections of works were read out loud during the group meetings and discussed along the way. When the material was difficult to understand due to specialized vocabulary or
new concepts, I simply translated the meaning and simplified the thought as we went along. One participant in the oldest age group commented:

I didn’t understand really what I was getting into and the more I read and the more I prayed and the more I kept meeting with the rest of you folks, the more I got excited and I thought – this is neat! … this went beneath the layers and … it challenged you! When we started writing and reading I thought this is way over my head… but it ended up being very good, thank you very much.

Another commented: “The readings were challenging, but helpful and interesting.” Since this research project was designed in response to the problem of mature believers being under-challenged in their spiritual growth in the local church, I intentionally introduced the participants to challenging concepts. The robust discussion of each new topic showed that the participants were engaged and capable of grasping the, at times challenging, concepts. It is possible that the very fact that this group of participants signed up for this research project might indicate that they are representative of the more keen, more dedicated, more courageous type of Christ follower. It might be these characteristics which helped them overcome the curriculum challenges.

Twenty-two data instances spoke to the difficulty in incorporating the required reading and writing into the participants’ life rhythm. This was particularly true of the eight employed participants. In the future, I would seek to reduce the amount of reading, for example, by choosing select chapters of Augustine or C.S. Lewis rather than the whole work.

Furthermore, the curriculum directed the writers to write about life events that seemed meaningful to them. Only a few exercises early in the process sought
to stimulate memory. Other spiritual autobiography programs tend to direct the writers to a specific topic. Birren and Deutchman for example, suggest writing along the following pre-set themes:

1. The major branching points in your life
2. Your family
3. Your major life work or career
4. The role of money in your life
5. Your health and body image
6. Your sexual identity, sex roles and sexual experiences
7. Your experiences with death and your ideas about death
8. Your loves and hates
9. The meaning of your life, your aspirations and life goals
10. The role of music, art, or literature in your life
11. Your experiences with stress

(Birren and Deutchman 1991, 67-79)

Birren and Deutchman offer a series of interview style questions to help the participants recall and write along these themes. Atkinson likewise suggests series of interviews as a tool in writing a spiritual memoir (Atkinson 1998). The approach in this research was to invite the participants to, along with God, scan their life for formative moments, people, or circumstances and write about those. The primary workbook, *The Arc of the Arrow* (Erickson 1998), offered some guidance on what to consider in writing. The additional curriculum materials served as resources for understanding and deeper reflection. As a result of the freedom to write about what was meaningful and to identify one’s own theme, some participants chose personally meaningful themes around which to organize their story. One who had served in the Navy chose the sailing analogy for his life story: smooth seas, storms on the horizon, doldrums and shipwrecks identified parts of his life. Another chose a landscape analogy: springs of refreshment,
mountains of hope, bridges of rescue, and sinking sands served as thematic descriptions of her life events. I conclude that though the guided themes would serve for an easier start to the writing, the less structured approach creates space for greater creativity and greater freedom for God’s Spirit to lead the writer. The participants offered a number of suggestions on how to improve the curriculum, these have been noted and many will be implemented next time this program is offered.

**The Perception of Growth**

The next data set in the Experience of the Process category refers to the reported perception of personal growth. Growth, in this case, is defined as instances of observed or reported sense of increased inner strength, stronger faith, a movement toward God, a transformation of an aspect of the self, and the acquisition of a new spiritual practice or skill. This data set contained the most reported instances across all data categories, consisting of 77 mentions. It would indeed be a surprise and a disappointment if an experience designed to be this robust resulted in reports of low growth quotients. Since this case study aimed to assess whether writing a spiritual autobiography forms a useful component in a church’s spiritual formation program, this data set is very helpful in formulating the answer to the research question.

The most easily observed area of growth was in the acquisition of new spiritual disciplines and skills. The curriculum introduced the participants to new spiritual disciplines such as a form of the Ignatian examen, gospel imagination,
spiritual direction, silence and solitude and others. Though many of these disciplines are not commonly practiced in the Mennonite Brethren context, all participants embraced them without hesitation. One reported difficulty with one of the imagination exercises as it involved swimming. This participant cannot swim and his imagination could not transcend this reality. On the whole, the participants reported benefits from exposure to the disciplines. There was evidence to indicate that these skills were incorporated into the participants’ lives. For example, at least one participant went on her own silent day retreat, another reported a new habit of daily Bible reading using the gospel imagination technique, and many reported benefits of the practice of meeting with a spiritual director. One participant reported:

I was a little bit skeptical about meeting with a spiritual director, but those sessions were quite helpful. I was dealing with a longstanding issue and I was able to sort of find a solution with her and in part of what we were learning about - was sort of was a catalyst.

Another was able to share the recently acquired examen practice with a family member: “I was telling my one Daughter-in-law [about being in the spiritual autobiography group], she wanted to know about that Jesuit thing [Ignatian examen]. I showed it to her, she took a picture of it with her smartphone and now she is doing too.” Such acquisition and incorporation of a new spiritual discipline illustrates a new way to create space for God in one’s life and an increase in the repertoire of tools with which to disciple others.

A second key type of skill was the new knowledge of how to purposefully and effectively invite God into one’s ongoing reflection on life. This skill has life-
long application and is useful in helping others process current or past life events. Though most of the participants had not completed their memoirs by the end of the research project, they all, apart from Kathy perhaps, understood the process and knew how to carry on. The comment below is illustrative of such development of a new skill and habit:

I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to finish this [writing due to illness in the family]….but I know what I'm doing, and you know, I am way behind from where I would like to be in my writing, but I know how to proceed. And so it's not an issue that I'm not done and to check it off like I like to do, because I know that will come.

Another perception of growth reported by the participants spoke directly to a positive movement in their spiritual formation, which has been defined in the Error! Reference source not found. section on page Error! Bookmark not defined. as the ongoing process which the Triune God, in the context of a biblical community, transforms the life and character of the believer to be more and more like the life and character of Jesus. It is this movement toward the life and character of Christ that is the heart of the Great Commission, therefore, at the heart of every Christian life. This transformation becomes evident through a variety of indicators just two of these are: a movement from bondage to freedom, and an increased passion and desire for God.

