

Christian Devotional Meditation and Wholistic Well Being

By

Raymond Dean Paxton

Liberty University

A Program Development Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Community Care and Counseling

School of Behavioral Sciences

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APPROVED BY

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D., Assistant Dean, Interim Psy.D. Program Director  
School of Psychology and Counseling Regent University  
Virginia Beach, VA

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Kristy Ford, PhD, LMHC-S, NCC  
CMHC Program Director  
Assistant Professor of Counseling  
Department of Counseling Education and Family Studies

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### **Dedication**

The author wishes to dedicate this dissertation to Fernando Garzon Psy.D. who has greatly influenced the development and knowledge of this subject matter. Not only is Dr. Garzon a great academic scholar, but models the values and mission of Liberty University. Dr. Garzon models what I believe a professor at a Christian university should be and displays the love of Christ daily.

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Assistant Dean

Interim Psy.D.

Program Director

School of Psychology and Counseling

Regent University

Virginia Beach, VA

Kristy Ford, PhD, LMHC-S, NCC

CMHC Program Director

Assistant Professor of Counseling

Department of Counseling Education and Family Studies

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## **Abstract**

Holistic well-being is a concept that implies humans are multidimensional and require a broad approach to help them achieve life contentment and satisfaction. Spirituality, relationships, emotional functioning, and biology all play a part in achieving this life balance and satisfaction. Interpersonal neurobiology suggests that early life experiences can contribute to underdeveloped brain structures resulting in the diminished ability to form meaningful attachment relationships that help foster contentment as an adult. This ability to engage in positive and supportive relationships has impact on life and holistic well-being. Further, the inability to form close relationships, engage, and emotionally connect with others has impacted the church as whole, and can even impact one's attachment to God. Church-based programs, therefore, are needed to foster holistic well-being. A 6-week program utilizing Christian meditation and mindfulness activities has been developed as a Christian sensitive approach to relationship and life enhancement, and holistic well-being.

*Keywords:* Christian devotional meditation, interpersonal neurobiology, attachment, holistic well-being, attachment to God, mindfulness

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Chapter One introduces Christian Devotional Meditation and Holistic Well-Being. A background is provided that identifies the topics, the problem, and the significance of this program. Included are definitions provided to assist those unfamiliar with the topics, and finally a summary. The chapter introduces concepts related to mental health, the Fall of Mankind identified in Genesis, a perspective on secular versus spiritual interventions, along with the appropriateness of unification of the two. Finally, the concepts of mindfulness/meditation, Christian meditation, holistic well-being, attachment, and Interpersonal Neurobiology are presented.

### Background

Confronted with imperfections mentally, physically, and spiritually, human beings struggle in their efforts to flourish. According to Renjen and Chaudhari (2017), “Neuropsychiatric-disorders such as depression, alcohol, and drug abuse are on the increase worldwide” (p. 198). In citing the World Health Organization, the authors reported depression has a huge consequence nationally. Suicide rates pre-COVID were rising, with the “age adjusted rate increased 35% from 10.5 per 100,000 standard population in 1999 to 14.2 in 2018” (Hedegaard, Curtin, & Warner, 2021, p. 6) and the number of families experiencing disruption are numerous, with the recent divorce rate at 2.7 per 1,000 total population (National Center for Health Statistics (2021)). These sobering statistics can be understood more fully when one considers theological aspects of humanity’s condition.

Such devastating statistics have multiple origins, including spiritual. Genesis indicates that humans are in a fallen state and no longer have the perfect relationship with God they once

enjoyed. Lambert (2016) stated, “Sin touches every element of our existence as people” (p. 219). Lambert identified the fall as influencing many areas: “...our standing before God,... motivations,...our thinking,...emotions,...our bodies,...relationships...and the world” (pp. 219-224). Willard (2008) stated, “We are the people of God, created in his image. That image is distorted by the fall but still there” (p. 1). Further, Willard suggested the fall resulted in far reaching consequences and shattered the harmony between man and God (2008). In Romans 7:15 (NIV), Paul states “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do.” Human nature impacts life, and as a result there are consequences of life and additionally sin. In attempting to make people feel better emotionally, several approaches have been adapted that range from the secular to the spiritual, and now holistic approaches are being considered that include numerous facets of life, not just mental health. Reviewing some of the compartmentalized models may help one understand the value in this contemporary holistic emphasis.

Adams (1979) described how the role of helper had once been the role of the church; however, Adams believed that role has been hijacked by modern psychology. As a result, Christians may experience confusion in choosing resources for emotional help in life. While Adams (1979) opposed incorporating psychology with spiritual approaches, Crabb (2013) identified a wide range of perspectives on the integration of psychological or secular, versus Christian or Biblical help. These perspectives can range on a continuum from those who believe psychology and faith resources should not be applied together, to those advocating the use of only a Biblical perspective.

This author ascribes to the belief that all truth is God’s truth, and that evidence supports the outcomes of God’s truth. Therefore, strategies that are not contradictory to God’s word are

acceptable, so the author is comfortable with evidence-based approaches when not used to contradict the Bible. These are known as *evidenced-based integrative approaches* as described by McMinn & Cambell (2007), Tan (2011), and Garzon (2013).

In secular psychology, there is an attempt to utilize what is called *evidenced-based* treatments. These include such secular treatments as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1995). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Luoma, Hayes, & Walser, 2007), Dialectal Behavioral Therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 2015), and Meditation/Mindfulness (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2018). These *evidenced-based* treatments may also incorporate elements of mindfulness and meditation.

A key part of the models noted in the above paragraph is mindfulness. Previous research has explored the benefits of meditation and mindfulness, with interest in its long-term outcomes. Harrington and Dunne (2015) described mindfulness practices as not represented in the literature as early as 1980; however, he reported mindfulness as represented in hundreds of yearly publications only 35 years later. Renjen and Chaudhari (2017) indicated that research into mindfulness began in the 1950s; however, increased interest occurred by the 1990s. Overall, it is evident that there has been an increase in mindfulness meditation and its benefits.

Mindfulness and meditation techniques were eventually considered for the benefits it could offer to mental health. Kabit-Zinn (1990) introduced the concept of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (as cited in Peltz, 2013) and according to Peltz (2013), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is now a widely used technique.

Simultaneously, while mainstream psychology was enhancing efforts at utilizing the benefits of meditation mindfulness activities, Christian efforts were also being enhanced to investigate the benefits of adapting mindfulness and using meditations drawn from its own

history of meditation. Ford and Garzon (2017) described attempts to develop adaptations of mindfulness that may be suitable for Christians, and though there appears to be limited research on Christian adaptations of mindfulness and meditation techniques, as early as 1988 the benefits of Christian Devotional meditation were being evaluated (Carlson, et al., 1988).

Christian-based mindfulness and meditation is different from other forms. Garzon (2015) has noted that basic secular or eastern mindfulness, without the inclusion of the Christian world view can be lacking. As Garzon (2015) pointed out, numerous elements associated with the experience of God can enhance the experience of meditation through “Christian Present Moment Awareness” (p. 7). Garzon (2015) further pointed out that “Strength in the Lord (not self-effort) and the power of his might” (Ephesians 6:10) grows in Christian present moment awareness.” The need for the Christian element has contributed to adaptations to secular techniques as identified by Garzon & Ford (2016), along with Knabb & Vaquez (2018) in researching Christian-derived techniques.

Christian approaches to mindfulness and meditation are becoming the focus of increased interest. Contemplative Outreach (History of Centering Prayer, n.d.) report three “Trappist monks” were influential in the modern implementation of Centering Prayer, and that Vatican II had indicated a need to return to such practices. Through the efforts of the three men, Fathers William Menninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating (History of Centering Prayer, n.d.) Centering Prayer progressed. Between 1988 and 2018, at least eight important research projects have addressed the importance of Centering prayer or Christian devotional meditation, along with possible benefits from practice (1988; Ferguson et al., 2010; Fox et al., 2016; Ford & Garzon, 2017; Johnson, et al., 2009; Knabb & Vazquez, 2018; Knabb et al., 2019; Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005; Wachholtz & Pargament, 2008).

As Garzon (2015) and Knabb et al. (2018) have indicated, the importance of the relationship with God in benefiting from meditation, Hari Sharma stated that “the true purpose of [eastern or secular] meditation is to connect oneself to one’s deep inner Self” (Sharma, 2015). This appears a radical difference from developing a true and experiential relationship with God. The result appears to be the difference between a closed versus open system relying on the strength of an external being along with the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Mounting evidence supports the idea that meditation changes more than one’s mental health. It changes the neurophysiological structure of the physical of the brain (Siegel, 2020). It is suggested that mindfulness and meditation can be linked to improved brain structure resulting in better processing overall (Siegel, 2020). Fox et al. (2014) stated, “We conclude that meditation appears to be reliably associated with altered anatomical structure in several brain regions” (p. 69). Given these significant findings, removing the eastern influence of some meditation may make meditation more appropriate to Christians who would worry about their loyalty to God if practicing Eastern-influenced meditation strategies. Thus, meditation with consequent neurobiological changes represent an aspect of a holistic approach. However, meditation with potential neurobiological changes is only one aspect of holistic well-being. Brain structure alone is not the only answer to emotional well-being.

Research supports the power and importance of attachments in achieving emotional and holistic well-being (Schoore, 2019). In reference to modern attachment theory, Schoore stated, “The theory offers a conceptualization of individual differences in attachment, of the interpersonal neurobiological origins of both secure and insecure attachments, as and of etiology of vulnerability to later disorders of emotion dysregulation and social information” (p. 31).

Further, Clinton and Sibcy (2019), suggested that relationships within the parental and child dyad can influence attachment to God.

Additionally, it appears that parenting and abuse can have negative effects on the developing brain and attachment (Sullivan, 2012). Sullivan (2012) provided an extensive description of basic brain development and the impact of early life events on attachment. Sullivan stated, “The enduring effects of traumatic early life experiences for brain and behavioral development have been demonstrated in clinical studies since the 1950s” (p. 10). Additionally, this theory is now validated through the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) which identifies the seriousness of early life traumas and neglect for the brain’s neurobiological development and subsequent adult relational functioning (attachment capacity and emotional intelligence). It appears that parenting and abuse can have negative effects on the developing brain. IPNB suggests mindfulness and meditation can have a positive impact on the part of the brain that assists in relationship development (Siegel, 2010) and Badenock (2011) suggested that experiences change structure and density associated with neuronal connection and the result can be a change in function. Christian meditation and adapted mindfulness strategies may also impact neurobiological development, God attachment, and interpersonal attachment, although research is needed to confirm this.

The combination of improving brain structure and improving relationships, including attachment to God, is brought together to inform a holistic perspective for treatment more comprehensive than the secular, Eastern, and Christian models of therapy and meditation described above. Spiritual formation and attachment to God can have barriers when using regular methods of spiritual growth such as bible study, prayer, and church attendance alone (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020). Wilder and Hendricks (2020) further suggested that the traditional

church style of teaching is not achieving growth toward God and that Christians may go expanded time frames without increasing spiritual maturity. Therefore, attachment to God may suffer and Christians may go expanded time frames without increasing spiritual maturity. As Wilder and Hendricks (2020) stated, “The contemporary church often falls short of facilitating the growth of Christian virtues, love, patience, kindness, and communion with God and others that union with Christ is intended to promote” (p. 49).

### **Problem Statement**

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., 2013) spans over 900 pages identifying developmental, substance use, and emotional difficulties that are now diagnosed and a part of society. According to Renjen and Chaudhari (2017), “Neuropsychiatric disorders such as depression, alcohol, and drug abuse are on the increase worldwide.” The Fall as identified in Genesis has impacted every facet of life as previously identified by Lambert (2016), and Cloud & Townsend (2001) described what they refer to as “Paradise Lost” (p. 16) that came about as a result of the Fall and Adam and Eve’s actions. While secular psychology strives to identify evidenced-based approaches to helping those with mental health difficulties, the emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions that have been impacted are beyond a unidimensional approach that is utilized often and falls short to address the comprehensive devastation and human suffering that has developed as a result of the Fall. There remains a need to develop holistic approaches that are acceptable within the Christian environment and addresses the needs of modern Christians who are experiencing spiritual, mental health, and relational difficulties.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this program development dissertation is to develop a theopsyoeducational and experiential holistic program based on interpersonal neurobiology, attachment theory, Christian spiritual formation principles, and mindfulness-based techniques that target improving relational attachments, applying interpersonal neurobiology principles, and increasing healthy awareness in a framework that is acceptable within an Evangelical Christian church environment. Implicitly, such a program has the potential to improve one's ability to experience genuine Christian agape love in interpersonal relationships with God, resulting in growth in emotional maturity, spiritual maturity, and overall improved Christian character. Further research would be needed to confirm these potential outcomes once this program is developed.