The data indicates that these growth indicators were evident in at least some of the participants. One participant reported the following positive movement in personal holiness which he referred to as a “significant breakthrough.” In writing he considered a sin that has been with him always, gained understanding of it along with a new ability to say no. “I'm further than I
would have been [in this area of personal holiness] without this group.” The discussion in section Relationship with Self, regarding healing, self-acceptance and affirmation contains evidence of increased personal freedom, a movement away from bitterness, false-perceptions of self, or fears which constitute bondage in the Christian life. Hence, an increase in the sense of freedom to live out of the true self is an indication of movement toward Christ-likeness.

A number of the participants reported that the experience of writing their spiritual memoir has set them off on an on-going path of growth. One participant observed: “I realize after I shared my reflection, specifically the one on suffering that I still have much more to explore, so I am seeing that perhaps all our insights are a work in progress.” Another expressed a new understanding about self along with an expectation that God will continue to press into that area: “I could already see there’s a pattern in my life where I do focus on the hard stuff. And so I see God revealing that and challenging me with that. So I don’t know where that’s all going to go.” Another stated: “I believe that God is inviting me toward vulnerability” with the intention to respond to that invitation. For others, the growth was difficult to pinpoint, rather it was a vague sense that God was opening up a way to a new significant way of being: “I am grasping something really significant is happening here, and I sense that it is deep and I’m barely grasping it at the concept level, I hope to follow all these concepts deeper.”

Finally, the data referring to personal growth contains references to an increased passion and desire for God. It is likely that this data set represents an outcome of the findings in the God category, where the data focused on references
to a shift in God-image, an increased trust in God, and other aspects of the participants’ relationship with God. One couple expressed the increased love for God as an answer to previous prayer: “We were praying...for God to take us back to that first love – when we were just crazy God followers…and I just about got there.” Another, very clearly felt the difference in her spiritual vibrancy resulting from this process: “I was really in the place of dryness and I feel much less dry now, so I think it's very been very worthwhile.” Others were less able to articulate the before and after, but nevertheless, sensed a spiritual value to the process: “In, in terms of my own growth…it's hard to evaluate when you're still in it. I find I do better in hindsight but it has been a really been positive thing.” The spiritual formation model on which this research was founded argues that long-term believers are at risk of settling into a spiritual plateau, where following Jesus becomes comfortable. As the participants listed the types of people for whom writing a spiritual memoir would be beneficial, they mentioned, among others, “people for whom the church has become a very safe place…lost the fire, and the fire went out… Does this process shake them out of the plateau? Yes, if they went into it [with that intent].” Hence, the participants perceived their experience as useful for stimulating movement in their spiritual life. The goal of a spiritual formation program for mature believers is to stimulate renewed growth. The data collected in this research indicates that in this case that objective was achieved.

It would be unproductive to attempt to ascribe the cause for the growth described above to any particular factor of this research. This growth is a result of the sum total of the participants’ life experience over the duration of the research.
project. Some of the personal insights and breakthroughs might have occurred in while writing or reading, in the spiritual direction sessions that accompanied the program, in personal devotional times, or in Sunday morning worship experiences that would have happened regardless of this research project. However, the participation in this research group provided space, intention, and fuel for the work of God’s Spirit in all spheres of the participants’ lives.

Finally, the process honoured the adult learning style. The facilitator was one of the group, seated in a circle with the other participants. Information download was limited and delivered in a conversational style, allowing for questions, comments, and discussion. The participants were not put in the role of a student; rather they were treated as experienced fellow sojourners to the facilitator/researcher. Even though, as discussed earlier, the curriculum was rich and varied, the point of the meetings and the readings was never to simply equip the participants with more information. It was to offer information for the sake of transformation. Unlike some Bible study groups or other church adult education programs, the discussion always came back to the goal of the Christian life which is to become like Christ. One of the oldest participants, who periodically expressed the challenge of the curriculum, grasped this goal as follows: “the last thing I need is more head knowledge – and this is not about head knowledge, it is about meeting God and transformation.”

In summary, the Experience of the Process data indicates that the process of writing and sharing, the robust curriculum, the adult-style interaction, along
with the other ingredients mentioned above created an environment that was conducive for spiritual growth of mature believers.

Personal Reflection

My facilitation of the groups writing their spiritual memoirs was an experience accompanied with a depth of blessing. As a co-learner in the group, I benefited from all the factors described above: from the rich curriculum which I first had the pleasure of researching, selecting and processing with each of the groups, from the love and support of the community which was especially meaningful due to the constant flow of gratitude, appreciation, and reports of growth by the participants, from the experience of my own writing and sharing (though the sharing ceased as the other participants started to bring their own stories to share), and from the transforming presence of God’s Spirit with us. To lead such a group created space for God to work in my own life. As a practicing spiritual director, I have the privilege of observing God’s transforming power in the lives of those who open themselves up to him. The facilitation of these groups felt very similar. I served, in part, as a spiritual director, with the front row seat to the powerful interaction between people and God’s Spirit. The importance of the setting was already discussed above. The data and my experience leads me to conclude that to duplicate these results the facilitator of the group would have to approach the group leadership with the same philosophy and bear the same objective of creating space for God as primary. The leadership of this group requires skillful facilitation focused less on the delivery of new knowledge and
more on reflection on already acquired knowledge and on the synthesis of this knowledge. Secondly, my close relationship with the participants offered an ideal foundation which may not be possible to duplicate in other settings. All but few participants came into the research with previous personal experience of me as a positive spiritual influence in their lives. I would like to offer this curriculum to a group in a local church where I’m not a known entity to see whether the setting of trust and open sharing would be as quickly realized as it was in this case.

However, it is likely that trusted spiritual leaders could apply this curriculum with the expectation of the same outcomes in their own context. During this process, I looked for potential leaders from among the participants who could facilitate this kind of a group at Glencairn in the future. I considered those necessary qualities described above first and the ability to deliver the content secondly. There were several in the group who qualify.