### **Significance of Study**

Christians may be hesitant to accept meditation and mindfulness techniques due to their previous association with Eastern religions (Garzon & Ford, 2017). Meditation has been identified as an approach that impacts long-established neural pathways that contribute to emotions which human experience and impact the ability to form supportive and satisfying relationships. This study may assist the church in increasing understanding of interpersonal neurobiology and attachment. Additionally, it may introduce and teach interpersonal relationship skills to enhance healthy attachments in relationships and will be useful in assisting participants in developing a deeper, more positive relationship with God through implementing God attachment focused prayer. This program is designed to be appropriate and acceptable for a church environment that includes meditation and mindfulness techniques. Definitions for a

variety of terms used in this narrative are provided below to ensure readers understand the material that follows.

### **Definitions**

**Attachment Theory:** The study of behaviors designed to keep an infant within close proximity of a caretaker for survival that eventually broadened into studying adult relationships and patterns of behavior within these relationships (Ackermam, 2021)

**Christian Devotional Meditation (CDM):** Defined as “A variety of strategies designed to enhance focused attention on God, Scripture or oneself with the intent of deepening one’s relationship with the Lord, cultivating emotional healing, and or growing in love toward one’s neighbor and oneself (Garzon, 2013, p. 60).

**Centering Prayer and Contemplation:** Often used interchangeably with Christian Devotional Meditation. A method of prayer designed to bring in depth contemplation resulting in “opening of the mind and heart-our whole being to God” (Keating, 2017). “Centering prayer in designed to facilitate the development of contemplation” (p. 1). The following are examples from Contemplative Outreach. “Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.” “Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.” “When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.” “At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence eyes closed for a couple minutes” (Outreach, n.d.)

**Holistic Well Being:** Holistic well-being takes into account that quality of life may be enhanced when it is balanced among many factors, rather than just a few areas. These include spirituality, love, relationships, and work and leisure (Myers, Sweeny & Witmer, 2000, pp. 251-253).

**Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPBN):** Interpersonal neurobiology combines numerous fields of science to extract common truths from within each field to assist in explaining how the mind impacts human behavior (Siegel, 2020).

**Meditation:** Paying attention on purpose in the moment with specific intentions resulting in increased calmness and relaxation (Lang, et al., 2012). Numerous ways in which meditation can be conducted.

**Mindfulness:** The process of paying attention done while maintaining a nonjudgmental stance of both internal and external experiences as they occur (Lang, et al., 2012).

**Neuroscience:** “The vast area of study of the anatomy and functioning of the brain and the nervous system” (Cozolino, 2020, p. 300).

**Neurotheology:** The study of the “intersection of spiritual formation and how our brain works” (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020, p. 14).

**Self-Compassion:** The ability to recognize one’s own pain and suffering and being able to show kindness to oneself during the experiencing of that pain and suffering versus being self-critical (Neff, 2003).

### Summary

In John 16:33 (New International Version, 2011), Jesus states, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” The fall of mankind as indicated in Genesis has resulted in numerous psychological, physical, relational, and emotional difficulties. Additionally, it has created a separation between God and mankind that remains today and impacts the attachment that Christians experience with God. Well-meaning Christians will often attend church and engage in conventional church practices; however, they do not make the spiritual and emotional progress

they need to cope with the realities of modern times. Science has made progress and has helped in identifying therapy techniques that have been identified as evidenced- based treatments.

However, a one-dimensional approach does not appear impactful enough to address the suffering and devastation created by the Fall. Those who identify as Christian may be fearful to adapt what secular psychology identifies as these evidenced- based treatments not rooted in Scripture.

Current research suggests there is a benefit in meditation and mindfulness. However, Christians may be hesitant about utilizing this method to reduce overall anxiety, stress, and improve relationships that contribute to holistic well-being. The physical brain, relational experiences, trauma, abuse, and neglect, and forms of memory all contribute to emotional functioning, quality of attachments, and holistic well-being. IPBN identifies a link between brain development, attachment, and overall integration, which is important to well-being. Additionally, IPBN assists in defining the benefits of mindfulness and meditation practices. A holistic program will be developed to satisfy Christian concerns with evidence-based treatment and mindfulness. It provides a 6-week learning experience including Christian Devotional Meditation that can be offered to Christians wishing to benefit from its practice and improve holistic well-being.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

This chapter begins by defining holistic well-being. Different facets of holistic wellbeing are then explored, such as the role of the church in holistic well bring, the brain, the brain and mindfulness meditation practices. Information follows identifying understandings brought forth from the field of interpersonal neurobiology and how brain development impacts attachments, along with Attachment to God. The significance of meditation and mindfulness practices on holistic wellbeing are identified and Christian meditation/mindfulness practices are introduced along with a brief history of Christian meditation practices. Also provided is final integration of concepts supporting a 6-week program to be presented.

### **Defining Holistic Well-Being**

Holistic well-being considers that quality of life may be enhanced when it is balanced among many factors, rather than just a few areas. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA) (2012), different definitions of holistic well-being exist, and the definition depends upon what approach a person is considering. One specific approach noted by The ACA is The Wheel of Wellness.

The Wheel of Wellness identifies characteristics associated with healthy living. Four principal areas of life are considered as important: spirituality, love, relationships, and work and leisure (Myers et al., 2000, pp. 251-253). The Wheel of Wellness literature suggests that when these life areas are met, people will experience a happier existence. These areas are further broken down into sub-areas which one may strive to achieve. Another approach to holistic well-being is presented by Di (2020).

Di (2020) identified the importance of understanding consciousness on both the micro and macro levels for growth and well-being. According to Di, what society places focus on will drive outcomes, and four areas of importance were identified including: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (2020). Di stated, “Without awareness humans will not be able to know our own biological, physical, emotional, and mental capacities” (2020, p. 1504). Overall, the author is suggesting that consciousness, when focused on specific desires, will enhance the likelihood of achieving them through self and systematic education. Once focus is applied, life can be improved. This is consistent with other psychological approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2005).

Various psychological approaches inform the concept of holistic well-being. While not utilizing the words holistic well-being, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy contends that when a person is not living their desired values, it can contribute to emotional difficulties (Polk & Schoendorf, 2015). Polk and Schoendorf (2015), presented the ACT matrix, explaining that avoidance of undesired mental states prevents a person from completing the overall actions needed for a valued life. Polk and Schoendorf (2015) described the difference between moving toward a desired behavior as compared to moving away from a mental state that is undesired. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy supports the idea that humans develop belief systems throughout life and experience thoughts on a daily basis related to these core beliefs (Beck, 1995). Beck suggested that these core beliefs can fall under two categories of love and helplessness (1995), p. 166). McKay, Fanning, and Ona (2011), suggested that depression and anxiety can be the result of, either falling short in these life areas or a fear that these areas might become negatively impacted. The authors suggested if a person can identify the specific areas that are not being met, then they can target them for progress (2011). Numerous evidenced-based approaches are

utilized in McKay et al. (2011) including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Dialectal Behavioral Therapy. Numerous areas in life are identified that may fall under a person's value system such as family, work, spirituality, and education (2011).

Utilizing a Christian perspective, Christlikeness and the Love of God and others is an important way to contentment on earth with Christian perspectives informing the concept of holistic well-being. When asked what is the greatest commandment? Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (NIV, Matthew 22: 34-40). In Mark 8:36, Jesus states when speaking to a crowd of people "What good is it to for someone to gain the world, yet forfeit their soul? (New International Version, 2011). Several Christian writers have identified important concepts related to holistic well-being from a Christian perspective.

Wilder and Hendricks (2020), Knabb (2016), Hunt (2008), Tan (2011), and Crabb (2013), among others have identified what they believe contributes to Christian informed well-being. Hendricks and Wilder (2020) stressed the importance of character development in becoming more like Christ, while Knabb (2016) identified six areas that can contribute to or take away from "living an authentic, impactful life" (p. 4). One aspect presented by Knabb (2016) is that symptoms of emotional disorders can prevent a Christian from following Jesus wholeheartedly. Hunt (2008) identified three areas in life that humans must meet for completeness. Hunt stated, "We have all been created with three God-given inner needs: love, significance, and security" (2008, p. 19). In addition, Hunt stated that negative behaviors result when humans attempt to meet these needs in non-appropriate ways., and then identified that God

meets these needs (2008). Tan (2011) presented information on the integration of Christian concepts and psychology, stating that from a Christian perspective, “The ultimate goal of counseling is maturity in Christ and fulfilling the great Commission” (p. 333). However, Tan identified the importance of cultural understanding and community support. In discussing human nature, Tan stated, “a biblical perspective on human nature assumes a holistic view of people with physical, mental-emotional, and spiritual dimensions” (2011, p. 332). Crabb (2013) identified Love, Significance, and Security as basic human needs and further stated that our needs reflect God.

### **Summary**

The previous section was an attempt to present the concept of holistic well-being. It presented ideas from modern psychology and Christian concepts. The accumulated writings suggest that human beings are multifaceted and not one-dimensional. Numerous areas of life that bring satisfaction are identified, along with formal approaches to well-being. From a psychological perspective including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, the ACT matrix, the Wheel of Wellness, the writings of Di (2020), and the compilation therapy introduced by (McKay, et al., 2011) have suggested that when humans fall short in valued areas of life, mental health and emotional difficulties may arise. From a Christian perspective, including Tan (2011), Hunt (2008), Crabb (2013), Wilder & Hendricks (2020), holistic well-being is rooted in the ability to have love, meaning, safety, and a genuine relationship with God. Knabb (2016) adapted ACT concepts that include moving towards values as supporting well-being.

### **The Church and Holistic Well-Being**

It is expected that becoming a Christian would make a difference in the mind and behaviors of a Christian believer. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV), Paul states, “Therefore, if anyone

is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” However, some believe the modern Church is not resulting in, or impacting the Christian population as desired (Wilder et al., 2020). Wilder and Hendricks (2020) stated, “The contemporary church often falls short of facilitating the growth in Christian virtues, love, patience, and kindness, and communion with God and others that that union with God is intended to promote” (p. 49). Wilder & Hendricks (2020) echoes this. Discussing past efforts as a pastor, the author identified that “the results I saw were inconsistent and often disappointing” (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020).

Wilder (2020), described the need for Spiritual transformation and character growth that results from being part of a group. This growth of spirituality and God relationship cannot occur in isolation. Therefore, according to Wilder, there is a need for relationship within this group, the Church, and accountability to grow toward being the person God wants us to be (2020) . However, as this paper will suggest, aided by concepts from IPNB, identifying the need for healthy relationships and actually forming them may be hindered from early life events a person may not even be aware of (Schore, 2019).

Church attendance and membership is in decline (Jones, 2021). According to Gallup, church membership was “73% in 1937 and began to decline around the turn of the 21st Century.” The article contributes some of this change to population age change with younger adults, including Generation Z and millennials not attending as older generations did. Jones (2021) stated, “The two major trends driving the drop in church membership -- more adults with no religious preference and falling rates of church membership among people who do have a religion -- are apparent in each of the generations over time.” Jones (2021) indicated that the implications include financial and the ability to have members available who serve. According to Pew (2019), the number of American adults who describe themselves as “Christians” is down by

12% while those who describe themselves as “atheist, “agnostic”, or “nothing in particular”, has increased by 17% since 2009. The result indicates there are fewer Christians in the growing population and these statistics indicate the church is failing as an institution to promote spiritually focused holistic well-being.

## **The Brain and Holistic Well Being**

### **Interpersonal Neurobiology**

Interpersonal neurobiology is a concept that began in the 1990s (Siegel, 2019). Siegel identified interpersonal neurobiology as an attempt to bring together common knowledge from numerous fields of science resulting in a clearer understanding that explains what a healthy mind is, and how it results from a complex system (2019). Siegel identified nine domains of the mind that when they experience integration (also identified as linkage and differentiation) can result in proper functioning of the brain (Siegel 2006). These nine domains include “Body Regulation, Attuned Communication, Emotional Balance, Response flexibility, Empathy, Insight, Fear Extinction, Intuition, and Morality” (Siegel, 2006, p. 251). Siegel further identified that IPNB attempts to answer the question “could both the mind as brain activity and mind as relational activity perspectives each be correct” (2009, p. 2). An interpretation of Siegel's presentation on interpersonal neurobiology suggests that when the physical brain improperly develops in structure as-a-result of early life experiences and trauma, the nine important domains do not experience the linkage that results in appropriate internal functioning and external interactions (2009). Another important concept related to understanding IPNB according to Siegel (2009) suggests the mind results from the flow of energy and information that results in the whole (the mind) that no individual part of the brain could do alone. Therefore, if the physical structure is impacted, the mind is impacted (Siegel, 2009).

Siegel suggested that these nine areas come together to enable “optimal mental health” (2009, p. 139). Describing what he coined as the Middle Prefrontal Cortex, Siegel stated this area is comprised of critical brain parts that allow for integration to occur and that the “Middle prefrontal area connects everything” (2009, p. 143). Siegel listed these critical brain areas as the “orbitofrontal cortex, the medial ventrolateral prefrontal regions, and portions of the anterior cingulate” (2009, p. 139). In presenting a real case in which this part of the brain was damaged, Siegel reported this physical damage to the brain resulted in an unattuned, unempathetic parent who had previously been attuned to the family needs. The importance of these brain areas and ability to integrate impacts the ability to function appropriately socially and develop the human relationships needed in meeting life, love, and attachment needs. Siegel (2009) identified that integration impacts attachment and overall mental health. Shore (2011) echoed the importance of neuroscience and IPNB in understanding mental health and attachments that can contribute toward well-being.

Schore (2011) presented brain science from the concept of the right and left hemispheres. Schore distinguished between the right side of the brain that impacts emotional abilities and the left side of the brain that functions in a more logical manner (2011). Schore stated, “The left and right hemispheres process information in their own unique fashion and represent a conscious left-brain system and an unconscious right brain system” (2011, p. 76). Extrapolating from these two inferences, the left and the right brain have very important and distinctive purposes. The result impacts Affect Regulation and attachment relationships. Schore suggested throughout that the physical brain development that begins early in life impacts the ability to manage emotions as a person grows older (2011). The explanation resides in understanding implicit memory that lies in the subconscious and impacts emotional responses in the current. Cozolino (2020)

explained that access to this subconscious implicit memory happens at a much faster pace than a true evaluation of what we consider to be live in this moment. Therefore, the impact of these past experiences may be exceptional, but unnoticed in the current interaction or thought.

Cozolino (2020) reported that this unconscious and implicit system is “meditated via a set of early evolving and early developing fast neural systems” (p. 40). Cozolino suggested because there is rapid growth of physical brain structures when young, these resulting structures impact the ability to emotionally respond as an adult and may present some with mental vulnerabilities others may not experience (2020). Such vulnerabilities could impact holistic well-being in the ability to form lasting and meaningful relationships, along with excessive emotional reactivity that results in negative decision-making resulting in poor outcomes and alienation of others.

### **Neurotheology**

Neurotheology is the study of “the relationships among the different areas and functions of the brain and how they restrict us in terms of engaging in the spiritual sides of our selves” (Newberg, 2015, p. 1). Klemm (2020) stated, “The usual goal of neurotheology is to understand brain functions associated with spiritual experiences” (p. 1). Neurotheology includes many academic fields such as “theology, religious studies, religious experience and practice, philosophy, cognitive science, neuroscience, psychology, and anthropology” (Sayadmansour, 2013, p. 52). Sayadmansour (2013) indicated how the physical brain may impact the understanding of spiritual and religious concepts. Sayadmansour stated, “It would seem appropriate for neurotheology to refer to the totality of religion and religious experiences as well as theology” (2013, p. 53). Numerous functions of the brain that aid in “understanding religious concepts include “The holistic function...The quantitative function...The binary function...The causal function...Willfulness and orientating functions.” (2013, pp. 52-53). In general terms,

this is the brains' ability to attempt and understand cause and effect, compare polarities, utilize numbers, and consider behaviors that are purposeful. Sayadmansour (2013) suggested these brain functions help determine how theological concepts, in general, might be derived.

Garzon (2007) posited that neurotheology attempts to bring an understanding of the relationship between the organic brain process and its impact on God image. Garzon identified the concept of neuroplasticity and the ability of neural pathways to change over the life span (2007). Early life experiences impact the development of these neuropathways (Sullivan, 2020), which can result in non-integration of the nine domain areas previously identified by Siegel (2006). Bingaman (2013) asserted that neuroplasticity allows for changes in neuro pathways. This is considered important in understanding God image, God relationship, and trust in God.

Wilder and Hendricks (2020) stated that a neurotheologian is someone who “studies the intersection of spiritual formation and how our brain works (p. 14) and in an interview Newberg suggested that neurotheology is an attempt to understand how different parts and functioning of the brain “help us or restrict us in terms of engaging the spiritual side of ourselves” (Liebert, 2015, p. 13). Weker (2016) indicated that neurotheology examines neural foundations that may be related to the experience of religion. Overall, neurotheology appears to be an attempt to understand how the brain impacts religious experiences.

### **The Brain and Mindfulness Meditation Practices**

Siegel (2010) identified the benefits of mindfulness meditation on the human brain. Siegel stated, “Studies show that the way we intentionally shape our internal focus of attention in mindfulness practice induces a state of brain activation during the practice” (p. 1). Siegel states that as this is completed over and over, “an intentionally created state, can become an enduring trait” (2010, p. 1). Siegel (2007) additionally suggested that mindfulness training impacts the

medial prefrontal cortex, thus “release primary bottom-up experiences from narrative top-down enslavement” (p. 260), resulting in connecting with the current moment versus stuck in ruminations. Siegel further suggested with practice, this ability could turn into a trait (2007).

Tang, Holzel, and Posner (2015) suggested there is “emerging evidence” that mindfulness meditation can produce neurophysiological changes in the brain. They suggested this is particularly identified in the areas of the brains that impact focus, self-awareness, and impact emotions” (p. 222). Jindal, Gupta, and Das (2013) indicated that meditation impacts the cingulate cortex which suggests meditation may impact “emotion formation and processing, learning, and memory” (p. 809). Jindal et al. also state meditation impacts “hippocampus, amygdala, and anterior cingulate” (2013, p. 809), thus impacting memory and motivation, along with emotion. Mindfulness based activities appear to impact gray matter and parts of the hippocampus.

Siegel (2014) asserted neurological benefits from mindfulness practices. Siegel stated, “Neurobiological research on mindfulness practice has taught us a lot about changes to brain” (p. 64). Siegel (2014) identified several areas impacted including, improved attention, “alerting and sustained attention” (p. 60) and impacts cognitive decline. Siegel further asserted that mindfulness meditation impacts emotional regulation, and that different meditations may reflect different responses under electroencephalogram patterns (2014).

### **Attachment Theory’s Relationship to Holistic Well- Being**

Attachment Theory was first developed by Ainsworth and Bowlby (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and has experienced extensive research since. Naveed (2020) introduced the basic tenets and importance of forming secure attachment and emotional bonds. Naveed stated, “attachment is an emotional bond that connects one person to another” (2020, p. 18). Naveed

identified various attachment patterns that have developed throughout history. In 1971, Ainsworth (1971) identified three main attachment styles: insecure avoidant (Type A), secure, (Type B), and insecure ambivalent/resistant (Type C) (Naveed, 2020, p. 18). A fourth attachment style has been identified as Disorganized Attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Overall, the article identified the importance of forming strong attachment bonds when young and then identified how insecure attachment developed early on can contribute to negative outcomes for mental health in adulthood. As the names suggest, the result of attachment patterns can impact the ability of an individual to feel secure and safe, or attachment patterns can contribute to the ability to form patterns in life that are organized or disorganized. Additionally, attachment patterns can contribute to anxiety toward attachments or contribute to avoidance type behaviors in relationships.

Attachment Theory proposes that childhood relationships and interactions impact the ability to emotionally function as an adult (Siegel, 2020), and that working models of attachment figures can form. Bowlby (1982) presented the concept of working models. Bowlby stated, “The cognitive map that an animal must have of its environment if it is to achieve a set-goal that requires it to move from one place to another” (1982, p. 82). Bowlby suggested these maps can incrementally change due to experience (1982). These models can be complex or simple and develop as an effort to survive. Working models and mental models can form relating to numerous issues. Homan (2014) discussed the expansion of mental models to God and self. In citing the work of Bowlby (1982), Homan added that “mental models of attachment figures and mental models of the self are complimentary” (2014, pp. 979-980). Homan suggested the mental models of God impact mental models of self. Homan stated, “Thus, people who perceive God as loving, caring, and available are likely to hold mental models of self as worthy of love and

compassion” (2014, p. 980). Clinton and Sibcy (2002) identified the Stages of Separation involved during an attachment interaction. Clinton and Sibcy (2002) identified protest, despair, and detachment, and then in crediting Bowlby (1982), presented the Attachment Behavioral System. The Attachment Behavioral System describes what happens when a child attempts to attain security through an attachment figure and either the negative or positive outcome that results in relationship to the attachment figure availability. Clinton and Sibcy (2002) identified those repeated experiences between a mother and child contribute to what Bowlby identified as “internal working models” (p. 23).

### **Neurobiology of Attachment**

Cozolino (2020) asserted the importance of interactions with parents in the development of neuro-growth. Cozolino stated, “Our early interactions stimulate our neuron growth, establish our neural chemical set points, and determine how well our neuro networks develop and integrate (2020, p. 65). Cozolino indicated this may impact critical life areas including, emotion regulation, the ability to form attachments, and the way we view ourselves (2020). Cozolino (2020) pointed to the fact that the experience of one person with his or her parents may not represent what is normal in the whole of society.

Animal and human studies help to provide information for understanding attachment. Although identifying the difficulty in studying attachment, Insel & Young (2001) stated, “Recent studies with chicks, rats, sheep, voles, and now humans have begun to reveal some important candidates for the neurobiology of human attachment” (p. 135). Insel and Young identified Oxytocin and vasopressin as important, along with Dopamine pathways, the nucleus accumbens, and the ventral pallidum (2001, p. 135). “Attachment is an emotional bond that connects one person to another” (Naveed, Sabor, & Zeshan, 2020, p. 18). There are different approaches to

understanding attachment, ranging from cognitive ideas and beliefs (Beck, 1995) to neurological approaches (Naveed, et al., 2020). Siegel (2020) suggested that the development of the physical mind as a child impacts emotional regulation and the ability to have adult relationships and attachments. Siegel also suggested that the physical brain can be changed as an adult through neuro-plasticity (2011). As a result, the neurobiology of attachment is suggested to be changeable in adulthood.

The neurobiology of attachment begins even before a child is born (Coria-Avila, Manzo, Garcia, Carrillo, Miquel, & Pfaus, 2014). The authors stated, “Attachment neurobiology develops early, beginning in utero, and continuing into the early preschool years” (Coria-Avila, et al., 2014, p. 19). Numerous locations of the brain are identified as important in attachment development including, “the hypothalamus-pituitary adrenal axis and reward system...amygdala...medial prefrontal cortex...hypothalamus” (Coria-Avila, et al., 2014, p. 19). As the child develops, interactions within the brain impact each other, such as the impact that Oxytocin may have on Cortisol as one example (Naveed, et al., 2020). This interaction may be increased or decreased through abuse or neglect. As the medial prefrontal cortex continues to develop throughout life and early adulthood, this impacts emotional regulation in adulthood. These interactions suggest that early abuse and neglect may impact emotional regulation as an adult. As attachment patterns in life develop, this will impact the ability to form secure or insecure types of attachment. Naveed et al. (2020) identified the various parts of the brain that impact the development of a secure attachment and in the end, the authors stated there are numerous consequences on mental health as a result of attachment patterns. Naveed et al. (2020) suggested that secure attachment impacts executive functioning and the ability to experience future social interactions. Importantly, Naveed et al. (2020) stated, “These attachment behaviors

are highly dependent on the neurobiology of the attachment pattern that starts developing before birth and continues to preschool.” (p. 21).

### **Attachment and Mindfulness**

Snyder, Shapiro, and Treleavan (2012) described mindfulness as contributing to the ability to improve how the mother interacts with a child and may improve how adults can respond to each other daily. According to the authors, mindfulness has a two-fold ability to increase skills to pay attention in the moment thus changing interaction responses, and it can also impact the physical structure of the brain impacting the nervous system (Snyder et al., 2012). Overall, Attachment Theory stipulates relationships and the ability to form them are of vital importance resulting in the ability of individuals to feel safe in this world and impacting behaviors that can improve or hinder life satisfaction. The authors suggested that mindfulness can improve attachments (Snyder, et al., 2012).

### **Attachment to God**

The previous section on the neurobiology of attachments suggests that the ability to form secure attachments is impacted by early life events. Then, these early events contribute to the ability to experience emotional regulation and form attachments as an adult. One concept in understanding attachment in humans is understanding the ability of humans to form attachments to God and their image of God.

Sandage, Jankowski, Crabtree, and Schweer (2015) discussed human attachment style and God attachment. The concepts of correspondence and compensation were introduced. Sandage et al. (2015) indicated that Compensation is the idea that when humans lack in human attachment, they may seek out God for attachment. Compensation suggests that if human attachments are successful, there is an increased chance for a positive God attachment. In citing

the work of Kilpatrick & Shaver (1992), Sandage et al (2015) stated, “individuals determine their relationship experience toward God by the nature of their attachment relationship with early caregivers, on a correspondence model” (p. 5). This suggests if a person experienced a negative relationship with early responsible adults who cared for them, they may have a negative view of God. In another discussion of attachment and God, Knabb & Emerson (2013) identified the presence of attachment concepts in the Bible, demonstrating God as a secure base.