Secondly, I was deeply moved by the constant faithfulness of God in his response to the desire of this group of people to draw closer to him. God showed up in every session, he was present in the community dynamic, he was present with the participants in their reading and their writing, and he spoke in intensely personal ways during the retreat times. My assessment is that God spared no effort in responding to his people, in loving them, in healing them, and in inviting them further and higher in their relationship with him. More so, God was present even when I was not. The second all-day retreat was reported by most participants as a powerful experience of meeting with God. My memory of that retreat is rather bleak. I was well prepared, but came in with very low expectations. We
were not able to get the date or the space I planned for. I was disappointed with our meeting room, it was a gray, cold, basement space, with no art on the walls. The chairs were uncomfortable, and there was no space for privacy on the grounds. To start the retreat, I invited everyone to write out and to speak out our desires for the day, we then posted them on the wall. My desire was for a compassionate and loving heart (as I have been feeling overworked and irritable in the days leading up to the retreat), sensitivity to the Spirit (so I could move the retreat according to God’s agenda), and the presence of Christ without which I knew this day would be a disappointment. During the whole retreat day, I paid attention to the conversation and to the leading of the Spirit, but for the most part felt much of the time as just going through the motions. I was coming down with something as by the end of the retreat day I was down with flu-like symptoms. Due to a busy schedule, I had not prayed enough in preparation for the retreat, and I had even forgotten to ask our church intercessors to pray for us while we were there. It was almost to my amazement that I observed the powerful movement of the Spirit, the enthusiastic responses of everyone in the groups. I was humbled and grateful that the Spirit worked in-spite of my deficiencies for the sake of the people who made themselves available to God. Of course, it is God’s presence that accomplishes any growth or transformation. This research experience assured me again, that God will be found by all who diligently seek him.

Thirdly, I was encouraged by the genuine desire of the participants to keep growing in the Christian faith. The questions they asked, the commitment they showed through the consistent attendance, and the effort they put into the
assigned work was evidence that they are willing to invest much into their relationship with God. As considered above, this group may not be representative of all who are in the church, but is certainly illustrative of many mature believers who are spiritually under-challenged in their local church context. One participant in this group expressed her sorrow that not all believers invest this much in their relationship with God in these words:

I believe the tragedy in the evangelical church in general is that there’s a lot of people that don’t want to go deep with God, they’re quite satisfied with going to church and maybe I’ll go to a small group…there is no hunger there for pursuing God (I agree)...They haven’t hit the wall yet...[or]...they’re not willing to work it through, so they go back and they stay on a plateau.

While it may be true that there are many in the church who are on a plateau, tools such as this curriculum are invitations to keep growing.

Finally, I was blessed with the precious and rare experience of authentic and affirming community. Though I belong to a small group and have a number of good friends in my church and elsewhere, I only experience community that offers this kind of spiritual support and genuine love in my spiritual direction support group, which consists of spiritual directors who were trained together and who continue to meet for group spiritual direction. I attribute the similarity between these two groups to the fact that both have Christ and personal formation into his image as a commonly stated goal and that all the activities of the group center around that goal. Community and friendships and practical support are outcomes rather than the explicit goals of these groups. My plan is to continue with these participants in the second year of the spiritual formation model which
is focused around a spiritual formation group. I trust that the same community experience will be realized in those groups, as Christ and a commitment to personal formation will be at the center of those groups.

Summary of Outcomes

This research project revolved around a case study which observed the spiritual formation benefits to writing a spiritual autobiography in a community setting, augmented by teaching and spiritual practices. The figure below captures the process elements which created a setting, or an environment conducive to spiritual growth.

![Figure 10 - The Formation Environment](image)

The first element is a rich curriculum presented in a conversational style which honours the experience mature adults bring to the learning environment. The second element is the practice of varied corporate and individual spiritual
disciplines which orient the participants to God and attune them to the constant work of the Holy Spirit. The third element is the process of purposeful, reflective writing about the formative influence in one’s life, carried out in the presence of God. The fourth element is an authentic community of those on the same quest to the understanding of self for the sake of becoming like Christ. The final component is the influence of the Holy Spirit, whose desire for our spiritual formation is greater than our own, and who faithfully and often powerfully moves in those who invite him to mold them into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. The result is an environment that is safe and fertile for spiritual formation. Figure 10 shows the impact of this kind of a setting on the group of participants involved in this research. The arrows pointing up, in, and out signify improvement in the areas of relationship with God, self, and others.

Figure 11 - The Formation Environment and its Effect
The participants felt positive impact in an increased sense of life integration, a new perspective which gives meaning and purpose to all of life, especially past suffering and loss. Out of this new sense of a purposeful whole came a new sense of affirmation and self-acceptance, which makes possible the genuine affirmation and acceptance of others. Finally, the combination of the setting which opened many ways of connecting with God and the new perspective of life and God’s presence led to an increased trust in God, increased love for God and an increased desire for God.

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

Based on the existing literature and research already conducted in this field as detailed above, I expected to find that the process of writing a spiritual autobiography in the context of a supportive local church community would result in a positive movement in the participant’s spiritual formation. The evangelical church in Canada and specifically the Mennonite Brethren denomination experiences an ongoing need of fresh and innovative ways to implement Christ’s command to make more and better disciples (Matt 28:19-20). The data gathered in this study supports the claim that writing a spiritual memoir, in the manner outlined in this report, is an effective means to spiritual formation for mature believers in the context of a local church.

The research revealed a number of adjustments that would make the curriculum even more effective. For example, I would reduce the amount of reading to essential chapters rather than entire volumes and I would begin the
writing process sooner so that the participants are closer to the completion of their memoir at the end of the nine-month period. I would also want to observe whether a previous positive relationship with the facilitator is necessary to achieving similar results.

Dan Allender aptly expresses the value of writing and sharing one’s spiritual memoir. His words echo my experience and the experience of those in the research group:

First, God is not merely the Creator of our life. He is also the Author of our life, and he writes each person’s life to reveal his divine story….Second, neither your life nor mine is a series of random scenes that pile up like shoes in a closet. Both your story and mine have unique characters, surprising plot twists, central themes, tension and suspense, and deep significance…third…when I study and understand my life story, I can then join God as coauthor….And fourth, there is the necessity and blessing of telling our story to others. To the degree that we know God and then join him in writing our story, we are honored to join others in the calling of storytelling. God is of course, the Master Storyteller. Your Story has power in your own life, and it has power and meaning to bring to others. I want your story to stir me, to draw me to tears, compel me to ask hard questions. I want to enter your heartache and join you in the hope of redemption. But your story can’t do these things if you can’t tell it. You can’t tell your story until you know it. And you can’t truly know it without owning your part in writing it. And you won’t write a really glorious story until you’ve wrestled with the Author who has already written long chapters of your life, many of them not to your liking. (Allender 2005, 3-6)

It is not possible, at this stage, to assess the long-term effect of this experience. However, since this group of participants intends to meet for another year around the quest for spiritual formation experienced and shared with others, I anticipate that the growth realized in writing the spiritual memoir will be well integrated and built upon in the next stage of the Three Years with Jesus model.
CHAPTER V:
CONCLUDING WORDS

My opening words spoke of my burden and call which motivates my ministry: to guide Christ’s followers into the abundant life he offers to all. My DMin work has offered new resources to facilitate personal growth and ministry in line with this calling. My spiritual journey and the curriculum designed to deepen mature believers, contained in Chapters 2 and 3, both speak to a personal experience of deepening spirituality, as well as the conviction that such deepening can be encouraged and successfully facilitated for others. The research project, detailed in Chapter 4, offers evidence that among God’s people there are those who are eager to invest considerable time and effort into the life-giving relationship they have with Christ. Furthermore, the research results in Chapter 4 powerfully demonstrate that such investment can result in profound, and at times dramatic, positive shifts in the relationship with self, relationship with others, and relationship with God, which further benefits all the circles of influence of these dedicated believers – within and beyond their local church context.

I would like to highlight five key spiritual formation insights gained by my DMin studies, the work on this portfolio, and the nine-month long research project detailed in Chapter 4. First is the fundamental formational dynamic of
alone-with community-on mission. This dynamic is evident in my own spiritual formation experience described in Chapter 2 and it is imbedded in the *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum developed in Chapter 3. It is a dynamic of time alone with God, which is then fruitfully processed in community, and which is then turned outwards in mission-minded living. Bradley describes this dynamic as it was applied in the Celtic monastic model (Bradley 2000), with consisted of solitary monastic cells organized around a central community hub. This arrangement allowed for a balance between solitude with God and community, contemplation and activity, worship and care for those in need (Bradley 2000, 18). The *Three Years with Jesus* curriculum is based on the belief that spiritual work has to be first done in the “cell”, that is, alone with God. This work, however, must be processed with community in order for it to be of maximum value to the individual and to the community. The research project demonstrates the effectiveness of this dynamic with those who wrote their life stories alone and then shared them in community. This community processing often led to further insights, greater clarity, and a settling of sorts, that is, a deeper appropriation of the solitary experience on the part of the individual. In addition, the community was enriched by the solitary experience and provided further food for thought for the individual to take back to his/her “cell,” for more solitary work with God. This alone – with community cycle was modelled in the life of Christ and ought to become a habit of life for the believer being formed into the image of Christ. The cycle however is not an end to itself. The Celtic believers would at some point send a portion of the community out to spread the gospel, and to establish new
community hubs around which spiritual formation of the new converts would take place. Hence, the *Three Years with Jesus* builds an intentional missional orientation in its design. One can well imagine the power of a community that vibrantly connects to the life of Christ in solitude and in authentic community. Church practitioners can easily facilitate the alone-in community-on mission dynamic within their context, with a supporting curriculum suited to those they lead. After all, even a community shared practice of *lectio divina*, is a micro representation of this dynamic.

Secondly, the design of the *Three Years with Jesus* intentionally applies the spiritual formation process that first involves an honest look at the self, then engages the Holy Spirit in transformation, and then sends this changed person out to others. Hence, the curriculum in Chapter 3 is designed for the believer to first undertake an honest encounter with the self, then be guided to do something about it, and finally be encouraged to carry out God’s mission out of the new person. My experience has shown that people are more ready to entertain deep internal change only after they have adequately reflected and understand who they are. The reflection facilitates the unmasking and begins the dismantling of the false self. The inner change continues the demolition project, but also serves to rebuild the person more into the image of Christ. This person is then more ready and able to encounter others in a genuine, non-judgmental way and to invite them into a relationship with Jesus that is truly life changing. A community that has been formed into Christ-likeness around honest self-reflection and intentional formation is well equipped to be known as Christians by their love, bringing truth
and grace to the world as powerful and gracious ambassadors of Christ. Again, church practitioners can be aware of and apply this model in various ministry settings, such as preaching, pastoral spiritual counseling, and small group discussions to name a few.

Thirdly, the findings around the effect of the formational environment on the formation process as described in Chapter 4, offer educational resources for those who seek to facilitate formation in others. Figure 10 depicts the elements that any pastor or spiritual leader can introduce into the ecology of their context: honouring community, appropriate spiritual disciplines, focused self-reflection, curriculum to stimulate thinking and to inspire a desire for more, and the acknowledged and practiced presence of the Holy Spirit, the change-agent himself. Of course, the key element in this ecology is the leader himself/herself, as one cannot lead others beyond where one has personally been. The profound effect of such an environment on the relationship with self, with God, and with others is detailed in Chapter 4.

Fourthly, as many who have gone before have found, deep inner change takes time. We are shaped by what we do and how we live, and it takes some time for the shaping to be noticeable. I chose to suggest a three-year investment, considering that is how long Jesus invested into those he called to be his apostles. I believe there is a reason why seminary (and other) degrees are designed to last about three years, as it takes about that long for a person to be shaped. The three years does not imply that the process ends at that point, merely that it takes three years to enact a lasting change. Hence, spiritual formation cannot be microwaved.
Those who design personal or church-wide paths for spiritual growth ought to be encouraged not to hurry through a process that is not likely to be successful if a high value is placed on the speed of completion.