Knabb and Emerson (2013) discussed the importance of relationships, early life experiences, and negative parenting as impacting God attachment. In referencing Attachment Principles utilized by Clinton & Straub (2010), Knabb & Emerson (2013) identified four attachment principles that include: ”Secure base... Exploration... Attachment Behaviors... Safe Haven” (p. 828). Clinton and Sibcy (2002) stated, “Fear of abandonment is the fundamental human fear” (p. 22).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) discussed the concept of Protest Behaviors that occur when attempts of reducing fear through seeking others for safety are not met. These behaviors are indicated as Protest Behaviors and in citing Bowlby (1982), identified the pattern as “protest, despair, and detachment” (p. 16). Knabb and Emerson (2013) indicated that humans never quit needing attachment and the type of attachments developed in childhood may be transferred to adult relationships. The result indicates that when adults reach for security through attachment behaviors, they may respond the same as the patterns they developed in childhood.

Knabb, Vazquez, and Wang (2018) addressed the concept of God image. In an article on rumination and negative thinking, anxiety, and depression, the authors presented the importance of experiencing and not just knowing of God’s characteristics in coping as an adult. The authors stated, “A deeper look at God’s character reveals three important characteristics: omniscience,

omnipotence, and omnibenevolence” (2018, p. 172). The authors discussed diverse types of learning people experience in life that apply to God, such as Bible teachings and sermons. The authors suggested over time, a God image is formed. The importance is in not just knowing of God but having a true relationship. However, this is impacted by previous life experience and implicit memory as previously indicated by Colozino (2020). As the previously stated attachment information has suggested, if implicit memory contributes to the idea people cannot be counted on, God is approached with the same relational context thus people may not be comforted by knowledge of God alone.

### **Meditation, Mindfulness, and Holistic Well-Being**

#### **Meditation/Mindfulness**

In the review of literature, multiple types of meditation and mindfulness techniques have been identified. Mindfulness is the process of paying attention while maintaining a nonjudgmental stance of both internal and external experiences as they occur (Lang, et al., 2012). Gutierrez, Fox, and Wood (2015) described different types of meditation that have found their way into modern use and classification. Fox, Gutierrez, Braganza, and Berger (2015) identified at least three different classifications. In citing Young, de Armis DeLorenzi, and Cunningham, (2011), Fox et al.(2015) identified three categories including “devotional, mantra based, and mindfulness” (p. 235). Techniques include traditional forms such as Zen meditations and Vipassana associated with the Buddhist heritage. Some forms of mindfulness may include a focus on biological awareness (Leite et al., 2010).

#### **Meditation and Mindfulness-Based Therapies**

Harrington and Dunne (2015) discussed the ethical and historical perspectives on mindfulness and therapy. The authors discussed the evolution and acceptance of mindfulness

and meditation-based approaches into American psychological practice. The significance lies in understanding that at one time meditation and mindfulness practices were not central features in helping humans recover from emotional difficulties. As this evolution transpired, these practices gained further acceptance in the clinical setting. The authors described criticism that has evolved in using mindfulness and meditation in ways early practices were not intended. It has been through extensive research that these practices are being accepted in what is now being referred to as mindfulness-based therapies. Loving Kindness Meditation, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy are examples of the inclusion of mindfulness-based meditation practices into therapy.

### **Loving Kindness Meditation**

Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) is another meditation technique that has been identified in the literature. LKM “facilitated increased positive emotions through meditation exercises designed to develop feelings of kindness and compassion for self and other” (Kearney et al., 2013, p. 426). Lang et al. (2012) reported that LKM meditation is a compassion-based treatment that improves positive emotions. This could be utilized to address both depression and anxiety. Additionally, it could be effective in addressing some symptoms associated with PTSD. LKM was used as treatment with veterans to reduce depression and overall PTSD. LKM appears to have an impact on PTSD through the avenue of improved self-compassion (Kearney, et al., 2013). However, limitations were identified in this study which indicated a lack of a control arm and possible selection bias.

Alba (2013) indicated the LKM is a compassion-based meditation that appears to have a greater impact on stress than on depression. Two different meditation retreats were utilized in which volunteers were asked to complete surveys before the retreat, after the retreat ended, and

then two weeks later. Participants experienced LKM over the four-night retreat. Alba (2013) identified limitations including small sample size and lack of a control group, and suggested future research should include a control group.

In another study conducted by Boyle et al. (2017), emotional regulation was evaluated following the use of mindfulness meditation. The researchers utilized a participant and a control group and evaluated the impact of LKM and psychoeducational components on participants with cancer. Results indicated multiple mediators in the short-term including decreased rumination and an improvement in self kindness. The researchers reported that at three-month follow up, the improvements were no longer present. More research on LKM needs to be conducted.

### **Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy**

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has been utilized for years, however, due to the Buddhist component may not be accepted by Christians (Garzon & Ford, 2016). Jain et al. (2015) conducted a review of previously completed research with populations who were experiencing depression. The review included both MBCT and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). It was pointed out that such methods as MBCT engages other factors that other types of mindfulness treatments may not including a cognitive component. Numerous elements of meditation therapies were identified, including mental imagery, cognitive elements, and attentional elements. In another article, Arch, Landy, and Brown (2015) evaluated LKM and its impact on self-compassion. Personal traits were evaluated as mediators to the effectiveness of treatment. Results indicated that those with higher levels of trait anxiety benefited less than those who did not. MBCT has multiple benefits if proven effective for the depressed population. According to Barnhofer, Crane, Hargus, Amarasinghe, Winder, and Williams (2009), MBCT was introduced to help those with depression. It includes both elements associated with

mindfulness and elements associated with Cognitive Therapy. Barnhofer et al. (2009) reported the treatment intervention is provided in a group setting. As this article points out, it had previously been indicated that MBCT may not be appropriate for those currently depressed. It was believed that those who are currently depressed may not be able to uphold the expectations of the treatment. Barnhofer et al. (2009) conducted a study with inclusion criteria of depression, past suicidal ideation, and multiple depressive episodes of at least three, and no current meditation or therapy treatment. Researchers utilized MBCT for treatment group and a wait group. Results indicated that MBCT resulted in a decreased depression. Researchers indicated small group sample as a limitation.

MBSR was first championed by Kabat-Zinn (1990). Harrington and Dunn (2015) stated, “MBSR emerged as a practice that seemed at once medical and spiritual. It was method of stress-reduction, or a path to brain rewiring, and a means to profound ethical transformation all at the same time” (p. 629). The authors identified how criticism was directed toward MBSR and whether it retained the original roots of the meditation.

### **Christian Devotional Meditation and Centering Prayer**

#### **Brief History of Christian Devotional Meditation and Centering Prayer**

Forms of Christian meditations are accredited to the “Desert Fathers” in the third century and handed down through centuries until the 14th century, the Cloud of Unknowing” was made available (Outreach, n.d.). Since the third century, there were others who contributed to forms of Christian meditation including “the writings of Christian mystics such as John Cassian, Francis de Sales, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, and Thomas Merton” (Outreach, n.d.). The Cloud of Unknowing has been attributed to spurring an interest in modern forms of Christian meditation. According to Contemplative Outreach, Vatican II identified the

need to return to methods of contemplation of the past. Wilhoit (2014) reported upon introduction to the Cloud of Unknowing, Menninger (1974) began to teach others including both Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Basil Pennington. Eventually, Contemplative Outreach was created by Fr. Thomas and Christian Meditation has continued to be taught. According to Contemplative Outreach, “Today Centering Prayer is practiced by people all around the world” (Outreach, n.d.). As early as 1988, Christian meditation was explored as a treatment strategy for psychological and physical variables (Carlson & Bacaseta, 1988).

### **Centering Prayer and Christian Devotional Meditation**

Centering Prayer and Christian Devotional Meditation are ways of forming a closer relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Scripture identifies the importance of meditation and a call to reflect on God. Numerous times throughout Psalms, the word “meditate” is used. In one example, the writer of Psalm 48 refers to meditating on the love of God. Psalms 143:5 states, “I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done” (NIV). CDM and Centering Prayer are different than what may be recognized as typical or common meditation. Knabb (2010) identified Centering Prayer as having numerous facets. Knabb stated “(a) it allows the individual to get in touch with his or her *center of being*, beyond logic and reason, which is where God is located.; (b) it offers the individual a simple effortless form of prayer so as to abide with God in the present moment; and (c) it helps the individual relate differently to his or her thoughts” (p. 914).

Garzon (2011) described the differences between mindfulness meditation (as described by Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Christian devotional meditation. According to Garzon (2011), CDM focus is on “God, Scripture, & Self” (p. 2), while mindfulness meditation focuses on the self. Additionally, the context of meditation in CDM includes God-Awareness and mindfulness

meditation does not. As described elsewhere in this paper, CDM is more of an open system to include the influence of God, Jesus, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit, as compared to a closed emphasis on the self.

Garzon (2013) asserted that there are numerous ways in which people may approach CDM, and Centering Prayer is one form. Frederick and White (2015) stated, “CDM is a broad term referring to many strategies, often derived from spiritual formation exercises, designed to bring total awareness and attention to God” (p. 850). Centering Prayer is a form of Christian Meditation. According to Gutierrez et al. (2015), Centering Prayer has been utilized since the 1970s.

Centering Prayer and Christian meditation practices have been described by others along with potential benefits to assist in mental health. Knabb (2012) addressed the concept of Centering Prayer and its ability to serve as an alternative to mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. Knabb identified three components of Centering Prayer. According to Knabb, Centering Prayer “(a) allows a person to get in touch with his or her *center of being*, beyond logic and reason, which is where God is; (b) it offers the individual a simple and effortless form of prayer so as to abide with God in the present moment; (c) it helps the individual to relate differently to his own thought” (2012). Garzon (2004) discussed Contemplative and Inner Healing Prayer. Garzon (2004) pointed out that Contemplative Inner Healing Prayer can serve as an addition to Cognitive Restructuring but does not change the particular thoughts that result in the current emotions. By providing a case study, Garzon (2004) demonstrated the difference between doing cognitive restructuring toward something that causes anger and asking God through Contemplative Prayer to help with lifting the anger. Blanton (2011) also discussed Centering Prayer. Blanton indicated that Centering Prayer has many similarities to mindfulness, however Centering Prayer

focuses on God (2011). Further, Blanton (2011) indicated mindfulness has been investigated extensively; however, Christian based mindfulness has not. Blanton (2011) provided a description of how to do Centering Prayer. According to Blanton (2011), Centering Prayer is not complicated and requires making a connection toward God. In utilizing Centering Prayer, Frederick & White (2015) evaluated the relationship of mindfulness and the ability to surrender to God. In utilizing what the authors identified as “secondary analysis of data” (p. 853), surrender to God was measured as a component resulting from Christian mindfulness practices, identifying CDM as a broad term, and centering prayer as a method. The authors indicated that they utilized research from CDM in making their hypothesis and concluded, “In focusing on the mediating role of surrender, we have extended mindfulness and centering prayer research” (p. 857). The results indicated that the ability to surrender to God through centering prayer can have an impact on stress. Frederick and White (2015) indicated limitations in their research. One limitation was small sampling, another was the possibility of other influencers, and the third was the method of utilizing a survey. For future research Frederick and White (2015) stressed the need to address both the method and sampling issues. Additionally, they described how Christian Devotional Meditation is a broad term. Christian Devotional Meditation can be comprised of many different techniques. In other research by Ford & Garzon (2017), Christian accommodative mindfulness was utilized. Ford and Garzon (2017) compared responses to Christian-Accommodative Mindfulness and Mindfulness training without the Christian element. In describing Christian-Accommodative Mindfulness, there is an intentional focus on breath and a realization that the mind can wander with a gentle reminder to return focus. Garzon and Ford (2016) also provided a description for Christian Accommodative Loving Kindness Meditation. Themes are directed toward the Lord as compared to only the self or humans. While indicating

that Christian Accommodative Mindfulness can appear to be helpful, they noted limitations to the study and a need for future research. Garzon and Ford (2016) indicated the need for a clinical sample, as their research method utilized a sample from a Christian college. They additionally identified the need for a longer treatment intervention. Garzon (2013) discussed Devotional Meditation for Anxiety and its application. Garzon identified three types of meditation. Garzon additionally identified that instruction on how to implement Christian Devotional Meditation has been small.

### **Integration of Concepts for Program Development**

Interpersonal neurobiology (IPBN) is an integrative approach utilizing research science and knowledge from numerous academic fields. Siegel (2020) stated that IPBN “is not a branch of neuroscience, but a broad framework drawing on findings from a wide range of disciplines that explores the nature of what it means to be human” (p. 6) and “IPBN seeks to create an understanding of relationships with people and the planets” (Siegel, 2020, p. 6). Shore (2019) added that IPBN “enables us to understand that the structure and function of the mind and brain are shaped by experiences, especially those involving emotional relationships” (p. 2).