Finally, a key insight into spiritual formation came through the research experience. I collected dozens of single-spaced typed pages of data. I sat with these pages for over two months, reading over them, circling words, colour-coding phrases. Several times I walked away from the work in frustration caused by the thick fog that seemed to have settled over the data. In a day or two, I returned to read over the data again, to circle and colour-code and to think some more. It was this process of persisting in the fog that resulted in the model depicted in Figure 10 - The Formation Environment. Had I resorted to eisegesis and forced the conclusions into the data, this formational model would not have come to light. Hence the insight: sitting with the fog is a general learning model. Whenever we are introduced to new, complex concepts, it takes a while for the fog to clear and for the concept to become ours so to speak. This is also true in the process of spiritual formation. Concepts, God’s invitations, glimpses into who we are versus what Christ wants us to become are often unclear and fleeting. It takes some sitting with the unknown, but then the fog lifts and clarity sets in. I observed this in the study group as they, one by one, grasped the skill of writing their life story with God in a reflective way. I also observed this in the study group as one by one clarity set in around identity, purposefulness of their life path, and God’s presence in their past. This learning model is useful to all who teach and all who learn.
I look forward to what God’s Spirit has in store for those who intentionally make themselves available to his transforming presence. The second year of the model (The Life Change Group) is already on the Glencairn church calendar for September 2017. The commitment of those who participated in the study demonstrates that spiritual leaders may set appropriately high expectations on those they lead. Expectations that are set too low lead to minimal engagement, and therefore, to minimal results.

It is my hope that others whose life task is the spiritual development of others will also benefit from this work and explore the application of the curriculum and the models it contains in other local church contexts. The research has pointed to the fact that competency of leadership is key to the success of this model. Therefore, my desire is first, to lead other leaders through this process, with the aim to facilitate their formation, as well as to transfer the necessary competencies in order to enable them to lead effectively in their own contexts.

The discipleship drought discussed earlier calls for intentional guidance of those who are new in Christ, as well as those who have known him for decades. The mission of the church depends on disciples who are able to effectively engage the Holy Spirit in the process of their own transformation into Christ-likeness and in the process of reaching others for Christ. The aim of this portfolio is to challenge and equip those who minister in the local church to deepen Christ’s followers for the glory of God, for the abundant life of his people, and for the sake of the Great Commission. I entrust the means by which this may take place to God.
APPENDIXES

Appendix A
Christ-likeness in the Sermon on the Mount

Qualities of a follower of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matthew 5</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5:3</td>
<td>I am deeply aware of my capacity to do what is evil in God’s sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:4</td>
<td>I am deeply concerned about my capacity to do what is evil in God’s sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:5</td>
<td>I consistently deal with all in gentleness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:5</td>
<td>I rarely feel the need to control or suppress agitation or anger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:6</td>
<td>I deeply desire and intentionally pursue God for the purpose of formation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:7</td>
<td>I consistently respond with mercy and compassion to all people, including those in need and those who have caused me harm in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:8</td>
<td>I rarely experience the need to battle thoughts of any kind of wrong doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:9</td>
<td>I deeply value harmony in the body and intentionally work to bring about genuine peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:10</td>
<td>I can readily point to a recent incident which might be coined as persecution due to my devotion to Christ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:13</td>
<td>I can readily point to a recent example of my influence for good in my context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:14</td>
<td>I can readily identify non-Christians who think better of Christ and Christianity as a result of their encounter or relationship with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:19</td>
<td>I passionately pursue deeper knowledge of the bible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My life consistently fulfills the command to love God with my all and to love others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I frequently teach the Bible to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:20</td>
<td>I am deeply aware of the fact that my actions however noble do not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
contribute to my good standing with God.

5:22 I rarely feel the surge of anger toward others in my community.

I never resort to name-calling or put-downs of others, even in jest.

5:23ff I consistently make the first move to reconcile with those who may have something against me.

5:27 I rarely struggle with sexual impulses for anyone other than my spouse (if married).

I am aware of my weak areas – my tendencies to sin and I have taken all possible precautions to ensure I will not succumb to my “usual” temptation when it comes.

5:32 I live in absolute mental, emotional and physical fidelity to my spouse (if married).

5:33ff I never speak an intentional lie.

I never deliberately conceal the truth.

I never knowingly speak partial truth to manipulate the hearer.

My words and promises are consistently reliable.

5:39 I rarely struggle with thoughts of pay-back for personal injustice.

I never act on the impulse to get even.

5:41 As a consistent habit of life I do not resist the violence of others with violence.

5:42 I consistently and generously give of what I have to help those in need.

5:43 I do not hate, dislike, or hold prejudice toward any individual or people group.

I consistently and intentionally pray for those who consider me or my people group as their enemy.

I consistently show genuine and active love to those who consider me or my people group as their enemy.

**Matthew 6**

6:1 I am certain that any good that I do is never to earn the good opinion of others.

6:2 I am certain that any monetary giving is not motivated by obligation or by a desire for the good opinion of others.

6:5 I am certain that in the performance of any religious activities (such as prayer, ministry etc.) I am never even on a subconscious level hoping to make a good impression on others.

6:6 My prayer life is one on-going communion with God.