Prior to birth, core developments of the physical brain are taking place and impact overall adult functioning. Both Sullivan (2012) and Shore (2002), discussed the importance of experiences that should happen, and those that should not happen for preferred brain development. Shore (2002) indicated there are significant growth spurts at early ages and stated, “Notice that the growth spurts overlap the prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal periods” (p. 250), and this is complemented by Sullivan’s (2012) suggestion that life experiences impact neural activity which impacts cell development. Sullivan stated, “early life deprivation fails to activate neurons” (2012, p. 2) which impacts overall brain development. Concepts related to safety are

being recorded in the infant's mind and by the age of one, symbolic representations are formed that contribute to attachment development. Shore indicated emotional communications of early life are recorded in the right hemisphere and "The right hemisphere, which is centrally involved in emotional communications, is in a growth spurt in the first year and a half" (2002, p. 252). Sullivan stated that by the end of age one "the process of attachment formation is completed" (2002, p. 5). Shore and Shore (2007) indicated that secure attachment is an important developmental task "in the first year of life" (p. 10).

Clinton and Sibcy (2002) identified five criteria that form an attachment relationship: "proximity... a safe haven... a secure base... fear and anxiety, and the loss of the caregiver induces grief and sorrow" (p. 149). These are critical concepts in considering attachment to God, and Clinton & Sibcy (2002) suggested that the type of attachment style one has with other humans impacts the attachment pattern a person has with God. The attachment patterns of avoidance, ambivalent, secure, or disorganized are believed to be utilized in a person's daily approach toward God.

In discussing attachment and brain development, the actual physical brain impacts how humans respond in the current moment. Siegel (2005) described the concept of integration between the various entities of the brain and previous life experiences described above are recorded in brain structure that is utilized to appraise situations that are being experienced. As Shore (2002) indicated earlier, emotional content is basically a product of the right hemisphere. The right hemisphere is often referred to as the fast track while the left hemisphere is often referred to as the slow track, because current experiences begin processing on the right side of the brain. Wilder and Hendricks (2020) explained the difference between what is referred to as the fast track versus the slow track when considering how information is processed in the brain.

Wilder and Hendricks (2020) stated, “The right side starts processing our surroundings and draws conclusions before the left side is even aware of what is happening” (p. 21). Since the right hemisphere is where emotional and relational content is stored, “The brain brings together current experiences and emotionally important personal memories to create an active sense of who we are in our relationships at that moment” (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020, p. 21).

According to IPNB, it is believed that mediation and mindfulness approaches help repair the structure of the brain that impacts affect regulation, attention, and ability to form attachments (Siegel, 2020). This is important as the previous paragraphs indicated that emotional content is a response from the right brain and concepts of relationships are formed early in life in this side of the brain. Sullivan (2012) indicated that experiences impact neural development, and Siegal (2019) suggested that the physical product of early life neural development in the brain can be changed. One approach in changing brain structure is meditation, wherein it is believed it can impact cell structure change.

Wilder and Hendricks (2020) reported that often the development of spiritual maturity and emotional maturity do not occur even though a person may spend years in church and believe this as result of how information is processed in the slow and fast tracks of the mind. Therefore, while Christian disciplines are helpful, they do not contribute to the growth expected from people who have spent so much time in church. Therefore, they propose learning should include the whole brain which includes the fast and slow tracks of the brain (Wilder & Hendricks, 2020).

The difficulty occurs when Christians with good intentions are reluctant to include meditation or mindfulness in fear that it may be inappropriate, due to meditation’s past association with Eastern religions (Garzon & Ford, 2016). The preceding information has

suggested meditation may be beneficial in improving positive mental health. The approaches must be deemed acceptable to Christians and the Church. If accepted by Christians in the church, Christian meditation could possibly result in improved affect regulation and group involvement, thereby a relationship with others and God.

Hall and Hall (2021) provided a detailed description of the evolution from a loving Christian Church defined in ACTS to the distancing and sometimes unloving behaviors of the modern church. Hall and Hall (2021) stated, “There was a seamless connection between knowing about God and knowing God. Likewise, there was a close link between studying God’s creation, including development, and living the Christian life” (p. 12). There was no difference in the knowing and living; however, as times emerged, and respect for the brain and cognition increased, the concept of academia emerged as more intellectually significant. The style of teaching in secular environments are now utilized in the church, such as lectures and reading which do not connect with the relational, loving, and emotional part of the brain. There is a new effort being utilized to appreciate what brain science can tell us about relationships, emotions, learning, interactions, and help Christians become a more loving and relational community. This program is one such attempt.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

The previous literature review identified several sources of information that when combined inform an approach to holistic well-being that contributes to improved mental processing and relationships, resulting in what Wilder has called “hesed,” a Hebrew word that Wilder & Hendricks (2020) stated “carries the sense of enduring connection that brings life and all good things into a relationship” (p. 80). A six-week program will be developed that includes the areas identified in the literature review. These areas are seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Integrating Concepts Related to Improved Attachment and Well-Being*

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Holistic Well-Being

Meditation Mindfulness

Christian Devotional Meditation

Attachment Theory

God Attachment

Interpersonal Neurobiology

The Neurobiology of Attachment

The Neurology of Mindfulness Meditation

Neurotheology

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A program will be developed that is acceptable for presentation within the church environment and be able to provide information on how love impacts the brain without being too scientific. Weekly meditations are being utilized that support a Christian world view. Each week will contain a meditation, discussion, and appropriate Bible verses. Additionally, group

exercises will be utilized when appropriate. Participants will be provided an exercise to practice between sessions that allow for enhanced right brain functioning that contributes to improved emotional regulation capacity.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PROGRAM**

According to Lifeway Research (Smietana, 2021), “more than half of Americans have read little or none of the Bible.” Reading the Bible, however, is a significant way in which people gain their knowledge of God, withstanding what Paul says in Romans 1:19-23 (NIV). In Romans 1:19-23, Paul instructs us that there is no excuse for not knowing God, and that God’s attributes have been made known for all to see. God is described as having divine nature and eternal power. Throughout the Bible, God’s power is demonstrated. Genesis states God “created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1, NIV), followed by all that God created. In Exodus, readers are shown the power of God through the 10 plagues, and in the Gospels, Jesus is resurrected from the dead. When read throughout, the power of God is clearly demonstrated. Those who have read and instruct on the Bible, teach of God’s characteristics that identify God as all knowing, all powerful, and all loving and present. Combining these characteristics of God with what Paul states in Romans 8:28 (NIV) “and we know that in all things: God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” it would seem as though Christians would have little to fear. However, Christians appear plagued by the same types of difficulties and worries that non-Christians experience. So why do some Christians face life with the same fears, anxieties, and psychological difficulties non-Christians experience when they believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God that is working for their good?

As humans, on this earth, the complexities of God and the universe may never be understood, and many of the “Why” questions may never be answered. The Bible does speak of sin (1 John 5:16-18, NIV) , and following the act of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 (NIV), the ground is cursed, and the perfect relationship and security that mankind had with God ended. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. But in his mercy and grace, God clothed them with “garments of skin” (GEN 3:21, NIV). God was with them, always. Still, the human body

was impacted and remains impacted. This includes the body and the physical brain. Just as the body deteriorates in strength over time, the physical body and brain can both be impacted from birth. Even though the Bible demonstrates God's love, mercy, and grace throughout, even with the death of his Son, Christians remain living in a fallen world where all is not right, and within that perspective, Christians still face hardships like any others and the weight of their own shortcomings and the consequences of others.

God provided an answer through Jesus, and all who call on him, acknowledge their sin, and accept him as savior can experience salvation. John 3:16 (NIV) states "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that that whoever believes him shall not perish but have eternal life." Many Christians will say, "I know this, but I just don't feel it." They have read the Bible, they have listened to the sermons, but still do not experience the peace, spiritual growth, and emotional security that they may expect or desire. Often, they experience guilt, for not experiencing the love towards others and God that they have been told they should have.

### **Why Love Does Not Always Come Easy**

Christian writers are now using science and research to help Christians understand why countless years of devoted church attendance and sermon experiencing may not develop into the growth, love for others, and spiritual maturity they would like. If honest, some Christians would profess guilt and acknowledge that at times, they even doubt their own love for God. They understand with their mind, but do not feel with their heart.

Christian writers Wilder and Hendricks described how people learn to love, develop relationships, and develop knowledge. Along with other Christian writers such as Clinton and Sibcy (2009), it is suggested that early life experiences contribute to a bank of knowledge that we carry with us that we are not even aware. It is suggested that the accumulation of past events

and experiences are stored within the physical brain, and we never really forget them, even though we may not think about them. This impacts whether we feel safe in the moment, and how our personalities develop and handle relationships as an adult. These are considered mental models. Humans form mental models of others, relationships, and even of God. We carry these models with us wherever we go, which heavily impacts the way current situations are appraised, or even if we see God as a loving father watching over us, or as an adversary waiting for use to make mistakes.

Several disciplines inform how we can understand the lack of love and/or acceptance humans have towards themselves, others, and God. These disciplines include science, neurotheology, meditation mindfulness, Christian meditation, and attachment relationship concepts, among others. Following, a 6-week program is introduced to help grow in Christian love toward others, God, and promote spiritual development within. The principles utilized are combined from the preceding fields of study and the Bible.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Holistic well-being takes into account that quality of life may be enhanced when it is balanced among many factors, rather than just a few areas. A review of research indicates that mental well-being impacts the overall quality of life, including emotional reactivity, the experience of stress, attachment, and even attachment to God. Given the fact that there are over 2 billion Christians around the world (Pew Research, 2011), attachment to God appears a relevant and meaningful topic. Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) are significant pioneers in understanding the concept of attachment, and this was preceded by Christian writers that have continued the investigation of attachment and its impact on relationships, attachment to God (Clinton & Sibcy, 2009), and Christian maturity and development (Wilde & Hendricks, 2020). In ACTS, the Bible describes the behaviors of the early church and the personal interactional and connection, care and love they had for one another. This has changed through time and the emotional connection that once was once experienced among Christians is no longer recognizable as compared to the early Church. This can be evident in non-Christian relationships as well. The ability to form relationships has experienced modern barriers understood through Interpersonal Neurobiology. Hall and Hall (2021) provided a detailed description of the evolution from the early church to what is exhibited now. Hall and Hall (2021) stated, “Many of the great theologians prior to the thirteenth century viewed the intellectual exploration of the Christian faith and of the world God created as inseparable from a personal relationship with God and the practical outworking as one’s faith and ministry” (p. 11). While people once lived their faith in the entirety of life, it is now compartmentalized in a way in which academia has contributed to a greater respect for knowledge, rightness, and correctness, compared to love for one another, and Christian development took a back seat. Secular knowledge and Christian experience became separated.

This research development program has utilized knowledge from numerous fields in what Siegel (2005) has called a consilient approach. Information from the academic fields of neurology, neurotheology, psychology, neurobiology, and developmental sciences, among others are utilized to provide increased understanding on concepts of Interpersonal Neurobiology and its relationship to Holistic Well-Being. This program suggests that early life development and significant events in life contribute to the brain structure that impacts the ability to emotionally respond in the moment, evaluate a situation, feel safe, form relationships, and attachment to God and others.

Interpersonal Neurobiology, Attachment studies, and Christian Maturity are significant in understanding the brain development that results in the emergence of the mind. Attachment studies have indicated that early life events contribute to the formation of attachment styles, and neurobiology research has indicated that attachment bonds are formed very early in life, and prenatal events impact the development of the physical brain (Shore, 2002). These early life attachment styles become adult attachment styles which then impact the ability to form meaningful and trusting relationships in adulthood. Additionally, the early development of the brain impacts the adult stress response and emotional reactivity. Siegel has introduced the concept of integration within the various regions of the brain that impact overall functioning (2006).

Research indicates brain changes during the lifetime due to process of neuroplasticity (Sullivan, 2012). Brain structure can be influenced through modern and not so modern techniques. One such technique is meditation. Meditation has been described in research as impacting the neuronetworks that contribute to integration described by Siegel (2006). Meditation is mentioned in the Bible and throughout Christian history suggested as an important

avenue in developing a relationship with God. Numerous Christian mystics have discussed the importance of meditation and even the Catholic Church has supported the use of it (Wilhoit, 2014). Yet, among some Christians, meditation carries a negative connotation associated with Eastern religions. This program has been developed-supporting Christian beliefs that may be more acceptable within the Christian environment.

The six-week program combines elements of neurology, brain development exercises that support social development, and Christian meditation. This is a program that requires additional research. It is in its infancy. It is suggested that several steps be conducted to identify its worthiness in the goals of increasing attachment, God attachment, and emotional responsiveness that contributes to Holistic Well-Being. The next step could include a pilot study among Christians measuring overall effectiveness and response, and acceptance among a small group of Christians. The pilot study could include quantitative measures along with qualitative interviews to evaluate outcomes. If deemed appropriate, following this stage a formal type of research is suggested that would include a Quasi-Experimental design including a group of Christians without the control or comparison group. In this design, the participants could be provided pre-tests and post-tests that measure for level of attachment, God attachment, stress, and spiritual maturity. Finally, the next step suggested would be that of a randomized trial. According to Jackson (2016) this allows a researcher “to control as much as possible to determine whether a cause-and-effect relationship between exists between the variables being studied” (p. 19). In these initial studies, it is recommended the population to be examined should be Christians active in church, since that is where the created program is to eventually be provided. If the results are positive for that population, a series of studies should be done with Christian clients in mental health care.