6:7 My prayer life is marked by on-going listening and hearing from
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>I constantly live in the confidence that my Heavenly Father is looking after all my needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I consistently offer all of my life as worship to a holy God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>I bring my daily needs before God moment-by-moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>I understand how to forgive as Christ forgave me and I let go of the sins committed against me quickly and easily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>I regularly practice the spiritual discipline of fasting with joy and without fan-fare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>To the best of my self-knowledge and awareness, in all my religious practices I am an authentic and transparent person, free from any form of hypocrisy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>I am completely free from consumeristic impulses to acquire more and more possessions. I am content with my socio-economic circumstances and if so called could easily live with less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>I continually orient my heart to desire more and more of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>I am confident that my devotion to Christ and his calling on my life is not diluted or divided by devotion or love for any other thing or person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>I rarely or never experience anxiety about any aspect of my future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>I continually devote time and space in my life for God in order to experience his transforming work in me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:1-5</td>
<td>I rarely or never experience feelings of superiority over others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:1-5</td>
<td>I am far more concerned about my own shortcomings than the shortcomings of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:7-8</td>
<td>As a daily habit of life I present my needs to God as the first recourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:9-11</td>
<td>I live with the absolute certainty of God’s unconditional love for me and trust his wise care completely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:12</td>
<td>I am careful to treat others in need or in failure then way I would like to be treated were I in their place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:13-20</td>
<td>I consistently show discernment in determining the spiritual health of those around me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 7</td>
<td>7:21-27</td>
<td>I live by the understanding that following Christ in all his ways is the most secure way of living.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Description of a Growing Disciple
BECOMING A DISCIPLE

Once you have made a commitment to be a Christ-follower, have you arrived? Or is it somewhat like signing up for the “course of a lifetime”? For perhaps, a methodically planned crime expedition. While these are helpful metaphors to the extent that they describe a journey, they are inadequate portraits of the real life Christ offers us.

Following Jesus is now the white-water rafting. He is the capable, committed guide, essential for our survival. Other offers are critically important. Everyone must learn to navigate and to remain safety to the raft. There are moments of tension, exhaustion, tranquility, discouragement and achievement, all of which describe the incredible adventure of entrusting oneself to our Guide for the journey.

Jesus approached his first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James and John—with the invitation “Come with me...I will make you...I will show you how.” (Mark 1:17). Words cannot adequately express all that transpired when the creation of heaven and earth came to dwell within, empowering us to “want to do and be able to do whatever Jesus does” (Philippians 2:13). Jesus continues to extend this invitation to join him in this life-changing, revolutionary adventure called discipleship. Our lives and our world will never be the same.

OUR NEED FOR A PURPOSE

What is our aim? If gaining knowledge is our primary purpose, we could easily lose our success—simply take a Bible knowledge test at any time. Grade 6, Grade 12 and several times throughout adulthood.

Discipleship is more than gaining knowledge. It is the process of transformation of the heart. It is choosing to be with Jesus in order to be like him, in the power that he gives. Discipleship is responding to God’s work in our lives, with the initiative making our transformation possible.

The description of a Growing Disciple (GID) is an attempt to describe who our true person is becoming as a devoted follower of Jesus, evidenced by changing behaviors. “If the Lord desires the heart, and examine the mind to toward all according to their ways.” (Jeremiah 17:10).

In the GID, each quality is characterized by four adjectives that are similar, yet inadequate on their own. They complete the sentence. A growing disciple is someone who is...” such as attributes of a YAC, both attributes need to be considered to give a true picture of this quality in a disciple’s life. “Evidence” are mentioned as clues, or fruit-bearing signs that we are indeed responding to God’s initiative in this particular area.

The GID is not exhaustive. The New Testament alone supplies us with six hundred behaviors and attitudes that describe a growing Christian. The Christian’s spiritual formation includes more than a dozen items describing our various qualities or attributes. The aim of this particular description is to keep the questions “Am I becoming a more devoted disciple?” in the forefront.

“A Growing Disciple is someone who is...”

QUALITY 1. CAPTIVATED AND COMMITTED

Scripture: Malachi 2:10-12; Matthew 24:40-41; Revelation 2:20; Matthew 24:48

God’s Initiative: “We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

Description: A person who becomes a Jesus follower because he is captivated by the love of Jesus and confident of a personal saving relationship with Jesus, and who is committed to growing as a disciple, regardless of the cost.

Evidence: - Understands the spiritual tasks for, and is confident of, a personal saving relationship with Jesus. - Feeds a growing love for God, which motivates intercession, obedience. - Cultivates faith and is keen to talk about life in Christ.

QUALITY 2. THIRSTING AND THRIVING

Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20; Deuteronomy 8:3; John 6:1-9

God’s Initiative: “My dwelling place has given us everything we need for life and godliness.” 2 Peter 1:3

Description: A person who determines to abide in Christ and is committed to cultivating a growing relationship with God, even in adverse circumstances, so that faith is progressively more vibrant.

Evidence: - Learns to study Scripture, indwellingly and devotionaly. - Becomes devoted to knowing God through the Bible and prayer. - Chooses to practice a variety of spiritual disciplines for training in godly character. - Priorities time to nurture a deeper relationship with God.

QUALITY 3. BONDED AND BUILDING


God’s Initiative: “But now the Lord is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple.” (Who offers the spiritual gifts that please Him because of Jesus Christ.) 1 Peter 2:6

Description: A person who engages with a community of faiths, in small group and larger contexts, and develops as a contributor to the health and effectiveness of a local congregations.

Evidence: - Learns to live the Christian life in community with other believers, giving and receiving a mutual level of discipling, accountability and support. - Displays an ardent awareness of a unique identity in Christ, and joyful participation in spiritual gifts to serve. - Practices generosity with time and resources.
## Appendix D  
Curriculum Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session &amp; Theme</th>
<th>Session Content with Reference Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1**  
Introduction to writing a spiritual memoir | Dillon, Psychology and Spiritual Life Writing, 2011  
Reichard, *A Case of Mumps* (sample autobiography excerpt)  
Introduction to Spiritual Direction |
| **2**  
Approaches to writing | Clark, Confessional Literature  
Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch. 1 & 2)  
Augustine, *Confessions*  
Introduction to Daily Examen |
| **3**  
Spiritual memoir as a quest story | Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*  
Davis, *Modern Girl Trying to Find the Holy*  
Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch. 3)  
Willard, Renovation of the Heart |
| **4**  
Understanding Self  
How to start writing | Daniels, *The Essential Enneagram*  
Baron and Wagele, *The Enneagram made Easy*  
Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch. 4)  
Outline for the first story |
| **5**  
Attachment and Memory  
Self-Acceptance | C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy  
Leanne Payne, Restoring the Christian Soul  
Plass and Cofield, *The Relational Soul*  
Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch.5) |
| **6**  
Silence & Solitude  
Inviting God into your life story | Accepting others as they are – Enneagram readings  
Dan Wakefield, *The Story of Your Life*  
Jennifer Hoffman, *Our Stories*  
Structured time of silence & solitude  
Group Sharing time  
Communion |
| **7**  
Role of Desire in Spirituality | Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits*  
Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*  
Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* |
| **8**  
Soul, Desire and God | Benner, *Surrender to Love*  
Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul*  
Introduction to Gospel Imagination  
Ignatian thought on desire |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session &amp; Theme</th>
<th>Session Content with Reference Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to imaginative prayer</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
| 9 True & False Self | Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*  
Benner, *The Joy of Being Yourself* |
| 10 Role of Suffering | Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*  
Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch.6) |
| 11 Looking ahead | Erickson, *Arc of the Arrow* (Ch.7&8)  
Steps to complete and publish the spiritual memoir  
Final interview |
Appendix E
Bibliography of Resources Utilized in the
Planning of the Research Project