According to Wilder and Henricks (2020), the Church is not producing the desired results for spiritual development. As they suggested, many well-meaning Christians sit in church, listen to sermons, and read their Bibles without change to spiritual maturity. It is believed this is the result of the type of teaching that reaches the logical brain versus the social and emotional parts of the brain. Mental health issues including depression and stress appear rampant and approaches often fall short in impacting Holistic Well-Being. More programs that include an interdisciplinary holistic approach are necessary. This would lead to increases in God attachment, relationship development, emotional reactivity, and reduction of stress, along with an increase in spiritual maturity. Holistic approaches could help in determining if faith outcomes can be impacted through treatment approaches. There remains a difficulty in creating programs that include a holistic approach and Christian components. It requires the participation of trained clinicians who are also Spiritually inclined and mature, that also have the knowledge and ability to conduct research. Now it is important to invite prayer that the Lord would raise up such persons for the benefit of the body of Christ.

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## Appendix A

### Interpersonal Neurobiology and Well-Being

#### Week 1

Introductions

Introduction to topic

Activity, Practice

Reactions to activity

Discussion of practice for next week

Exercise for week

Resources

#### **Introductions and ice breakers:**

Please introduce yourself to the group. Identify any significant information that you would like the group to know about you.

#### **Why Christian Love Doesn't Always Come Easy**

David's' psalm, 139:13-

For you created my inmost being.

You knit me together in my mothers womb

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Your works are wonderful

I know that full well.

The mind is a wonderful thing. Have you ever wondered how the mind works and thoughts materialize? “Why I’m I depressed, why don’t I like that person? Why am I so angry? It’s an outstanding phenomenon and one that scientists can-not completely explain, however can make estimations. In simplest concepts, the physical brain operates as a whole and results in the output of our mind. The brain is a conglomeration of neurons that communicate with each other through networks and circuits. When all is functioning well, a person can respond under adversity and make decisions that may be helpful. Others may experience adversity in a frantic and disproportional way, responding with chaos. Research indicates that our physical brain begins growth before birth and continues changing throughout life, which can be a good thing. Old habits learned can be unlearned, and new concepts can be developed. People can even learn to love when they didn’t in the past. But how does this happen?

In this week's lesson, interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) is introduced. A person may ask, why? What on earth does IPNB have to do with experiencing the love of God, the love of others, and spiritual development and emotional growth that can contribute to overall well-being? The benefit of understanding IPNB lies in the fact that IPNB is a fancy term for understanding how the physical brain results in the output of our thoughts and emotions, and what is commonly called the mind. Important concepts are that the physical brain and the mind are not the same thing. The physical brain is never static and that parts of the brain are active at all times. The efficiency of these activities is impacted by early life and ongoing experiences. Ongoing experiences contribute to the development of the physical brain structure, which then contributes to the processing that results in the mind. One example provided in the literature is that of Romanian orphans raised in extreme isolation who have smaller brains and a larger

amygdala, which increases the fear response. Therefore, changing the structure of the brain can change how we love and respond to others, including God. This week we will focus on three significant concepts.

Memory

Mutual mind

Fast/track slow track

**But first of all, re read this verse:**

Psalm, 139:13-

For you created my inmost being;

You knit me together in my mothers womb

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Your works are wonderful

I know that full well.

**Discussion:**

What does this mean to you? When David says I am fearfully and wonderfully made, what part of him is he speaking of?

Do you find it difficult to consider that the neurons and circuits in the brain impact how people love and care about others?

Prior to birth, individual neurons in the brain begin to form. Eventually, billions of neurons comprise circuits and networks that communicate with each other and occupy various regions of the brain. If all is well, the networks communicate efficiently, and experience stability and balance. Early life abuse, or neglect can contribute to an alteration in the number, size, and connection of these neurons impacting the ability of neurons to communicate, resulting in rigidness on one end and chaos on the other.

**Discussion:**

What do you believe it takes to experience good mental health?

Have you ever known anyone who is easily angered, continually depressed, or appears to have the inability to love?

Let's review three elements that contribute to the output of emotions.

Memory: There are two types of memory to focus on as far as good mental health and experiencing love and joy in life. One form of memory, Tacit memory, simply means the accumulation of past experiences that result in concepts we develop toward ourselves, others, and life, and is unconscious. However, these memories impact how we feel in the moment even when not thinking about a particular past event. Explicit memory is the type of memory a person can say on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1985, I learned to drive a car. Memory is very important when it comes to emotionally responding in the current moment, reacting with disregard, or with love, towards those we don't even know. What's helpful to understand is that we do not generally forget life events, they are stored away even though we were not conscious of them.

**Discussion:**

Can you identify a significant event in the past that is a representation of precise explicit memory?

Example, even though you may have not thought of it in a while, what car did you take your drivers test in?

If you were asked is exercise good for you, you may not know the exact day you came to that decision, however, was an accumulation of events throughout life that are in your memory being accessed when asked that question.

Can you think of a general belief you have such as “People are good,” “People are bad,” “I can’t trust anyone,” “I’m not really loveable”? Can you consciously recount every event you experienced that contributed to that belief, do a few significant ones stand out?

Mutual mind is a concept that represents the ability to truly identify with what another person is thinking or experiencing in a given moment. This is an important concept related to empathy and the ability to have empathy for others. It is an ability to think like others, In the end, if we can have a mutual mind with others, then maybe we can generate the ability to have a mutual mind with Jesus, thinking the way Jesus would towards others, we would naturally be more loving. This would contribute to personal character growth and emotional maturity. What if you were able to respond naturally with the love and care Jesus does, without having to think about it? That would be your new you.

*Fast track/slow track:* This concept describes the left and right sides of the brain. While they are highly overgeneralized at times there are clarities that can be made. The right hemisphere is responsible for all things emotional and relational while the left is the more logical side. The right side of the brain, including emotional content responds faster than our logical

side, meaning, if it's not inside you already i.e.. (compassion) it is going to difficulty to create it in a given moment.

Therefore, the ability to change the structure of the brain is important in being able to experience and develop compassion and love during the immediate experience, even when a person doesn't want to. If we are not already a loving individual, it's not naturally going to happen in the moment, even if we read about this morning. It needs to become part of memory and structure.

In Matthew 5:43 to 45 Jesus states,

'You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven.'" (NIV)

### **Discussion:**

Do you find it hard to love others you don't know?

What about loving your enemies, why would a person want to do that, love their enemies?

This brings us to the knitting together of these concepts. Christians need to learn to love authentically which comes from our character, and character is a product over time through experiences that are processed in the right brain. Wilder and Hendricks state "Character formation, which is a primary responsibility of the church, is governed by the right brain, not the left. The early church identified in ACTS did this as part of their character, however this changed over time. Todd Hall provides a thorough explanation of how over time, reason, knowledge, and

logic replaced relationship with God and others as priority. Eventually, knowledge became recognized as a secular endeavor and spirituality became less respected. Presently, the church teaches through sermons, lectures, and readings. While helpful, it does not connect with the part of the brain being used in the moment of interactions with friends and strangers. Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) simply helps to understand what activities help nurture the right side of the brain that will help to grow the connections, memories, and networks that are called upon to love others in any given moment, even strangers. Overall, from a Christian point of view, implementing some of the concepts can help form a mutual mind with Jesus, that promotes thinking like he would toward others.

**Discussion:**

Do you believe people often have the desire to be right in interactions, versus loving?

Why or why not?

The following meditation is called Body Scan Awareness. The aim to build a mutual mind with God by increasing your awareness of current experiences and surrendering them to God, no matter the circumstances, which in time, will build new neural connections and contribute to changing your relationship with God.

**Week: Body Scan Awareness****Body Scan Meditation**

I'd like you to sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your eyes closed or finding a comfortable spot in the room to focus on. Notice the sounds in the room [name examples]...Begin to turn your awareness to your body. Observe how you're sitting in the chair,

how your hands are placed on your lap [adjust phrasing as needed] and how they feel...Notice how your clothes feel on your shoulders...how your back feels against the back of the chair...see if you can sense any pockets of air where your back doesn't touch the back of the chair...Notice how your face feels...See if you can sense any differences in temperature with how the air feels around your face, perhaps some places are cooler than others...Feel your feet in your shoes pressing against the floor...notice how your hips feel pressing against the seat...Feel your clothes against your legs...Just be aware of your experience, what is happening right now in this moment...while you're observing this experience, I invite you to become aware of God's presence with us in this room today, that He's here with us and wants to be with you in your experience. I invite you to yield all you are experiencing to God in this moment...Let go in His presence, releasing your tensions, thoughts, and worries into His hands. Jesus says "Come unto me, all of you who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Just be with God...When you are ready, return your focus to the room.

Reactions to activity: Please discuss your reactions to this week's lesson.

Discussion of practice for next week.

## Resources

Coursey, C. (2016 Version 2). *Transforming fellowship: 19 brain skills that build joyful community*. Hopland, MI: THRIVEtoday.

Friesen, J., Wilder, J., Bierling, A., Koepcke, R., & Poole, M. (2013). *Living from the heart Jesus gave you: 15th anniversary study edition*. East Peoria, ILL: Shepards House, Inc.

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Wilder, J. (2020). *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard & the church that transforms*. Colorado Spings, CO: NavPress.

Wilder, J., & Hendricks, M. (2020). *The other half of the church: Christian community, brain science, and overcoming spiritual stagnation*. Chicago. IL: Moody Publishers.

## **Week 2 Love**

### **Outline**

Introductions of new participants

Review of practice and input:

Introduction to topic

Activity, Practice

Reactions to activity

Discussion of practice for next week

Weekly exercise

### **Review of practice and input:**

Please discuss as a group your reactions to the information discussed last week. Ask your presenter for any clarifications needed.

### **Key Topic: Love**

Love is not frivolous. Many books on poetry have been written professing the love of one young love to another. Shakespeare remains famous to this day with the infamous story of Romeo and Juliet, and in Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, a love confesses he could not be believed if he were to write of the characteristics of his love. Voltaire even sends the young Candid on a devastating journey that was the result of a kiss. It could be said that love is everywhere, but it could also be said that no it isn't.

Love is identified as a basic need. In the Bible, it is identified that it's not good for man to be alone. God made a help mate for Adam, and they were united in marriage. Adam and Eve committed sin and the relationship between the two of them and God changed. They felt insecurities and knew their nakedness. The next generation documented the murder of Abel by Cain. From the beginning of man therefore, there have been loving, and not so loving relationships.

Can you match up these great connections? Remember not all love is romantic love as the identification of the two greatest commandments by Jesus:

David	Paul	Donny	Cher
Abraham	Elisha	Jacqueline	Ozzy
Sarah	Ruth	Ronald	Lucy
Ricardo	Harriet	John	Timothy
Rachel	Sonny	Nancy	Elija
Boaz	Marie	Jonathan	Jacob

Is there any-thing notable about any of these relationships that is significant to you?

### **Modern Attachment and Love**

Science continues to prove God right. With the invention of complicated imaging machines, researchers are now able to make some speculations about what happens with the

human mind. What has science found? Research has indicated that love and relationships are obviously important, and the inability to form close relationships and love can be harmful mentally in life. Relationship/love theories are now being associated in conjunction with mood regulation theories and it appears that the ability to be emotionally stable is impacted by the ability to be relationally stable. The result is that when people do not have the ability to form close relationships and love, they also have increased vulnerabilities toward mental health difficulties. For a Christian this can also become troublesome because it is believed that for some people, the way they approach human relationships, is the same way they approach their God relationship. If a person is unable to trust humans in relationships and form close emotional bonds, they may also have a difficult time trusting God, loving God, and not understanding why.

From a scientific point of view, early life neglect, abuse, or unattuned caretaking can result in the inability to form emotionally close bonds as an adult or to another extreme, make a person extremely anxious toward the potential loss of relationships. Additionally, these early experiences can impact brain areas that if developed as appropriate, assist the person in processing information and accurately evaluate situations as they unfold in front of them.

The activities suggested though-out this program are designed to increase the ability to form loving relationships resulting in a loving Christian Community. Each week, a meditation is being utilized and a skill building exercise.

Why meditation: Research utilizing brain imaging has indicated that the physical brain responds positively to focused attention and meditation. The Bible spoke numerous times of meditation and it is suggested that the practice of it helps to develop the physical brain in areas that enhance integration of the various regions of the brain. In other works, meditation has been reported to increase the connections within the brain that improve mental health processing and

in the ability to form positive secure loving relationships. The meditations utilized are Christian based meditations carefully selected to support a Christian world view.

This weeks' meditation is called loving kindness and is designed to develop loving thoughts towards others, self, and God.