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**Category 3 – Spiritual Formation Resources**


**Category 4 – Research Methodology Resources**


Appendix F

Verbal Informed Consent Text

As the participants and the researcher have an established trust relationship, a written consent form seemed incompatible with the relationship and the tone of the participant group gatherings. The researcher, however, offered the following verbal information to the participants as part of their inquiries into joining this study, at the first meeting of the group, as well as along the way as questions from the participants warranted restating of the terms of participation in the project:

As you know, I am working on my DMin in Spiritual Formation at Tyndale. As part of my studies I'm required to complete a research project related to the work in my church and related to encouraging Christ-followers into a deeper relationship with him.

I'm hoping to use the process and outcomes of this group for this research. My project however is not yet approved by the Tyndale Board of Ethics, which is a body that makes sure that I do not cause any harm to people choosing to participate in this project. I am in the process of completing the required forms and applications to secure this approval. I will let you know as soon as it is granted or if it is rejected.

This research will observe the impact the writing of your spiritual autobiography has on your self-acceptance and understanding, your self-image, your sense of integration of your life experiences, your God-image and your general reflection on the value of the process to you. Studies have shown that writing a spiritual autobiography has these and other potential benefits, our task will be to see if this is really so in our context as ordinary people in our church.

I will ask you to fill out this survey at the start and again when we end the process. If you get started on it and find that you don’t want to answer certain questions or that you don’t want to complete this survey at all, that’s perfectly ok. You don’t need to do that to be part of this group. If you choose to complete the survey, I will ask you to pull a code out of this hat. This is your code, use that instead of your name on the survey. That way the information will not be tied directly to you. I will keep these completed surveys locked up in my office and the data that will be entered electronically will be stored only on my personal laptop.
which is password protected and always in my possession. I don’t keep it at the church overnight or when I'm not here.

We will be together for nine months – ending at the end of this year, in December, meeting roughly once each month. In addition we will go away to a retreat center for two 1-day retreats, one in July and one in October, to practice silence and solitude, to have some teaching, writing and sharing time. Come to as many group meetings and the retreats as you can, during the summer-time when schedules are complicated I will schedule a make-up group session a week later for those on vacation who wish to catch up. If you simply cannot make it to a groups session that’s fine, I will give you whatever materials are handed out after the fact.

I will be asking you to complete various assignments between meetings, some will involve reading and writing, others will be spiritual disciplines such as meeting with a spiritual director or praying in certain ways. I would like you to feel free to do as much or as little of these assignments as you wish or as you can. Think of this group as primarily for your benefit and not for my benefit. Take part in what you deem is beneficial to you. If at some point life happens and you for whatever reason are not able to continue in the process you are free to pull out and not feel bad about it.

For the first few months we will be mostly reading samples of spiritual autobiographies to get our heads around what this kind of genre looks like. After that we will start writing our own life stories. We will have opportunities to share what we write with others in the group, but again, this is entirely voluntary; don’t feel that you have to share.

At the end of the 9 months I will ask you to meet with me to let me know your thoughts on the process, whether you found it beneficial and why, and how it could be improved. I will give you the questions I will be asking you well ahead of the time. Again, this meeting is not mandatory and you are free to decline.

There is a small risk involved in being part of this study, and that is the possibility of recall of painful memories. We will not be hunting for memories that you are not already well aware of, but perhaps in the writing about these incidences you might feel distress or grief or other negative feelings. Please don’t hesitate to come to me or any of our pastoral staff, or your spiritual director to address these.

This group has been approved by our elders; they understand what we are attempting here and that it fits with the direction our leadership desires to go. Pastor Richard has joined the group as a participant. If you have any concerns about any material or what we are doing you can contact the elders or Pastor Richard. In addition, my supervisor for this project at Tyndale is Dr. Mark
Chapman, you can also contact him, just ask for Mark Chapman at Tyndale, or you can find his email on the Tyndale website, in the listing of the professors.

If at any point you forget some of what I said here, please don’t hesitate to ask for a repeat or clarification. I know that this is a lot of information. I’m really looking forward to being together with you for the next 9 months working on understanding our life story better.

Any questions that you’d like to raise right now?
Is everyone clear on what we will be doing together and why?
Finally, I will ask you to please respect the confidentiality of what is shared in this group. Let’s agree to keep each other’s privacy and to not repeat what happens here outside the group.
Appendix G
Concluding Interview Process and Questions

A. Give the interview questions in writing to participants a minimum one week prior to the scheduled interview time.

B. Obtain verbal consent to audio tape the interview a minimum one week prior to the scheduled interview time.

C. At the start of the interview explain the process and the purpose of the interview, give participants the freedom to not answer, to ask for clarifications, to take time to think of answers, to refer to notes.

D. Questions:
   1. In a few sentences, how would you summarize your experience of being part of this spiritual autobiography group?
   2. Were there any highlights of this experience that you'd like to share?
   3. What were some of the challenges you experienced in this process?
   4. How would you assess the value of being part of this process?
      i. to you
      ii. to others in the group
   5. Would you recommend this way of writing a spiritual memoir to others?
      If so to whom and why?
   6. Any other comments you'd like to add?
Appendix H
Distribution and Proportionality of Collected Data by Source

This figure shows that the Thursday evening group contributed somewhat less data in the exit interview in comparison to the other two groups. This is due to the particular group dynamic which demonstrated a greater propensity to stray off topic and discuss side church issues, personal anecdotes and philosophies on discipleship etc. While such comments illustrate the comfortable group dynamic, they do not bear directly on the research in question and hence were excluded from the data coding process.

Figure 12 - Volume of Data by Source
Appendix I
Thematic Proportionality of Data by Source

Though the data came from four major sources, as shown in Appendix H, the chart in the figure below indicates a consistency of thematic proportionality in the data collected from the three exit interviews and the field notes.

Figure 13 - Data Theme and Proportion by Source
## Appendix J
### Research Project Phases and Timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 20-Mar 20, 2-16</td>
<td>Project Plan-dates and curriculum development, Project approval in context, Supervision plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 09, 2016</td>
<td>TCPS2 Core Certificate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar 20-Apr 17, 2016</td>
<td>Participant Recruitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 27 &amp; 28, 2016</td>
<td>Session 1</td>
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<td>Apr 27-May 03, 2016</td>
<td>Intake Survey Data Collection</td>
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<td>May 18 &amp; 19, 2016</td>
<td>Session 2</td>
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<td>Jun 01 &amp; Jun 2, 2016</td>
<td>Session 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun 22 &amp; 23, 2016</td>
<td>Session 4</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jul 13 &amp; 14, 2016</td>
<td>Session 5</td>
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<td>July 23, 2016</td>
<td>Session 6 - Retreat Day</td>
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<td>Aug 09, 2016</td>
<td>REB submission</td>
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<td>Aug 24, 2016</td>
<td>Proposal submission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 31, 2016</td>
<td>Proposal approval from Tyndale REB</td>
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<td>Sep 14 &amp; 15, 2016</td>
<td>Session 7</td>
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<td>Oct 12 &amp; 13, 2016</td>
<td>Session 8</td>
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<td>Oct 15, 2016</td>
<td>Session 9 - Retreat Day</td>
</tr>
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<td>Oct 29, 2016</td>
<td>Mid-way check in with supervisor</td>
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<td>Nov 23 &amp; 24, 2016</td>
<td>Session 10</td>
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<td>Dec 06 &amp; 07, 2016</td>
<td>Session 11 - Final session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 15-Jan 05, 2017</td>
<td>Final Interviews</td>
</tr>
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Appendix K
Life Story Writing Template

Choose an event that was somehow formational, that is, it affected how you understood life, yourself, God, it caused a shift in your direction or illustrated something about you. Aim for 3-4 hand-written pages (about 1.5-2 double-spaced typed pages). You know this story well, it should take you less than 1 hr to write up. You can edit and fix up words later. If writing is a barrier for you try telling it and recording your voice and using that as your first draft.

Suggested Outline for Writing

a. Ask God to help you find the words and to help you remember fully and thoughtfully.
b. State when this happened - E.g. When I was in grade 1
c. State if this time was significant - It was just after we moved and I had no friends in my school
d. Where did this happen - be specific – I was sitting in the last row in my class
e. Was this place significant? – I was hoping not to attract any attention.
f. Describe the people involved – what were they like and your relationship to them – My Grade 1 teacher was Mrs. Jones, a large woman with pitch black hair and black eye-liner. Her booming voice sent shivers down my spine. OR My uncle was a kind and gentle man, always ready with an affirming word; I looked forward to his visits.
g. Describe in detail what happened, aim for about 6-7 sentences or so, about ½ typed page – focus on the important part in the story – the part that matters, that affected you – Mrs. Jones handed out blank journals to each of us and asked us to draw our house. Since we had just moved, I didn’t really know what our new house looked like. But I knew that every house has a front door, some windows and a peaked roof....
h. Your immediate reaction to the event, 1 or 2 sentences – My face turned hot red and I wished I could fall through the floor and disappear. I felt humiliated...etc. etc. OR I remember being deeply moved by my uncle’s affirming words. I believe it was in that moment that the desire to be the kind of man he saw in me took hold in my heart.
i. The formative effect this event had on you – I was further convinced that there is something wrong with me, that I lack what it takes to be acceptable to others OR I lived through much hardship always having my eye on that vision of being a man that matters.
j. The long-term effect this had on you – *I was afraid of water ever since and avoided any activities that involved paddles, boats and the like. I missed out on not only water fun, but the bonding and friendship that happens when kids play in or on water.*

k. How does this continue to play out in your life to date? Has God spoken into this along the way?

l. Finally, how has this affected your God-image, the way you think about God?

m. When you are done choose a title and perhaps (totally optional) an introductory question, sentence, scripture or quotation – *How can one who believes he is flawed come to believe he is fully loved?*

n. Let the hand-written story sit for a few days, then type it up and edit it as you type. As you edit reflect whether you fully captured the event as it happened, and whether you have given enough time to reflect on its formative impact on you. Ask God if there is more to this event that you put on paper, if so, expand and clarify until you feel it is done.
### Appendix L

#### Group Meeting Dates and Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Date &amp; Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>April 27 – 7pm</td>
<td>Glencairn Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 28 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>May 18 – 1pm</td>
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<tr>
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<td>May 18 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
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<td>May 19 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>June 2 – 7pm</td>
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<td>June 8 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>June 28 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>July 14 – 7pm</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July 20 – 7pm</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>July 23 – 9am-4pm</td>
<td>Crieff Hills Retreat Center</td>
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<td>Crieff, Ontario</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Sep 15 – 7pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Oct 12 – 1pm</td>
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<td>Oct 13 – 7pm</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Oct 15 – 9am-4pm</td>
<td>Guelph Bible Conference Grounds</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dec 8 – 7pm</td>
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REFERENCE LIST


Friesen, Randall Gary. 2016. Improving the Long-Term Impact of Short-Term Missions On the Beliefs, Attitudes and Behavior of Young Adults. Abbotsford, BC: MBMS International.


Penner, James, Harder, Rachael, Anderson, Erika, Desorcy Bruno, and Hiemstra Rick. 2001. *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church*. JPA.