**Key Bible Verses: Read these versus and discuss their significance to you.**

“My prayer it's not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father just as you are in me, and I am in you May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me- so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’ (John 17 20-23 NIV)

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. ” (Matt 22:36-40, NIV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, NIV)

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those

seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3: 31-35)

### **Activity/Meditation**

#### **This a meditation on loving kindness**

This prayer meditation is focused on the love God has for us, His children. By praying and meditating on these themes, the goal is to internalize these biblical truths as an experiential reality in our hearts. As we go through this meditation, periodically I will offer some clear prayer statements for you to ponder.

First, seek to be still in God’s presence. Sitting in your chair, make yourself comfortable and relaxed. Your posture should be upright so that you can remain alert during this time. You can close your eyes if you wish, allowing my voice to guide you through the prayer.

Now gently come to focus on your breathing remembering that the Holy Spirit himself is described as the breath of God. As you breathe in physically, seek to breathe in the very presence of God who is with you right here and right now in this moment. Spend a few moments simply breathing in His presence. Welcome now the presence of the Holy Spirit who is the breath of God in you and around you.

**AS I COME INTO YOUR PRESENCE LORD, I AM SURROUNDED BY YOUR LOVE AND PEACE.**

Notice any questions or commentary that arise in your mind in this moment. As you become aware of any thoughts arising in your mind, gently seek to let those go, returning your focus to God and the words of the prayer,

**AS I COME INTO YOUR PRESENCE LORD, I AM SURROUNDED BY YOUR LOVE AND PEACE...**

**IN YOUR PRESENCE LORD, I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU ARE THE ONE WHO CREATED ME, YOUR LOVE FOR ME IS UNCHANGING, AND YOU LOVE ME AS I AM.**

As much as you are able, use these words to express your own faith in God, but if you sense any resistance in your heart don't criticize yourself in any way. Simply acknowledge with kindness your honest response. As much as you are able, seek to identify with and pray these words from your own heart, **IN YOUR PRESENCE LORD, I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU ARE THE ONE WHO CREATED ME, YOUR LOVE FOR ME IS UNCHANGING, AND YOU LOVE ME AS I AM...**

**IN THIS MOMENT, IN YOUR PRESENCE, I ACCEPT YOUR LOVE, MERCY, AND GRACE.**

Knowing that God loves you and accepts you just as you are right now, you are free to rest in His love. Notice if any struggling, or arguments or questions arise in your mind. Gently watch these thoughts come and go and return your focus to the love and tenderness of God towards you personally, **IN THIS MOMENT, IN YOUR PRESENCE, I ACCEPT YOUR LOVE, MERCY, AND GRACE... TODAY I WILL REST IN KNOWING THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS WITH ME, LORD.**

In these moments, continue to rest in the love of God towards you personally, using the silence to simply be present with Him. In a few moments, I will say amen to signal the end of this prayer meditation.

Breathing in His presence, **I REST IN YOU, FATHER, CREATOR, AMEN.**

### **Reactions to activity:**

Please discuss as a group the experiences you encountered while conducting this activity.

**Exercise 1:** For 24 hours do what you can to intentionally demonstrate joy to those you interact with. Chris Coursey identifies signs of joy communicated through.

Facial expressions: Smile and give direct eye contact when you say hello to people this week.

Body language: Be aware of positive body languages such as keeping arms open versus crossed and closed arms and keep your body facing the person speaking with you.

Positive Verbal communication: Pay attention to voice tone and remove barriers that are between you speak with this week.

Positive Emotions: Coursey states that “we develop a strong bond with people who are light up to see us (p. 50). Consciously demonstrate joy and that you are glad to see someone this week.

Positive physical responses: Pay attention to those speaking to you so that they know you are listening. Some use the term facilitation to engage others who are speaking This includes nodding your head periodically to show you are listening. Addition don't do other tasks such as checking the phone when someone is talking to you.

The life model contends that true happiness comes from being with people who are glad to see us. Coursey indicates that dopamine is released in the brain when people experience joy. Thus, impacting neural communication in the mind.

Resource:

Coursey, C. (n.d.). *The lifeboat in your brain: A life model works ebook*. Retrieved from <https://lifemodelworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/19-relational-skills-the-lifeboat-in-your-brain.pdf>

Coursey, C. (2016 Version 2). *Transforming fellowship: 19 brain skills that build joyful community*. Hopland, MI: THRIVEtoday.

## **Engaging with the Holy Spirit around Scripture**

### **Week 3**

#### **Outline**

Review of practice and input: no review first week

Introduction to topic

Activity, Practice

Reactions to activity

Discussion of practice for next week

Resources

#### **Review of practice and input:**

Please discuss as a group, your reactions to last weeks' experience.

Key Topic: Engaging with the Holy Spirit around Scripture

Life can be frightening, scary, and at times, just plain difficult, and all people want to feel safe and secure. In John 6:67 (NIV), it states "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him; "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6: 67-68, NIV). In the above passage, Peter asks Jesus where they should go. It is obviously an important question. If you do not turn to Jesus when you are hurting and afraid, where or who do you put your trust? Do you put trust in the government, friends, family?

This week's focus is on Scripture. The Bible is full of encouragement for those who suffer, think of the Sermon on the Mountain (Matthew 5-7, NIV). Also, When Jesus was confronted by Satan,, what did he use as his weapon? He used scripture. Jesus answered: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 44, NIV).

**Discussion:**

Who do you turn to when feeling frightened, scared or have a need?

In what order does prayer come in your attempts to feel safe and secure?

Have you ever turned to scripture when experiencing a threat or need?

One common statement in the Christian realm is that mankind believes in God, however, lives like they don't believe what God has said. This is consistent with understanding how the mind works and responds in a given moment. Though, we can logically quote versus such as Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works of those who love him" (NIV), in the moment it is often not internalized as true. This is because we have only learned logically, rather than experiencing it as true. Also, research indicates that if we are unable to trust people in general, we may also have difficulty in trusting God (this will be addressed in the next chapter). So how do we do that, we are back to learning to have an experiential relationship with God through the meditations provided in this text. Therefore, focusing and meditating on Gods' word is one way of internalizing Gods' message to us. This additionally impacts emotions as humans contemplate dangers, threats, or even love in this world.

Yearly calendars or journals are produced, taking a day at a time, and usually presenting a Bible verse followed by commentary, if these Biblical verses are true, then it should, in one

way or another provide solace or comfort to those who read them. It can be easy to forget that when a person reads a bible verse, they are reading something God wanted to communicate to them.

**Discussion:**

Have you ever purchased one of these yearly commentaries and did you find these helpful?

Did you read them once you bought them?

What is the purpose if these daily scripture readings?

**Exercise**

What is your favorite Bible verse?

Why does this verse have significance to you?

Can you remember a time when this verse brought you comfort?

Do you believe scripture remains accurate for today?

**Key Bible Verses: Read these versus and discuss their significance to you.**

2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul states all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (NIV).

Revelations 21:5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true (NIV)

Proverbs 30:5 “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (NIV)

Psalms 119: 160 “All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.” (NIV)

John 17:17 “Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth” (NIV)

What are the implications of accepting every word of God as true?

### **Activity/Meditation**

#### **Engaging with the Holy Spirit around Scripture**

Introduction: These are four dynamics of prayerful conversation with God around Scripture. Sometimes these will feel like natural steps to be taken in order, at other times, a particular step will predominate, or the order will vary. Be led by the Spirit as you interact with God’s word using these phases. (passage to be accepted)

1. Prepare (Silencio): Quiet your heart, placing yourself in God’s presence. Offer this time to God.
2. Read Slowly (Lectio): Slowly read the passage out loud. Allow the words to settle and resonate in your heart. After a pause, re-read the passage out loud. Repeat this reading as many times as you feel led, listening for the word or phrase that catches your attention and quickens your heart. When you have a sense of that word or phrase, proceed to #3.

3. Reflect (Meditation): Take time to sit with the word or phrase that caught your attention. Re-read the passage if it feels right, stopping at that word or phrase again to slowly drink it in. Perhaps repeating the word/phrase quietly feels right. Perhaps entering the passage's biblical scene in your imagination seems appropriate. Ask God to lead you as you explore this phrase at a heart level.
4. Pray (Oratio): Talk to the Lord about the phrase He has highlighted and what's coming up. Journaling here might be useful. How is God addressing you in this Word and inviting you to respond? Allow the Word to guide you into a prayerful response.
5. Rest (Contemplatio): Rest in God's presence. Receive deeply God's word and rest in His presence and love. Allow yourself some time to wait and be still before you re-enter life as usual. Stay with the Lord until you feel prompted to leave. Take God's word with you throughout the day.

**Reactions to activity:**

Please discuss as a group the experiences you encountered while conducting this activity.

Exercise: Learning to rest and quiet the mind. Coursey identifies that techniques that help person rest or quiet the mind are beneficial to developing long term mental health and relational joy.

Coursey and Dr. Garzon suggest methods include

Stretching, Holy yoga, Praise moves, or non-yoga stretching [See you tube for samples]

Silent retreats

## The Sabbath

Exercise that calms the mind.

Coursey states this skill is ‘best learned by spending time with people who rest’ Learning to rest releases the chemical serotonin which assists in calming our mind

Resource:

Coursey, C. (n.d.). *The lifeboat in your brain: A life model works ebook*. Retrieved from

<https://lifemodelworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/19-relational-skills-the-lifeboat-in-your-brain.pdf>

## Attachment

### Week 4

In the song *The Greatest Man I Never Knew*, Reba McEntire sings about a girl, her father, and the lack of emotional display he has toward her. In the song, she identifies that she was never told by him he loved her, however, suggest that he assumes she knew. To be honest, it sounds tragic. To make it even more intense, the writer uses the words “how was I to know he thought I hung the moon” So, you have a daughter, whose father thinks she has “hung the moon” yet doesn’t share that with her.

#### **Discussion:**

Have you ever known anyone that came across as emotionally distant?

Were emotions shared freely in your home?

Do you have a difficult time sharing your emotions with those you love? Have you ever wondered why?

Have you ever wondered why some people are anxious in relationships while others do not seem to care? How is it that some people are so emotional while others appear numb and distant? Research with children and parental relationships eventually evolved into research that helps understand adult love and interactions.

Research indicates that prior to birth, neurons begin to form that eventually develop into circuits and regions. As explain previously, during a loving, interactive upbringing, these neural networks, and systems develop appropriately and store information about love and relationships. However, if a person experiences emotionally distant caretakers, abuse, or neglect, it impacts the

these developing networks in size, connection, numbers, and contributes to different ways in which people experience relationships.

When asked about the most important commandments,

Jesus said “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).

Discussion:

Is it hard for you to feel love for God? Have you ever felt jealous when others are sharing how much they love the Lord, and at times you do not feel it?

The truth is, you may come by it naturally. Attachment theory suggests that humans develop a range of emotional closeness based on their experience from early life. As a result, people grow up to demonstrate specific types of behaviors in relationship from the experiences stored in their memory. There have been four basic types of patterns identified.

Secure: those who feel safe in relations and positive about themselves as deserving love and positive about others

Anxious: those who are anxious toward relationships with fear of loss

Avoidant: those who have difficulty being emotionally close in relationships

Disorganized: not a consistent pattern

Why is this important? Because it impacts the way you experience relationships and it impacts your ability to recognize, accept, and give love. Additionally, it has been shown that for some, the way a person experiences early relationships is the way they approach their God

relationship. Therefore if a person has felt their caretakers were mean and restrictive and emotionally distant, they may see God the same way.

Do you see God as loving or as a rule orientated dictator?

Exercise:

How do these following relationship patterns impact the way a person sees God?

Secure

Anxious

Avoidant

Disorganized

What type of relationship did David have with God

So, how can a person develop the ability to increase their love toward others and God. As identified earlier, reading scripture is helpful, but doesn't necessarily stick in the fast track of the mind. Therefore again, exercises that work the right part of the brain, contribute to improving these neural networks and emotional responses.

Meditation has been shown to positively impact those areas of the brain. A Christian God orientated meditation is being presented this week for practice.

Choose a word as your focus that fits with your desire to trust and release things into God's hands. Sample words include the following. You may find another that fits as well:

Grace, love, mercy, surrender, trust, Jesus, \_\_\_\_\_

## Christian Meditation Centering Prayer

### Script\*

Make yourself comfortable, sitting up straight and closing your eyes. Allow your feet to rest on the floor, and your arms to rest at your side and your hands to rest on the arms of the chair or your lap.

When you are ready, begin to recite the prayer word of your choice. Try not to repeat it too quickly or slowly. Rather, just repeat it in a natural rhythm. Let the word express your willingness to yield to God's sovereignty over your inner world. Trusting in Him, simply let the word float in your mind, capturing your faith and trust in His endless love. Just say the word over and over again.

At times, you'll notice your mind has wandered to another thought or perhaps a worry. When this happens, no need to judge or criticize yourself. Rather, just notice it and return to your prayer word. Recognize that God's loving arms are always outstretched to you, waiting for your return.

Again and again, just repeat your prayer word, returning to it whenever your mind has wandered. Sink deeper and deeper into the grace and love that God offers, letting go of control and concerns. Just rest in God's arms, trusting in his infinite wisdom, love, power, and grace.

As the prayer meditation comes to a close, just try to rest in God's presence quietly for a few moments. Perhaps you will want to end the time in a quiet prayer. When you are ready, open your eyes.

\*Adapted from Knabb & Frederick (2017)

**Reactions to activity:**

Please discuss as a group the experiences you encountered while conducting this activity.

**Exercise:** Creating appreciation. Coursey states that “Appreciation when shared activates our relational circuits, resettles our nervous system and releases a cocktail of bonding hormones so we feel connected and peaceful” For the next week, daily identify 1-2 things daily that you appreciate or are grateful for. These can be small or large things, Simple things like Starbucks coffee if you like that, or big things like good health. Specifically tell a spouse or friend something you are grateful each day. If you prefer, write it in a daily journal.

Resource:

Coursey, C. (n.d.). *The lifeboat in your brain: A life model works ebook*. Retrieved from <https://lifemodelworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/19-relational-skills-the-lifeboat-in-your-brain.pdf>

## **Responding to Emotions with Emotional Maturity**

### **Week 5**

#### **Outline**

Review of practice and input: no review first week

Introduction to topic

Activity, Practice

Reactions to activity

Discussion of practice for next week

Resources

#### **Key Topic: Present Moment Focus: Remembering God**

Humans spend a great amount of time in their heads thinking about events they perceive as a threat, or that may contribute to depression and anxiety. The average person experiences several thousand thoughts a day, some important, some not so important. Some may notice that they think over and over about the same thing which is called rumination. From a Christian perspective, negative rumination competes with the realization that God is present, and a provider of all things needed. Judith Hunt writes that humans need love, security, and significance. This is important to understand because that helps us understand emotions better, because our emotions tell us something. If a person is experiencing negative emotions, then it means something they care about in some way is being threatened.

Group discussion:

What type of thoughts go through your mind when you find yourself depressed, anxious, or angry? Do you automatically think, God is with me, this will be ok?

Do you find yourself ruminating over the same issues or problems?

If so, are these problems solvable? If not, what can you do?

It is important to understand that emotions tell us about our desires. Everyone wants to be safe. Cognitive theories tell us we also want to be loved. This makes sense as the Bible speaks of the importance of love. As the theme of this program carries forward, it is helpful to remember that when we respond in the current moment, we are responding from the emotional part of the brain. In the long term, if we are loving individuals at heart, who trust in God, and we respond from the emotional part of the brain, then that response will be trusting and loving.

This week we concentrate on present moment focus, in addition to responding from the emotional part of the brain, it is helpful to be aware that God is present and in our suffering.

### **Focusing on God during times of struggle**

Key Bible Versus: Read these Bible verses and discuss their significance to you.

“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” (Luke 12:5, NIV)

Answer me quickly, LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. (Psalms 143:7-8, NIV)

“Where is your faith?” he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.” (Luke 8:25, NIV).

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, *Abba* Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. (Romans 8:14-16, NIV)

### **Exercise**

Earlier. It was identified that people need love, security, and safety. June Hunt suggests that these needs are met by God. Do you agree? One issue though is that different people define these differently. One person may define security as a million dollars in the bank, while another may define security as a huge family. The same is true for love and significance. It is not the same for everybody, but it does impact where a person places their attention and efforts.

How do you define love?

How do you define significance?

How do you define security?

Where did you learn what love, security, and significance means to you?

Does God meet these needs? If God meets these needs, do you still turn to others for your significance, love, and safety?

So, how can learning to focus in the moment and bringing our attention back to an awareness of God's presence and promises help our emotions? It's important to remember that if a person didn't care, he or she would not have a strong emotion about what is occurring. If a person is experiencing a strong negative emotion, it is probably related to their experience of love, significance, or meaning.

Discussion:

What do these verses mean to you

“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?<sup>[1]</sup> And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.<sup>31</sup> Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

The goal of this week information is to help be aware of God's presence while going through times of trouble, anxiety, and fear. The below meditation is designed to help return to the moment when experiences unwanted emotions.

## **Activity/ Meditation**

### **Meditation Scripts for Adapting Mindfulness for Conservative Christians**

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.

#### **Christian-Adapted Breathing Meditation**

Make yourself comfortable, sitting in an upright posture with your feet on the floor. You may like to close your eyes or find a spot in the room for your eyes to focus on. Allow yourself to change gears from the usual busy or doing manner to a manner of simply being, of resting in God's caring presence. As you allow your body to become still, bring your attention to the fact that you are breathing. The breath is a reminder of God creating us, "And the LORD God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;"... "and man became a living soul." [Gen. 2:7]. With every breath in, you can recognize God breathing His life into you. With every breath out you can place yourself in His hands, resting in the Lord...Breathing in His life, breathing out resting in Him. There is no need to change anything...Just breathe naturally...Breathing in His life and breathing out resting in Him. He is with you in your experience, giving you life, love, and grace...

And now focus on your breath more intently. If your mind wanders into other things, this is normal. No need to criticize yourself. Simply release those thoughts into God's loving hands and return to your breath. There is no need for a long prayer, a simple yielding and turning of your focus back to the breath is releasing these things to God.

Notice the breath as it rises in your belly as you breathe in. Feel the belly fall back down as you breathe out. Be fully present here in each moment with each breath, observing the belly as it expands when you breathe in, and as it falls when you breathe out...Expanding and

falling...Expanding and falling. And when your mind wanders, gently release those thoughts to God and return to the breath, a simple heart turn is all that's needed.

Notice how your breath feels as it goes into your body and as it leaves your body. Again, no need to change the breath in any way. Just be aware of it and of any feelings associated with breathing. Feel the temperature of the air as it goes into your nostrils...Are there any difference in air temperature as you breathe out?...Perhaps one way feels cooler and the other warmer, or perhaps not...See if you can sense the air going into your nostrils, into your sinuses, and down into your lungs...Observe how it feels as the air travels in and out...And when your mind wanders, gently release those things to God and bring yourself back to your breath. Notice the wave-like, rhythmic pattern of your breath, fully conscious of the duration of each breath from moment to moment. No need to go anywhere, no need to do anything. Simply be here with your breath. Your breath can re-anchor you to God's presence with you in the present moment when your mind gets caught up in other things. A simple taking in of a breath can remind you He is with you, a simple breathing out can release things into His hands.

In a moment, the breathing meditation will end. Perhaps you would like to end it with a prayer to the Lord or perhaps in another way. In whatever way you would like, begin bringing this time of prayerful meditation to completion. And when you are ready, bring your awareness back to the room, opening your eyes. \*Adapted from Garzon & Ford (2016)

**Reactions to activity:**

Please discuss as a group the experiences you encountered while conducting this activity.

**Exercise:** Seeing What God Sees: This week's exercise includes attempting to see situations from God's perspective. During the week, when you find yourself becoming angry or upset with a person or situation, ask yourself "How do I think God sees this person or situation"? Coursey states this helps to remind us that God is with us and reminds us to look to God for clarity and comfort.

Resource:

Coursey, C. (n.d.). *The lifeboat in your brain: A life model works ebook*. Retrieved from

<https://lifemodelworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/19-relational-skills-the-lifeboat-in-your-brain.pdf>

## God's Characteristics

### Week 6

#### Outline

Review of practice and input: no review first week

Introduction to topic

Activity, Practice

Reactions to activity

Discussion of practice for next week

Resources

#### Key Topic: God's Characteristics

Throughout history Christian writers have attempted to identify the attributes and characteristics of God. Three well known concepts identify God as omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient. This would suggest that God is all loving and good, all powerful, and all knowing. Examples of these are easy to find in scripture.

God knowing us:

In Psalms 139:13-16 David speaks of God and his awareness of David. He states "for you formed my inward parts you knitted me together in my mother's womb I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made wonderful or your work I don't know it's very well my frame was not enough from you my maiden secret intricate leaves of the earth your eyes formed in your

book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me when as yet there was Nothing”

**Discussion:**

What does it mean to you that God knows you?

Does it bring comfort that God knows you?

God’s power:

In Genesis it begins with an assumption that God always was. It describes the creation of the heavens and the earth and God's creations of all things. Throughout the Bible Gods powers are demonstrated:

Creation

Separating the Red Sea

The Birth of Jesus

The Miracles of Jesus

The flood

The famous passage in Romans 8:28-29 states And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been call according to his purpose, for those God foreknew he also pre destined to be conformed to the likeness of his son , that he might be the first born among many brothers

If God is all powerful, what does it mean that he is working for the good of those who love him.

If God is all powerful and knows us, what does that mean when we are going through times of trouble?

Gods' goodness. Please read the following versus and discuss what they mean to you.

**Psalm 145:8-9** The LORD is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The LORD is good to all,

and his mercy is over all that he has made

**Matthew 7:11** If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (NIV)

**Psalm 69:16** Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good;

according to your abundant mercy, turn to me

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,

abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you

### **Discussion:**

If God is completely good, knows us, and is all powerful, what does that mean for our journey here on earth?

## Activity/Meditation

### Scriptural Truth Mediation: God's Characteristics

Instructions: Choose a brief Scripture passage that is meaningful and comforting. Below are a few samples. Feel free to use other Scriptural passages that you like that are also encouraging.

*Psalm 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd"*

*Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through him who gives me strength"*

*Proverbs 3:5a "Trust in the Lord with all your heart"*

*1 John 1:9a "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins"*

*1 John 4:8b "God is love"*

*Romans 8:1 "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"*

*Psalm 37:7a "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him"*

*Matthew 11:28 "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"*

I'd like you to make yourself comfortable, sitting in a relaxed position, closing your eyes or finding a spot in the room to let your eyes focus on. Allow yourself to switch from the usual mode of doing to a mode of simply being, of resting in God's presence. Release rumination and worry into God's hands and move your focus towards the Scripture phrase... Take a deep breath in... and breath out... Repeating the Scripture passage as you breathe out... If you chose a

longer verse, you may want to repeat half the scripture in one breath and the other half in your second breath... Breathe in... Breathe out quoting the passage... Focus your mind on the scripture. Your mind will eventually wander. This is normal. Exercise a spirit of grace toward yourself and refocus your attention on the verse... Breathe in and breathe out quoting the Scripture. Quietly reflect on the passage... Ponder its meaning and what God's saying to you in it... when your mind wanders, gently return your focus to the passage. No need to beat yourself up. Breathe in and breathe out repeating the verse...Just keep doing this rhythm, breathing in, and stating the Scripture, pondering it, as you breathe out... In a moment, the scriptural mediation will end. Whatever way you would like to end this time will be fine. As you conclude the mediation, you may want to end with a prayer to God, thanking Him for revealing Himself to you through the verse... when you are ready, bring your awareness back to the room, opening your eyes. \*Adapted from Garzon (2013)

### **Reactions to activity:**

Please discuss as a group the experiences you encountered while conducting this activity.

### **Exercise: Reflection**

This week a different activity will be conducted. During the previous 4 weeks you were introduced to sample right brain activities and the previous 6 weeks introduced to Christian Meditations. This week it is important to review what you have experienced.

As a group:

Please discuss and reflect on your experience going through this program.

Name at least one thing that you learned or experienced that was significant to you.

Finally, what's next:

How can you keep moving forward?

If I suggested that if you enjoyed them, continue to practice the Christian meditations introduced, or locate others that you may enjoy. There is a variety of information on the internet on Christian development, Christian meditation, and how relationships impact the mind, although it is always prudent to be careful who you listen to.

Below is a list of resources committed to helping move forward in understanding how to improve your journey in Christian development and maturity. You may want to form a group committed to further developing these concepts.

Coursey, C. (n.d.). *The lifeboat in your brain: A life model works ebook*. Retrieved from <https://lifemodelworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/19-relational-skills-the-lifeboat-in-your-brain.pdf>

Coursey, C. (2016 Version 2). *Transforming fellowship: 19 brain skills that build joyful community*. Hopland, MI: THRIVEtoday.

Friesen, J., Wilder, J., Bierling, A., Koepcke, R., & Poole, M. (2013). *Living from the heart Jesus gave you: 15th anniversary study edition*. East Peoria, ILL: Shepards House, Inc.

Hall, T., & Hall, E. (2021). *Relational spirituality: A psychological-theological paradigm for transformation*. Downwew Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Wilder, J. (2020). *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard & the church that transforms*. Colorado Spings, CO: NavPress.

Wilder, J., & Hendricks, M. (2020). *The other half of the church: Christian community, brain science, and overcoming spiritual stagnation*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

**Final Thought: What did Jesus think was Important? Matthew 22:34-37 (NIV)**

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert on the law, tested him with this question, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it; Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments