

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGIES OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN MYSTICS
APPLIED TO EVENING PRAYER SERVICES:
THEIR IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS

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To Vivian M. Hare, B.A., Christian Education, Presbyterian College
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the congregation and extended church family
of Montreat Presbyterian Church, Montreat, North Carolina,

and the Reverend Canon Anthony Hulbert,
who in a profound year at St. Andrew's Church in Bedford, England,
introduced me to the spiritual sustenance of daily prayer services
and the ineffable sublimity of the medieval women mystics

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Abstract

Spiritual Theologies of Medieval Women Mystics Applied to Evening Prayer Services: Their Impact on Participants

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Keith Andrew Grogg

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This project proposes that the spiritual theologies of medieval women mystics, when applied to worship in the Reformed tradition, can measurably enrich the spirituality of worshipers. This qualitative research is a phenomenological study collecting data showing how the incorporation of the medieval women mystics into the Evening Prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church impacts the participants' spirituality. The research found that the Evening Prayer services already have a stronger impact on participants' spirituality than worship leadership had recognized, rendering the mystical spiritualities mostly superfluous in the case of Evening Prayers, while suggesting further study involving other modes of worship.

I. Introduction

The theologian Wendy Farley has argued that the medieval women mystics offer a vitality often sorely missing in twenty-first century mainline Christian worship in the United States.¹ In 2022, though unfamiliar with Farley at the time, I had begun to wonder if connections might be possible in my own ministry context between the reverberating spirituality of the medieval women mystics, which had captured my spiritual imagination from an early age, and a growing sense that Protestant worship in the United States had significant room to grow toward greater spiritual vitality and deeper spiritual connection.

Beginning during the height of the 2020 Covid lockdown, I have, in my role as pastor of Montreat Presbyterian Church (“MPC”), produced and electronically distributed a weekly, pre-recorded, online midweek prayer service. Scores of people within and beyond our congregation and the local community have participated in the services during that time, many doing so with regularity and some rarely missing a week.

In 2023-24, I attempted to find out what participants in MPC’s online, midweek services would tell me about their own spirituality, and what the impact would be if I were to attempt to incorporate the direct influence of some of the medieval women mystics into the Evening Prayer liturgies.

Evening Prayer Services: An Effective Introduction and Subsequent Struggles

In 1989-90, I served in England as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission volunteer through a U.K.-based program for young adult recent college graduates which was called Time for God. TFG had placed me with St. Andrew’s (Anglican) Church in

¹ Wendy Farley, *The Thirst of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 1-2.

Bedford, England to serve as an arm of that church's mission program both within the parish and in the wider community.

At the end of each weekday, four to six of us—staff members and one or two church volunteers—would convene in the chapel of St. Andrew's at 5:00 P.M. for Evening Prayer, a service conducted from liturgy in the *Alternative Service Book* then in use in the Church of England. This was my first exposure to the rich treasury of liturgical vocabulary and cadence which had been evolving in the Anglican church over centuries. The day's designated worship leader would lead responsive liturgies and a psalm, and another participant would read a passage from the New Testament. Participants would voluntarily name, in prayer, people and conditions in the community and in the world. The service included prayerful quiet in one another's company and in the awesome presence of God, revealed, as to Elijah, in the sound of sheer silence.² Refreshed by prayer, restored through silent communion with colleagues, and re-centered in the word, by 5:30 P.M. I would be bicycling home for dinner with my host family and usually some evening activity in church or community.

Back stateside, through three years of seminary and more than a quarter century of ordained pastoral ministry and in several faithful churches along the way, I made numerous attempts to recreate the conditions that made those daily prayers the recurring opportunities for effective spiritual restoration that the services in England had been. No model proved sustainable in the long term. Each attempt struggled along for a few weeks or months before fading out due to lack of ongoing congregational interest and flagging pastoral commitment. Every few years, I would introduce a new model of daily or weekly

² I Kings 19:9-13 (NRSV)

shared devotional time, inevitably leading—to the apparent displeasure of no one—to the quiet cancellation of the program.

Covid Demands New Devotional Opportunities

Isolated from one another and without access to in-person worship during the pandemic of 2020, congregants and community members expressly asked for increased online pastoral contact and voiced a need for any spiritual content that church leadership could provide. In mid-2020, I produced some early, fumbling, pre-recorded prayer services, experimenting with the liturgy and struggling through the suddenly urgent need to advance, quickly, my own technological skills.

With the authorization of the church's session, the encouragement of viewers, and the collaboration of the worship committee, I began producing and distributing prayer services weekly, settling by January 2022 on a weekly Evening Prayer service of less than ten minutes' duration, emailed as a video link on Tuesday evenings. In the early days of producing the services, I used various Daily Prayer liturgies from both the 1993 and 2018 editions of the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship*. By early 2022, I had eliminated Morning, Midday, and Night Prayers from the rotation, and I based all the ensuing weekly prayer service offerings on the Evening Prayer liturgies (Saturday through Friday) in the 2018 edition of the *Book of Common Worship*.

2022 Sabbatical: A Dispiriting Experience of Widespread Lifelessness in Worship

While a fulsome, analytical description of the many challenges to congregational life brought on by the Covid pandemic is beyond the scope of the present writing, as churches gradually emerged from isolation into a new, post-pandemic era, many clergy

colleagues and I shared feelings of immense, sometimes debilitating exhaustion from the struggle to carry on through the ordeal. The more fortunate clergy served congregations who recognized the wisdom, importance, and mutual benefit of sabbatical time for their church professionals and had the resources to make it possible. Montreat Presbyterian Church was one such congregation.

During the course of a twelve-week sabbatical in 2022, on any given Sunday, I would visit one, two, or three worship services in a variety of locations, traditions, and contexts. With a handful of restorative exceptions, I found myself repeatedly saddened by a prevailing sense of a dearth of energy, inspiration, or theological audacity in those services. Entering in need of spiritual sustenance, I often left feeling more depleted than when I had arrived. I ached for the congregations, the clergy, the volunteers, the musicians, and all other church staff (“For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me”).³

The empathetic pain I felt was rooted in an overwhelming sense that congregations were severely fatigued, struggling to offer worship that could connect with people’s spirituality, that would seek to raise mortal eyes toward the divine and challenge the injustices of our earthbound status quo. Instead, I often heard, on the one hand, preaching, prayers, and liturgy that seemed not to have the energy to acknowledge the yawning social inequities both outside and within the church, or, on the other, insistent bromides correctly naming the corruption endemic in human systems of government, society, and commerce while all but replacing any language for awestruck consciousness of the ineffable God of love with prosaic platitudes about community.

³ Jeremiah 8:21

The persistent sense of lifeless worship and depleted energy manifested variously in such phenomena as the indifferent greeting of visitors and newcomers, underequipped lay worship leadership, uninspired or ill-fitting music, inharmonious applications of technology, detached and unfocused liturgy, or colorless sermons whose texts sounded more like tepid answers on a first-year theology exam. All of these phenomena practically shouted: “You’ll just have to bear with us; we are simply worn out.”

Any church can have, and all preachers do have, “off” Sundays from time to time. The Spirit is more than capable of working through those off days to inspire congregants (“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness”).⁴ And it is incumbent on me to clarify that the saddening observations I have cited were by no means universal. Some church services, sermons, and liturgy in which I participated during my sabbatical led me to deep pools where I drank and was refreshed.⁵ But the frustrations were pervasive to the point of being broadly thematic and not simply isolated instances.

I sympathized with the drained preachers, overwhelmed church staff and volunteers, struggling congregants, and other visitors like me who had come looking for spiritual connection to God and to the world, perhaps through a shared quest for enlightenment, hope, inspiration, strength, or at least food for thought, and left empty-handed. I found myself concerned about what appeared to be the lethargic state and heartbreakingly low expectations of worship in my denomination. I wondered about avenues I might explore that could rehabilitate the spiritual effectiveness of my own

⁴ II Corinthians 12:9

⁵ Revelation 7:17, “*And he will guide them to springs of the water of life*”; Proverbs 11:25, “The generous soul who waters will also be watered.”

worship leadership and offer a productive way forward for myself and others whose charge is to plan and implement faithful Christian worship.

The Vibrant Spirituality of Medieval Women Mystics

Farley speaks of “dedicated but frustrated Christians” and, suggesting an available antidote, puts forward the “rich tradition of wonderful [medieval mystic] women and other contemplatives” who “portray with singular vividness the longing of the divine Love for humanity.”⁶ Might the devotional intensity of writings by and about the women of the Christian medieval mystic tradition prove to be an underattended, available resource that could offer greater spiritual connection for mainline U.S. worshipers in the twenty-first century? Farley continues:

As we experience our own frustrations with church and society, the voices of contemplative women come to us as long-lost sisters and mothers who remind us of the burning light of divine love, piercing any darkness, luminous regardless of the fluctuations of fate...their theologies invite us into depths of the Christian vision that we may hardly know exist.⁷

The Purpose of This Project

The intent of this study is to incorporate some specific themes of medieval women’s mystical spirituality into a series of three online prayer services, and collect phenomenological data from participants to answer questions of whether, and how, the influence of the spirituality of medieval women mystics on those services impacts the participants’ own spirituality. I made the decision to incorporate the tradition of the medieval women mystics at the intersection where the phenomenon of uninspired

⁶ Wendy Farley, *The Thirst of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), ix, 1.

⁷ Farley, *The Thirst of God*, 15-16.

worship meets the “piercing” and “luminous” spirituality of the contemplatives and visionary women of the Middle Ages. I chose MPC’s Evening Prayer services as the medium because they have attracted an online congregation who are likely to be conversant in the meaning and experience of an ongoing spiritual practice.

I hoped to understand more about the spiritual needs of that online congregation, which incorporates members, neighbors, and friends of Montreat Presbyterian Church. I hope that a more informed understanding of how the members of this community think about, experience, and reflect on their own spirituality may inform ways that worship leaders can offer devotional practices that can and do offer enriching opportunities for spiritual seekers to find the nourishment of connection with God and the world, even within traditional and ongoing expressions of worship. In order to achieve that understanding, I need to comprehend the context in which this community brings to worship their spiritual hopes and expectations.

II. Context

The researcher of this project is the pastor of Montreat Presbyterian Church (“MPC”), a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Montreat, North Carolina. MPC is one of two Montreat congregations that emerged from a 2007 church split to which both parties agreed after years of litigation and mediation. The other is Christ Community Church, a congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. MPC is legally the ongoing Montreat Presbyterian Church which dates to 1906,⁸ although members of both congregations, and others in the community, speak of MPC as having reestablished its identity when reaffirming itself as a PC(USA) congregation in 2007. MPC members tell the 2007 “origin” story with descriptions of a small group of church members meeting prayerfully on the porch of a private home and affirming their intention to continue MPC as a PC(USA) congregation.⁹ A lay leader of the nascent renewing church, Jim Henderson, wrote of that time in a 2024 document:

The [Montreat] Conference Center was supportive in providing worship space if one of their facilities was not otherwise booked by a conference or retreat. Guest pastors presided over worship services, and the members created the other activities of an active congregation. In many ways we were a New Testament church. We owned no property, had no installed pastor, and our financial resources were quite limited... [MPC] grew in number and in strength, and we were able to put in place most of the committees, practices, and procedures needed to continue our long tradition.¹⁰

In 2014, MPC called the first full-time pastor of its present iteration, this project’s researcher. By the mid-2020’s, MPC had grown to having an active membership roll of

⁸ Sue Diehl, *1906-2006, A Pictorial History: Montreat Presbyterian Church* (Montreat Presbyterian Church, Montreat, NC, 2006), 2.

⁹ Heath Rada, author interview, Black Mountain, NC, April 23, 2024.

¹⁰ Jim Henderson, “The ‘Before’ Story” (Montreat, NC: Montreat Presbyterian Church, April 24, 2024).

about 140, with significant numbers of additional participants listed on denominationally unofficial church rolls, including two which account for clergy, mostly retired or semi-retired, who have committed themselves to regular, invested participation in MPC as either “clergy members” or “supporting clergy.”

Montreat is both a geographic place and a conceptual identity in which residents, visitors, and devoted parties throughout the United States and in other parts of the world seek spiritual growth and nurture. The wooded mountain town of Montreat is home to a number of independent entities, anchored by a Presbyterian conference center and a private, “Christ-centered” college.¹¹ The conference center is aligned with the PC(USA), from which Montreat College withdrew even indirect affiliation in 2016 over socio-theological issues.¹² The town consists mainly of those institutions and a few hundred “cottages,” some of which are quite grand houses.

Montreat is home to a small year-round citizenry, many of whom are retired, as well as seasonal populations of college students, conferees, and annual visitors who rent cottages or stay in family homes for a week or longer. The town does not have a stoplight, filling station, or any commercial businesses or dining establishments other than those connected to the conference center or the college. The vast majority of permanent residents in Montreat identify as white, are U.S. citizens, and report speaking

¹¹ Tim Funk, “Christian college requires teachers sign pledge opposing same-sex marriage, abortion.” *Charlotte Observer*, April 30, 2017.
<https://www.charlotteobserver.com/living/religion/article147369024.html>.

¹² Emily Enders Odom, “Montreat College breaks ties with Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities.” *Presbyterian News Service*, April 28, 2017.
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/montreat-college-breaks-ties-association-presbyterian-colleges-universities/>.

English at home.¹³ The attending, in-person MPC congregation, reflecting the demographics of the local population but drawn from a radius of more than 20 miles (including Black Mountain, Swannanoa, Asheville, Fairview, and Lake Lure), includes a disproportionate number of highly educated, retired or semi-retired clergy, academics, and other church professionals.

The several independent Montreat entities, some with competing agendas and most bearing the name “Montreat” in their titles, co-exist in limited space both literally and figuratively, in the sense of having a share of the Montreat identity. A Venn diagram of the stakeholders in the various institutions would be a tangled mess. The 1897 founders of Montreat intended it to be a place of rest for returned Christian missionaries; the name is a portmanteau of “Mountain Retreat Association” (MRA), which is the entity that continues to do business as the Montreat Conference Center. In 1907, the PCUS (the Southern branch of mainline Presbyterianism in the U.S. until reunion in 1983) bought the retreat center from its founders. In 1967, local residents chartered the Town of Montreat. In 1975, the conference center administration oversaw the separation of the college from the MRA and established it as a self-governing entity.¹⁴ In 2007, Montreat Presbyterian Church formally split to produce two ideologically distinct local congregations. During these years, interested parties from throughout the region and beyond created the Presbyterian Heritage Center in Montreat, and local residents formed the Montreat Cottagers Association.

¹³ Data USA, accessed July 24, 2024. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/montreat-nc>.

¹⁴ Mary McPhail Standaert and Joseph Standaert, *Montreat* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2009), 7 and 9.

Among the local organizations, while some pairs of institutions maintain closer working relationships than others, each pursues its own mission and agenda. The established entities in Montreat, not often collaborative in programming and not at all in governance, and whose members are sometimes theologically or politically at odds, will from time to time exhibit an amiable neighborliness, such as making requested space available even at their own inconvenience, adjusting the time and location of events so as not to interfere with another entity's function, promoting another entity's program, or inviting each other's constituents to participate in social, religious, or educational offerings. Even as the two congregations litigated against each other and members expressed reciprocal recriminations in the late 2000's and early 2010's, the Montreat churches included each other in their public prayers, as they have continued to do into the mid-2020's. From at least the mid-2010's and into the 2020's, the head officeholders of all the local entities displayed a certain level of bonhomie, sometimes meeting together socially while publicly and privately expressing personal support for each other. This shared commitment to affable coexistence helped to smooth sometimes delicate relations in an era of intense polarization, especially given the often divergent worldviews espoused by the various constituencies in Montreat.

The dynamics of spiritual life in Montreat reflect the expectations and worldviews of both permanent and seasonal residents. Some of those expectations reflect elements of Montreat's social history. In the late 1980's, Gwen Kennedy Neville published a dissertation reflecting patterns and thought currents in Montreat at the time, in which she interpreted "Montreat as a community" as forming

a commentary on the elaborate stratification of urban industrial society. It is egalitarian, communal, and simple in its style of life and patterns of consumption.

And yet, the community itself is formed from the upper strata of southern elite society; its inhabitants are the owners of the industries and the professional people who maintain medicine, law, academia, and the church. They are those who have the ability to own and keep up a summer cottage, either singly or in family clusters. They value education, and many have attended private colleges and universities; they value tradition, and many count their ancestors among the early distinguished Presbyterian settlers of the Carolinas... [T]hose who are at the top of the social hierarchy of their individual towns and cities and at the top of the prestige scale in Presbyterianism can experience a society that purports to be non-hierarchical and completely unstratified. Montreat has, however, a fragile internal stratification system of its own. Within the community of sameness there exists difference based on one's membership in a kin group or one's number of years of coming to Montreat.¹⁵

While later generations have reflected some of Neville's dynamics less vividly or not at all, vestiges of her findings are still discernible among the generations she studied.¹⁶

Montreat is regularly in the national or denominational spotlight in part due to the local entities' historical practice of bringing illustrious figures in contemporary religion to the community. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke in Montreat's Anderson Auditorium in 1965. *The Hiding Place* author Corrie ten Boom "was the first woman to take the pulpit at Montreat Presbyterian Church as a lay preacher on December 13, 1970."¹⁷ The global evangelist and presidential counselor Billy Graham lived high up in Montreat for many decades until his death in 2018. In earlier years, he preached and taught often in the community; in later years, his absence from public view only magnified an almost mythical sense in which his presence loomed over the town. Conferences and an annual summer worship series regularly bring in celebrated faith speakers from ecclesia,

¹⁵ Gwen Kennedy Neville, "Covenant Community: The Denominational Conference Center," in *Kinship and Pilgrimage: Rituals of Reunion in American Protestant Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 121-122.

¹⁶ Richard DuBose, interview by author, Montreat, April 25, 2024.

¹⁷ Sue Diehl, *Pictorial History*, 75.

academia, politics, social justice activism, popular writing, and entertainment.¹⁸ In acknowledgement of the draw of such luminaries, the widespread interest in Montreat, and its reputation as a spiritual destination, some in the vicinity or within the denomination informally (and controversially) call Montreat, with no small measure of irony, “Presbyterian Mecca.”

Less cheekily, stakeholders in Montreat sometimes refer to the global community of invested parties as “Montreat Nation,” a phenomenon which contributes to MPC’s marginally higher than ordinary profile in the denomination. A past MRA president noted, in conversation with the present author, that Presbyterians in other parts of the country are often more curious about the state of Montreat Presbyterian Church than of other congregations of similar size or larger. Former Montreat resident Heath Rada, moderator of the PC(USA) General Assembly in 2014-16, observed in 2024:

As moderator, I had the opportunity to see how beloved Montreat was. I would never go anywhere in the denomination and speak and be introduced as living in Montreat, North Carolina, that there wasn’t an applause, or definitely follow-up afterwards: “Oh, let me tell you *my* Montreat experience...” It was just phenomenal. And much more than my friends who were at Ghost Ranch or Mo Ranch or Stony Point, any of those [other PC(USA)-affiliated retreat centers]. They had their beloved followers, too, but [for Montreat], it was universal.¹⁹

Because of the widespread interest, MPC’s leadership and congregants operate with an awareness that the church’s actions and decisions, including the provision and nature of its worship offerings, are subject to discussion and have impact on the lives of people outside the congregation and far beyond the vicinity.

¹⁸ Examples between 2015 and 2024 have included, respectively, Brian McLaren, Diana Butler Bass, Rep. John Lewis, William Barber II, Rachel Held Evans, and Amy Grant.

¹⁹ Heath Rada, interview by author, Black Mountain, NC, April 4, 2024.

Lifelong Montreat attendee Richard DuBose, who became the president of the Montreat Conference Center in 2014, stated in 2024 that “the one constant in Montreat is change,”²⁰ highlighting a tension illustrated by an occasionally repeated local saying that when someone suggests changing anything in Montreat, the uproar begins: “You can’t move that stone! That’s where Grandma stubbed her toe sixty years ago.” Passionate and litigious contretemps related to real or proposed changes have regularly roiled the community: the 2007 split of MPC, in part over changing interpretations of the appropriate roles of women and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people in ecclesia; the 2014-15 resistance to the town council’s intention to build a new town hall in an undeveloped wooded area in the midst of Montreat; the early 2020’s protest against the conference center’s plan to replace a deteriorating, long-dormant ruin on its property with a new, accessible, environmentally harmonious lodge for overnight visitors. Longtime and more recent residents candidly share testimonies that these and earlier change-related controversies have left some relationship scars, and some unhealed emotional wounds, among members of the community.

People in the geographic space of Montreat share with the wider “Montreat Nation” an abiding, profoundly invested, and acutely personal connection to Montreat. The roots of that connection are deep in the historical, denominational, and spiritual consciousness and perception of its many stakeholders. Despite some demographic homogeneities, Montreat, as both a specific location and a conceptual space, remains politically, intellectually, and theologically diverse. The manifestations of efforts among the leaders of the various entities to co-exist with mutual forbearance testify to the

²⁰ Richard DuBose, interview by author, Montreat, June 17, 2024.

presence of genuine goodwill in Montreat while demonstrating the delicacy of the equilibrium in an era of polarization and in a community that is subject to existential tension and periodic conflict.

Covid's Arrival

The first case of Covid in Montreat arrived in the spring of 2020, and statewide stay-at-home orders were issued on March 27, to take effect three days later. “The Order directs people to stay at home except to visit essential businesses, to exercise outdoors or to help a family member. Specifically, the order bans gatherings of more than ten people and directs everyone to physically stay at least six feet apart from others,” read the governor’s press release.²¹ These or similar conditions remained in effect in Montreat for many months, as the community awaited the development of adequate testing, vaccines, and therapeutics.

The inability to gather safely in person and have physical proximity created an emotional and spiritual hardship on two levels. On one level, it caused enormous grief and disorientation in itself. Congregants spoke of feeling bereft of the comforts and consolations of being together for large group events and the ability to interact face to face, and mourned the loss of the stability of predictable patterns of life and activity outside the home. The session of MPC recruited several congregants with professional qualifications in health-related fields to serve as a Covid advisory panel. Members of that panel, while endorsing the decision to disallow in-person church events in the absence of an effective Covid vaccine, openly expressed concern for the spiritual and emotional

²¹ State of North Carolina, “Governor Cooper Announces Statewide Stay at Home Order Until April 29,” accessed August 1, 2024. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/news/press-releases/2020/03/27/governor-cooper-announces-statewide-stay-home-order-until-april-29>.

health of congregants, given the impossibility of engaging in familiar rituals of community and religious life.

MPC's Congregational Care Committee established a weekly Zoom meeting designed to simulate the camaraderie and casual discourse around the coffee table during the half hour before in-person worship. The online gathering would take place shortly before the email distribution of the weekly worship service that the pastor and musician had pre-recorded. One Sunday morning a few weeks into the pandemic, the member who was hosting and moderating the Zoom event was closing the proceedings when she was overcome with the sorrow and frustration of being kept physically apart from everyone and, bursting into tears, immediately went out of frame, signing off shortly thereafter. Those who remained online expressed feelings of both support for the moderator and sharing in her anguish, as well as a further frustration that the best we could do for her in that moment would be to text, email, or call: the circumstances did not allow for home visits, let alone hugs or other in-person support. Devastatingly, some congregants could not physically be with loved ones who had contracted the coronavirus in nursing homes or other facilities in their final days and hours. Though the pandemic lockdown was entirely necessary for health, safety, and survival—perhaps even the survival of the species, for all we knew—the spiritual cost was, in a word, enormous.

On another level, the inability to experience physical proximity exacerbated the tensions reflecting the inflamed social and political discord of the time by depriving people of the nuances of face to face contact when one needs to communicate difficult or vulnerable perceptions and perspectives. The concurrent global and national crises of 2020 were also crises for members of the Montreat community. Congregants urgently

sought, sometimes stridently, strong, immediate responses from clergy and lay leaders to cataclysmic national episodes, many of which would be more effectively handled with solicitude and nuance, which physical isolation rendered unavailable. The monthslong peak of the pandemic coincided with the tragedies that gave rise to Black Lives Matter, the reckoning of the #MeToo movement, draconian U.S. border policies, gun violence atrocities, outlandish statements from the highest offices of government, destructive riots, the brazenly dishonest refusal of some in the national legislative branch to vote to certify the 2020 presidential election, the destabilizing January 6 insurgency, and the ongoing, histrionic denialism—which opinion-based media magnified to their captive audiences—of science, fact, and reason. All of these led to urgent calls to church leaders, from congregants and members of the wider community, for statements or programs that would address these and other divisive, hot-button issues. Such calls came at the very moment when those charged with providing statements and discussion forums were without access to the interpersonal cues that indicate empathy and love and smooth the way for honest, non-violent communication: the softening of the voice; the friendly tap on the arm; the vulnerable sincerity embodied in an “open” posture; visual cues such as the subtle nod, the soft twinkle in the eye, and other small actions that wordlessly convey warmth, openness, and solicitousness.

Additionally, the conversion of communal worship into a one-way, online phenomenon made clear, for some clergy, the crucial nature of one’s ability to “read the room,” an ability somewhat stifled in Zoom meetings and entirely lost when addressing devotional liturgy to an indifferent cell phone camera in an empty room. The pastor of MPC learned in conversations with clergy colleagues that most had never realized the

extent to which the worship leader, reading the room, can and does respond to the audible and visible cues that a congregation returns.

The eventual advent of vaccines and testing, and the resultant easing of restrictions on gathering, allowed for the resumption of many of the rituals that had been suspended, but the need for clergy and congregants to attend to ongoing spiritual health concerns, directly and indirectly related to the traumas of the Covid era, remained urgent.

This is a summary of the context in which the pastor of Montreat Presbyterian Church developed, beginning in 2020, a weekly program of pre-recorded, online midweek prayer services, using the PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship*. The scores of worshipers who participate with regularity have heard and prayed many of the same prayers numerous times: since January, 2022, the pastor has almost always used for these weekly services the seven daily Evening Prayer liturgies from the *Book of Common Worship*. Whether worshipers would find additional spiritual connection in the services if the provider infused specific spiritual theologies of the medieval women mystics into the Evening Prayer liturgies is the subject of this research project.

III. Literature Review and Theological Perspectives

In this section, I will highlight three aspects of spirituality from the medieval women mystics. These are merely three among a practically limitless number of spiritual themes and emphases from the tradition that, by their application into the components of liturgy, may offer worshipers deep, energetic and lasting spiritual experiences. I will specifically discuss Hildegard of Bingen's approach to liturgical composition as a reflection of a spiritual theology of reaching for God, Catherine of Siena's vocabulary of the ineffable, and Mary of Oignies's phenomenon of uncontrollable tears linked to her meditations on Christ, his suffering, and his love.

Why Medieval? Why Women? Why Mystics?

Bernard McGinn has offered a definition of mysticism, among many formulations over the course of a distinguished career, as “an everyday consciousness of God's deepening presence in our lives and the transformation that that's meant to effect in us.”²² Surviving writings by and about the medieval women mystics crackle with devotional intensity, and the tradition as a whole presents itself as robustly spiritually vibrant. Yet each component aspect of the term “medieval women mystics” is significant to the whole.

The early 2020's saw a stream of popular scholarship countering persistent misconceptions about the fifth through fifteenth centuries C.E. in and around Europe as

²² Bernard McGinn, “What Is Mysticism?” *Contemplative Revolution* (podcast), episode 80 (February 26, 2021), 11:19-31. Barbara Newman has called McGinn “our premier historian of mysticism.” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, III:1 (Spring 1995), 1.

“the Dark Ages.”²³ Reflecting the vibrancy of mystical theology throughout the medieval epoch, Newman writes of a seismic shift taking place within the high Middle Ages: “One of the most significant differences between twelfth- and thirteenth-century mysticism is the profound loss of interest (if not yet belief)” in the earlier era’s “symbolic cosmologies...in which God does not so much embrace the naked soul as go forth and meet it in every nook and cranny of creation”—loss of interest, in other words, “in the divine presence immanent in any creature other than the human soul,” in favor of “a relentless inward turn.”²⁴ In short, the medieval period, both before and after the turning point Newman identifies, was an intellectually dynamic epoch of rich spirituality and fervent mystical-theological exploration. In E. M. Cioran’s memorable phrase, “the Middle Ages were pregnant with God.”²⁵

In the realm of everyday religious life, Caroline Walker Bynum cites “the counseling and healing medieval women practiced through their eucharistic visions and miracles, the criticisms of the church they announced in inspired utterances, [and] the salvation they offered to their fellows through disease and suffering,” and suggests that the “extravagant asceticism and eucharistic devotion” that arose among religious women in the Middle Ages were arguably “a reaction against the moderation urged by church

²³ Examples include Falk, *The Light Ages*, 2020; Gabriele and Perry, *The Bright Ages*, 2021; Ramirez, *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It*, 2022; Janega, *The Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women’s Roles in Society*, 2023.

²⁴ Barbara Newman, “The Mozartian Moment: Reflections on Medieval Mysticism,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 202.

²⁵ E.M. Cioran. *Tears and Saints*, translated and with an introduction by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 25.

leaders, against new efforts to make a place...for women and for the laity.”²⁶ Farley asserts, “In the medieval period, [mysticism] was the only form in which women could hope to be taken seriously.”²⁷ In short, the tradition of the medieval women mystics is an insistent, resonant resource worthy of exploration for twenty-first century spirituality.

The Reach for God in the Musical Compositions of Hildegard of Bingen

One of history’s remarkable polymaths, the breadth and intensity of Hildegard of Bingen’s many pursuits and the historical record of her prominence as a formidable administrator subvert the image of the medieval mystic as an otherworldly dreamer lost in a permanently transcendental state.²⁸ Hildegard (c. 1098-1179) was elected mother superior of her convent in her thirties and later founded two other monasteries. In addition to substantial tomes of spiritual theology such as *Scivias* (a term of her own construction) and *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, she also wrote medical, botanical, and other reference works, composed troves of liturgy and sacred poetry, and created visual mandalas that spiritual practitioners continue to use nine centuries later. She also composed liturgical music.

²⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 237, 238.

²⁷ Farley, *The Thirst of God*, x.

²⁸ Barbara Newman, “Introduction,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia, with introduction, translations, and commentary by Barbara Newman, Second Edition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 5-6. Bonnie Wheeler also presents an accessible overview of Hildegard’s life and work, highlighting her administrative prowess, in four audio lectures in *Medieval Heroines in History and Legend*, Chapters 8-11 (The Great Courses, 2013).

Scholars disagree on whether Hildegard herself is to be considered a mystic.²⁹ Regardless of how Hildegard may be categorized, her work may be confidently situated in the mysticism tradition if one accepts McGinn's "broadly conceived" 2016 definition of mysticism as "the aspect of religious life that seeks a deep and transformative sense of the direct presence of God."³⁰ Hildegard writes in *Scivias*, "Thus, O human, you see the lucent sky, which symbolizes the brilliance of the joy of the citizens of Heaven; in which you hear different kinds of music... You hear the joyous citizens of Heaven... [The] wonders of God, which you have already been shown, are enveloped for you in a sweet and delightful song. It sings with joy of the wonders of the Elect..."³¹

In a letter seeking Hildegard's theological perspective on a matter of debate, Odo of Soissons wrote, "They say that you are taken up in the heavenly places and see many things which you bring out in your writing; also, that you bring forth the melodies of a new song although you have not studied any of these things." (Hildegard had no formal training in either Latin or musical composition.) "Blessed are they," wrote Odo, "who so far excel us sinners that they can discern heavenly matters."³² Hildegard's reputation may have been that of an elevated mystic, but it is the compositions themselves which embody the mysticism of being "taken up in the heavenly places."

²⁹ Notable among those arguing against Hildegard as a mystic is the prominent Hildegard scholar Barbara Newman, as she states in "The Mozartian Moment: Reflections on Medieval Mysticism" in *Minding the Spirit*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 201.

³⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Reformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016), 3. This formulation is distinct from a definition McGinn articulated in 2021.

³¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, translated by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 532.

³² Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 244.

The present author contends that Hildegard's approach to the musical composition of her liturgical pieces offers a spiritual theology which can be profitably offered for twenty-first century worshipers in order to deepen and intensify devotional practices, not only such as Evening Prayer services but in preaching and all forms of liturgy as well. To be clear: this section is not about including Hildegard's music in services, but about discerning the spiritual theology that inspired her to compose it. Hildegard's compositions make use of modes, intervals, and melisma to suggest a theology of God's transcendent wonder and beauty, and a spirituality of the human will and capacity to reach for the cosmic heights of God. Qualities in Hildegard's liturgical music suggest a spiritual theology which can be applied to all forms of worship and liturgy in order to offer worshipers an opportunity to reflect on God in wonder, awe, exhilaration, and gratitude.

Aspects of Compositional Style in Hildegard's Liturgical Music

Responses to music are subjective and often conditioned by culture. For example, Western ears are conditioned to accept only half-steps and whole steps in their musical vocabulary, while Middle Eastern music makes use of quarter-step tones which sound out of tune in some other parts of the world.

The setting of this project is in the Western world, especially the United States, and the subject of this section is a product of European tradition (the German Hildegard writing in a musical idiom descended from Gregorian plainchant). Within that Western context, the effect of the music that Hildegard composed for the liturgy to be sung in her own and other monastic communities has been described through the ages in celestial terms. One late-nineteenth century musicologist wrote of the "inexpressible delicacy" of

Hildegard's composition, "infused with heavenly breath."³³ In the same era, the abbot Pothier commented on the "sentiment" and "expression" in Hildegard's music, with its use of "leaps" and unorthodox melodic variations.³⁴ In the late twentieth century, Marianne Richert Pfau noted the "inspirational quality and captivating expressivity" of Hildegard's music.³⁵ Hildegard's own correspondence suggests the theology underlying her beliefs about the role of music in the monastic community: "[The] canticle of praise, reflecting celestial harmony, is rooted in the Church through the Holy Spirit. The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God."³⁶ Some specific aspects of Hildegard's compositional style suggest themselves as vehicles for a particular spiritual theology of the soul's reaching up and out for the heavenly heights of God.

Mode

The musical term "mode" refers to the scale of notes in which a musical piece is written.³⁷ In an accessible televised presentation by Leonard Bernstein in the mid-twentieth century titled "What Is a Mode?" the composer-conductor noted that for much

³³ Raymund Schlecht, ed. and trans. Jennifer Bain, *Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 187.

³⁴ Dom Pothier, in Bain, *Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception*, 189.

³⁵ Marianne Richert Pfau, "Mode and Melody Types in Hildegard von Bingen's Symphonia" (*SONUS* XI:1, Fall 1990), 53.

³⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in Margot Fassler, "Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse," in Barbara Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 149.

³⁷ Harold S. Powers, et. al., "Mode" (Grove Music Online, 2001), 1-5.

of its history, the West has mainly known only two modes: the major and minor scales.³⁸

After having the orchestra behind him sing a brief plainchant prayer, Bernstein at the piano sings and plays the opening chords of the then-current hit single “Along Comes Mary” as two examples of music composed in the Dorian mode, and tells the audience:

You can see that this Dorian mode is almost like an ordinary minor mode, but not quite. And that ‘not quite’ is what makes the big difference, and that difference gives the music a certain ancient, primitive, [non-traditional-European] feeling. That’s why the plainchant we heard before is so stirring, so ancient as to seem timeless. And that’s why the tune in Debussy’s *Fêtes* seems so exotic and of another age.

Bernstein places “Along Comes Mary” in the same category, “primitive and earthy.”³⁹

Marianne Richert Pfau in 1990 examined the use of mode as an important aspect of the inspirational expressivity in Hildegard’s composition, noting Hildegard’s “modal ambiguity.”⁴⁰ Jennifer Bain further elucidated Hildegard’s modal ambiguities in a 2023 lecture at the University of Notre Dame, examining instances wherein Hildegard extended melodic lines beyond strict modal definitions to produce plainsong that disregards musical limits and extends modal boundaries, often combining two modes in

³⁸ Leonard Bernstein, “Young People’s Concert: What Is a Mode?” *Leonard Bernstein Office: Lectures/Scripts/Writings*. <https://www.leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/what-is-a-mode/>. Original CBS broadcast November 23, 1966. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7oA1-y0EJE>

³⁹ Bernstein, “What Is a Mode?”

⁴⁰ Richert Pfau, “Mode and Melody Types in Hildegard,” 53-71.

one passage to produce melodic lines that create surprise and wonder.⁴¹ “As a result,” writes Barbara Newman, “nothing [in Hildegard] is ever musically predictable.”⁴²

Soaring Intervals

Margot Fassler notes in Hildegard’s music the importance of interval: the relative pitch between two notes. Often Hildegard’s melody lines, rather than ascending gradually (think of the stately upward climb of the first eight notes of the hymn, “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates”), suddenly soar unexpectedly “with large leaps from one pitch to another.”⁴³ Fassler claims the leaping intervals are responsible for the “rhapsodic quality” of Hildegard’s liturgical compositions. Leaping a full octave from middle C to the next higher C (in the do-re-mi, or “solfège” formulation, going from “do” all the way up to the next higher “do”) is noted by choristers as a difficult jump. Hildegard uses such “upward motion” with some regularity, musically suggesting an audacious reach to the heights of the heavens and illustrating the vastness of God’s cosmic majesty.⁴⁴

Melisma

Hildegard makes frequent use of melisma, the stringing together of “more than five or six notes sung to a single syllable.” Though melisma is a general term, it is used

⁴¹ Richert Pfau, “Mode and Melody Types in Hildegard,” 54, 71. Jennifer Bain, “Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Mode: New Considerations” (lecture, University of Notre Dame, March 3, 2023). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoZT42J27uk>.

⁴² Barbara Newman, “Introduction: Musical Style and Performance” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia*, 29.

⁴³ Margot Fassler, “Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse,” in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 164.

⁴⁴ Fassler, “Melodious Singing,” 164.

specifically in connection with chant from the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ An example, suitable for its complete lack of exceptionality in the Hildegard canon, is “O virga mediatrix,” which Newman calls an “alleluia-verse,” the alleluia that introduces the reading from the gospel during the eucharist.⁴⁶ “O virga mediatrix” opens with two alleluias. In the first, the first syllable is sung in four notes; the second syllable is given two notes; the third syllable roams over fourteen notes; and the fourth syllable lands on one, making a total of twenty-one notes for a four-syllable word. The second alleluia repeats the pattern of the first. These are followed by a simple “ah,” which, with one syllable, courses over twenty-eight different notes before Hildegard’s text continues.⁴⁷ Newman’s English translation preserves a sense of reverence and wonder from Hildegard’s paeon in Latin to the mother of Christ: “Alleluia! light / burst from your untouched / womb like a flower / on the farther side / of death. The world-tree / is blossoming. Two / realms become one.”⁴⁸ Throughout the short piece, many of the syllables in the original Latin are conveyed with “more than five or six notes,” giving a sense that the singer is undertaking both an aching, cosmic search and an awestruck reverence for the supreme, elevated holiness of Mary—in both cases reaching audaciously for the celestial heights of the divine.

Richard L. Crocker reports on a writing of Augustine in which the latter articulated a feeling that “singing without words expressed a joy too deep for words.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Richard L. Crocker, “Melisma” (Grove Music Online, 2001), unpaginated.

⁴⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia*, 276n18.

⁴⁷ A faithful audio rendering of “O virga mediatrix” can be heard in The Oxford Camerata, *Heavenly Revelations* (Naxos, 1995).

⁴⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, “Alleluia-verse for the Virgin,” in Hildegard, *Symphonia*, 125.

⁴⁹ Crocker, “2. Melismatic Chant” under the heading “Melisma,” 2001.

Hildegard's use of melisma during an "alleluia-verse" which hails the joining of the divine realm with the earthly is a kind of theological statement in itself which exhibits a spirituality of awe and gratitude, humility and love, "a joy too deep for words."

The Monastic Context of Hildegard's Compositions

Why did Hildegard compose in the manner that she did, dramatically combining modes, asking liturgical singers to leap surprising and spectacular intervals, and making frequent use of long and winding melismas? Fassler makes the demonstrable claim that "[Hildegard's] music cannot be fully understood apart from the monasticism that inspired her to compose in the first place and then to create the particular kinds of music she produced."⁵⁰ But Fassler and others make unsustainable claims when they attempt to speak for the abbess in terms of Hildegard's personal preferences. No citations are provided wherein Hildegard writes, "I love to write like this." Yet Fassler speaks of Hildegard's "apparent love of the most ornate kinds of music," even as the author goes on to note the "theological underpinnings" Hildegard provides in the composer's own words: "the words symbolize the body, and the jubilant music indicates the spirit; and the celestial harmony shows the Divinity, and the words the Humanity of the Son of God."⁵¹

On a theological level, Hildegard claimed the melodies came from God; at the practical level, her duty was to provide appropriate liturgical music. Whether her liturgical melodies were divinely given, or whether the works of Hildegard and the Holy Spirit were indistinguishable, or even if the work came entirely from the abbess alone, the

⁵⁰ Fassler, "Melodious Singing," 150.

⁵¹ Fassler, "Melodious Singing," 154.

work of a liturgical composer is to fashion music following the demands of context and need without regard to whether the composer/liturgist enjoys going where she discerns that the music *must* go.

Ian D. Bent and Marianne Pfau identify the point of Hildegard's musical liturgy as fostering "*ruminatio*, ('chewing over'), a method of penetrating the deeper spiritual meaning behind both words and music."⁵² Fassler further explains that *ruminatio*, "the 'chewing on the cud' of the text," was "central to monastic learning and to learning within the liturgy." Hildegard's liturgical settings of psalms and other scriptural passages, her own sacred poetics, and other church writings invariably interpret the text through the melody. Fassler further points out that in Latin (the language of Hildegard's compositions), intonation is a greater source than syntax of the meaning being conveyed in a sentence.⁵³ In this way, the melodies Hildegard composed were essential to expressing the meaning of the texts being sung.

Summary: The Spiritual Theology of Hildegard's Musical Composition

Benedictine religious life actively fostered in its adherents love and humility. The intense love of God for God's creation inspires the humble, sinful creature to aspire not only to hope for forgiveness and salvation, but to reach audaciously up and out into the unfathomable cosmic vastness of God, ultimately seeking complete union with the universal divine. No limited language confined to mundane consonants and vowels can convey this heavenly truth. Only a voice that soars daringly upward between intervals, that roams tirelessly in melisma, that explores unusual and dissonant modes and

⁵² Ian D. Bent, revised by Marianne Pfau, "Hildegard of Bingen." (Grove Music Online, 2001), 6.

⁵³ Fassler, "Melodious Singing," 162.

confounds perceived boundaries between them, traveling where it will in its desperate and ecstatic reach for God, can convey the longing, the stretch, the astronomical scope of the humble soul's need, and mystical ability, to reach for, touch, and feel the embrace—if only for an instant—of the ineffable, eternal divine. To incorporate into both the setting and the liturgy of Evening Prayer a theology of the invitation to the human soul to soar to the heights of God's transcendence is to invite participants into a humble, energetic and blessedly audacious spiritual experience.

The Vocabulary of the Ineffable in the Prayers of Catherine of Siena

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) was a child when she began reporting mystical experiences. Her adolescence included fasting and other extreme forms of devotional self-denial, lengthy periods of self-imposed isolation in her room at home, and further mystical visions. At an indeterminate point, she became literate. Before she was nineteen, she was, as a youthful exception, allowed to join the work of the Mantellate Sisters, a non-clustered order of religious women dedicated to the care of the sick, dying and destitute. She achieved widespread recognition and corresponded with heads of church, state, and military.⁵⁴ McGinn finds it “extraordinary” to consider the influence Catherine has had on the Church, having suddenly emerged from relative obscurity equipped with “the courage, the skill, and the authority” that became her public hallmarks.⁵⁵ She continued to be overcome by ecstatic visions, bursting into prayer mid-conversation or

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, “Women and Spirituality in Medieval Italy,” in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 239. Suzanne Noffke, “Introduction,” in Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue, translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 1-6.

⁵⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350-1550)* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 201.

while dictating letters; ecclesiastical companions would record her ecstatic prayers by notation in real time or verbatim soon after.⁵⁶ While, per Joseph Berrigan, “All her works [treatises, sermons, letters] reflect the intense personal experience she enjoyed of God in her mystical raptures,” Suzanne Noffke affirms that “Catherine’s life is, in fact, defined by her prayer.”⁵⁷

The aim of this section is to argue that Catherine’s use of terms exemplified by the word “ineffable” (*ineffabile*) reflects a spiritual theology that, when conscientiously woven into twenty-first century liturgy, contributes to an engaging, encouraging and fruitful sense of awe, wonder, and trust in the holy mystery of God for contemporary seekers and worshipers. In the context of Catherine’s prayers—ecstatic, lyrically rich, and effective—the use of the term “ineffable” and the regular reference to the insufficiency of language are striking. Catherine is saying that God and God’s love are beyond comprehension, let alone vocabulary, yet the mortal human can recognize God and celebrate the indescribability of the holy mystery.

Catherine’s Public Ministry of Eloquence

Catherine was a master of language. If any matter in the religious realm was capable of being described, Catherine was as well-equipped as any public figure to do so. Jane Tylus is certain that “Catherine’s reputation derived largely from her strategic uses of her voice in prayer, exhortation, and exegesis,” and that Catherine “championed” the

⁵⁶ Suzanne Noffke, “Introduction,” in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 1-2.

⁵⁷ Joseph Berrigan, “The Tuscan Visionary: Saint Catherine of Siena,” in Katharina M. Wilson, ed., *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 254. Noffke, “Introduction” (*Prayers*), 1.

effective use of language and vocabulary.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Petroff deduces from Catherine's letters that "she was the right voice for her time [and] she knew it."⁵⁹ McGinn notes Catherine's own public call narrative (as given to, and preserved by, Raymond of Capua, Catherine's contemporary and principal hagiographer), in which, during four hours in which she experienced physical death in 1370, Christ told her she had to "go back" for the sake of saving souls, and that he would grant her "a mouth and wisdom" to go before the highest seats of power and "put to shame the pride of the strong."⁶⁰

The resultant eloquence was well known in Catherine's lifetime. Tylus notes the myriad invitations to speak "in abbeys, convents, churches, hospitals, piazzas, and council rooms" where she "preached, sermonized, prophesied, prayed, admonished and taught."⁶¹ McGinn has observed that action (the missional ministry of *kerygma*) and contemplation (Catherine's ecstatic mysticism) "had not been [traditionally] conceived of as being capable of complete fusion within the sphere of public activity" before Catherine.⁶² Tylus highlights a 1514 writing, based on accounts contemporaneous with the period of Catherine's activity, describing how in her speaking before Pope Urban VI,

⁵⁸ Jane Tylus, "Mystical Literacy: Writing and Religious Women in Late Medieval Italy" in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 160-161.

⁵⁹ Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, 239.

⁶⁰ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, in McGinn, *Varieties*, 203 (from Conleth Kearns, *The Life of Catherine of Siena by Raymond of Capua* (Washington, D.C.: Dominica Publications, 1980), 204-5. Christ's words echo his own in Luke 21:15 and the Apostle's in I Corinthians 1:27.

⁶¹ Tylus, "Mystical Literacy," 161.

⁶² Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 21.

all present “were seized with wonder” by her “erudite tongue, and her fiery words penetrated the most hardened heart.”⁶³

Ineffabile

The salutation of “Prayer 1” in the collection of Catherine’s surviving prayers begins: “*Deità deità, ineffabile deità*,” translated by Noffke “Godhead, Godhead, ineffable Godhead.”⁶⁴ It is not the last time that Catherine’s prayers include a vocabulary of the ineffable in addressing God. The word is descended from Latin *ineffabilis*, “unutterable.” Since at least the time of Catherine, an “ineffable” reality or phenomenon has been understood to mean “beyond expression, too great for words, inexpressible.”⁶⁵

With such a spectacular arsenal of vocabulary, eloquence, and mystical connectedness at her disposal, Catherine uses the word “ineffable” as she addresses God in prayer. In other words, arguably the preeminent wordsmith of the day can only describe God as indescribable. Moreover, Catherine does not use the term lightly: in her prayers and other writings, variants of the word “ineffable” are used almost exclusively to modify the word “love” or the name of God. In the 1906 Thorold translation of Catherine’s *Dialogue*, the adjective “ineffable” is used sixteen times, almost always with

⁶³ Tylus, “Mystical Literacy,” 162-163.

⁶⁴ Caterina da Siena, *Le Orazioni di Caterina da Siena*, ed. Giuliana Cavallini (Siena, Italy: Cantagalli, 1993), 3. Catherine of Siena, “Prayer 1,” *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, 16.

⁶⁵ “Ineffable,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ineffable>.

the noun “love,” once with “mercy,” once with “fire of love.” A few times the adverb “ineffably” is used, in each case modifying the verb “to love.”⁶⁶

To speak of God as “ineffable” is an example of *apophasis*, which is to describe a phenomenon, object or reality by citing characteristics that the object does not have. Mark S. Burrows observes the problem that interpreters of apophatic or mystical texts sometimes “move too easily to explain or define what is, strictly speaking, inexplicable and indefinable.”⁶⁷ Michael Sells writes: “The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name, ‘the transcendent.’ Any statement of ineffability, ‘X is beyond names,’ generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.”⁶⁸

Catherine’s use of *ineffabile* was emphatic rather than innovative. In the fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysius had already prayed, “Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness,...direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy mystical Lord, most incomprehensible...where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness...”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* (London, UK: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1907).

⁶⁷ Mark S. Burrows, “Words that Reach into Silence,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 208.

⁶⁸ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

⁶⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius The Areopagite, “The Mystical Theology,” in *The Complete Works*, ed. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 203.

Sells notes, “Real contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent, but these conditions are not illogical,”⁷⁰ and clarifies that fields other than theology also must deal with ideas and realities which are better or more appropriately invoked by remaining unspoken. The present author cites the meta poem “Introduction to Poetry” (1988), in which the poet Billy Collins laments the inclination of readers (students?) to demand literal, containable, reductive definitions from poetic imagery. The poet/teacher describes how he wants people to engage with a poem: to “hold it up to the light / like a color slide,” “press an ear against its hive,” to “walk inside the poem’s room / and feel the walls for a light switch.” But the metapoem ends in disappointment and disgust as “all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it,” brutalizing the poem “to find out what it really means.”⁷¹ “Poetry, drama,” writes Sells, “almost any form of art—risks being trivialized when its meaning is defined and paraphrased discursively... Apophatic texts have suffered in a particularly acute manner from the urge to paraphrase the meaning in non-apophatic language.”⁷²

The comparison can be made to preachers who believe their congregants are demanding concrete, mathematical answers to every life question and, in response, seek to meet the imagined demand using language that tacitly suggests that scripture will always provide closed, final, unerringly precise definitions of the divine will for every situation. Conversely, a theology of the ineffable God incorporated into services such as

⁷⁰ Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 3.

⁷¹ Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry,” in *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 58.

⁷² Sells, *Mystical Language*, 4.

Evening Prayer can offer participants a true and resonant spirituality “with sighs too deep for words.”⁷³

At the core of Catherine’s articulations of love and humility were speechless degrees of gratitude, awe, and joy in the face of a God who, her soul knew, was “mad with love” for her. Catherine’s apophatic vocabulary of the ineffable, indescribable, unutterable love of God is a positive theology that recognizes and celebrates the fact that our good and loving God, while so much greater than we are as to be, in practical terms, incomprehensible, is fully present and constantly working on our behalf and for our eternal benefit, intimate enough to “wipe every tear from their eyes.”⁷⁴

The Power of the Spirit in the Tears of Mary of Oignies

Mary of Oignies (1177-1213) was among the earliest of the beguines, a semi-monastic community of women who devoted themselves to a life of prayer and service to the poor. Mary undertook extreme acts of devotion (extreme to the point that a trigger warning is appropriate before encountering her life story, in which even her admiring friend and hagiographer took care to counsel against anyone emulating her practices), and was purported to display mystical gifts: manifest indications of God working miraculously through her to speak prophetically to the church and the world. One “gift” which befell her was the phenomenon of uncontrollable, effusive, and uncontainable tears. In this section, I will marshal the work of church historians to provide historical context in which to observe the phenomenon of Mary’s miraculous tears through the lens

⁷³ Romans 8:26.

⁷⁴ Revelation 21:4.

of the *vita apostolica* as a demand for a more authentic spiritual life and a pushback against an inert ecclesiastical structure. I will articulate a spiritual theology, gleaned from James of Vitry's hagiography of Mary, of welcoming the intensity of the Holy Spirit.

The Demand for an Authentic Spiritual Life

At the turn of the thirteenth century, "a new religious fervor" swept over parts of Europe, affecting both female and male laypeople. This new enthusiasm "could be satisfied neither by the new [religious] orders nor by the secular clergy. Lay groups proliferated, proclaiming the absolute and literal value of the gospels" and embodying the *vita apostolica* (apostolic life), which was regarded as a compelling, more faithful way of living, including the voluntary renunciation of possessions in order to realize the goals of their religious integrity.⁷⁵ The *vita apostolica* was also changing: for centuries, the apostolic life had been understood by the monastics to refer to "a stable community of prayer and common ownership."⁷⁶ The twelfth century saw the clergy debating the monastics on this view, and reformers noting the evangelizing mission of the first Christ-following apostles. The "shift from centering on inward-looking community to outward-looking encounter with the world" was seismic.⁷⁷ The response of the institutional Church, unwieldy and inattentive, was found to be staggeringly inert.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Brenda M. Bolton, "Mulieres Sanctae," in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 141-158.

⁷⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 5.

⁷⁷ McGinn, *Flowering*, 6.

⁷⁸ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 14.

The apostolic model that sparked demand for renewal in institutional and spiritual life was an ethic that combined pastoral care (which meant care for and involvement with the unwell, impoverished and downtrodden), rejection and renunciation of material wealth, and “a more profound and introspective religiosity.” Simons suggests the possibility “that the pastoral task...suffered the most, and that a wide spiritual gap separated” the people from their ecclesiastical leadership.⁷⁹

The Beguine Movement

Large numbers of men had been choosing to enter the priesthood or other religious life, and wars and crusades had claimed the lives of many others. This may have resulted in a disproportionate number of women who either had no interest in marriage (including Mary, who persuaded her young husband to agree to make theirs a sexless marriage) or for whom there were few prospects for partnering, “and who therefore sought release in a mystical, contemplative life.”⁸⁰

Walter Simons, citing Martha C. Howell, notes that women, despite being “active participants in the urban economies” of Mary’s region, were routinely denied leadership in social, civic, governmental, and trade arenas.⁸¹ Women also faced denial in the church. “The appearance of such large numbers of women in such diverse forms,” writes Bolton, “demanding that they should be allowed to participate in the large-scale religious changes which were in progress in the early thirteenth century perplexed the church....” Though a

⁷⁹ Simons, *Cities*, 61, 14.

⁸⁰ Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” 147.

⁸¹ Simons, *Cities*, 10-12. Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

few notable figures within the patriarchal hierarchy—Pope Innocent III, James of Vitry—championed such status and participation for women and “might have made possible the creation of an independent female order worthy of” figures such as Mary, “to recognize women in this way proved impossible in the face of antagonism from the traditional forces in the [ecclesiastical] hierarchy.”⁸²

Brenda Bolton, noting that the first wave of beguines, including Mary, were practically all from the privileged ranks, observes that “the religious poverty movement appeared to represent a reaction to landed wealth or newly acquired urban prosperity” and speculates that they may have “felt that competition to achieve status was irreconcilable” with the apostolic life. They “wished not only to be poor but to live with the poor.” The beguines “followed no definite rule of life; they had no real founder; at their inception they sought no authority from the hierarchy and imposed no irreversible vows upon their adherents,” and it can even be stated that they “were never officially organized.”⁸³ They are “the only movement in medieval monastic history that was created by women and for women—and not affiliated with, or supervised by, a male order,” and they “did not stress...the merit of the priesthood.”⁸⁴ This was reflected in their complicated reception in secular society: while some satirized the image of the beguines—the word itself is vernacular and may have been pejorative⁸⁵—for many,

⁸² Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” 154.

⁸³ Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” 145-147.

⁸⁴ Simons, *Cities*, 143. Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” 145.

⁸⁵ Sarah McNamer, “The Middle-English Version of Jacques de Vitry’s Life of St. Marie d’Oignies (Introduction),” in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 710.

“beguine prayers for the dead were just as valuable, if not more, as masses said by priests” due to the beguines’ evident compassion and knowledge of the streets and communities in which they lived out the *vita apostolica*. “The beguines’ mourning had special potency because it was inspired by compassion, punctuated by tears and moans...Mary was said to have emitted cries of agony like a woman giving birth.”⁸⁶

Mary and the Beguine Community at Oignies

Petroff described the community of holy women who gathered around Mary of Oignies as “mystics...of a new sort who focused their meditative effort on the suffering humanity of Christ, on dedication to the Eucharist, and finally on mystical marriage with Christ.”⁸⁷ McDonnell notes that in addition to her voluntarily poor and chaste “prototype of the beguine,” Mary offered men, too, “a practical example of the *vita apostolica*,”⁸⁸ with McGinn pointing to the highly educated male clergy who, for that reason, were drawn to the community centered around Mary.⁸⁹

After her death, Mary’s clerical confessor and “ardent disciple,” James of Vitry (d. 1240), produced a hagiography, the *Life of Mary of Oignies*, which is the primary source of much of what is known about her. James appears to have written his *Life* both to extol Mary as a candidate for sainthood and in support of the beguines and the wider cause of

⁸⁶ Simons, *Cities*, 79-80.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, “New Styles of Feminine Spirituality—the Beguine Movement” in *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 174.

⁸⁸ Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 121.

⁸⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 34.

ecclesiastical acceptance of, and disposition toward, women's religious orders. It became "one of the most important documents for the study of beguine spirituality and women's piety in the later Middle Ages."⁹⁰ James's *Life of Mary* includes three short chapters on the miraculous phenomenon of Mary's unrestrainable tears.⁹¹

Mary's Effusive Tears

James sometimes shifts from writing in the third person to addressing God directly: on an unexpected day, Mary experienced a holy visitation, during which she "considered the benefits that you had generously shown forth in the flesh to humanity. She found such grace...that a great abundance of tears was pressed out by the winepress of your cross in the Passion, and her tears flowed so copiously on the floor, that the ground in the church became muddy with her footprints." Subsequently, Mary "could neither gaze at an image of the cross, nor speak, nor hear other people speaking about the Passion of Christ, without falling into ecstasy..."⁹²

Caroline Walker Bynum views Mary's tears through the lens of "food in female spirituality," citing Mary's response when James asks Mary whether her copious tears caused debilitating headaches.⁹³ Mary explains: "These tears...are my refreshment, they are my bread day and night. They do not afflict the head, but nourish the mind; they twist

⁹⁰ McNamer, "Introduction," 709.

⁹¹ James of Vitry, "The Life of Mary of Oignies" by James of Vitry, translated by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation. Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, Vol. 7* ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2006), 56-58

⁹² James of Vitry, "The Life of Marie d'Oignies" Book I, Chapter 16, trans. Margot H. King (2006), 56-57.

⁹³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 115.

without pain, but refresh the soul with a kind of serenity; they...fill the soul to the full, and soothe it with a kind of smooth ointment; they are not extracted through violence, but are delivered freely by the Lord.”⁹⁴

A Spiritual Theology of Surrender to the Power of the Spirit

James’s framing of events—the visitation to Mary and her consideration of what God has done for humanity in Christ provoking torrents of tears—suggests a spirituality of contemplation on God’s ineffable love leading to a complete and tearful surrender to gratitude, joy, and trust in God. The human response itself feeds and nourishes the one who experiences it. Another passage adds an aspect of submission to the power of the Holy Spirit:

One of the priests of the church softly but firmly exhorted her to pray in silence and to restrain her tears... Conscious of the impossibility of [this], she slipped out of the church unknown to him and hid herself in a secret place which was removed from everyone. There she tearfully implored the Lord that he show this priest that it is not in man’s power to restrain the intensity of tears when the waters flow with the vehemence of the blowing spirit. [When] the priest celebrated mass that day...His spirit was drowned in such a flood of tears that he almost suffocated, and as much as he tried to repress its intensity, by that much more was he drenched with his tears...⁹⁵

The flood eventually saturated the altar cloths and left the pages of the prayer book soaked.

The *coup de grâce* suggests the theology that God is on the side of the marginalized and that, to use a current term, the “mansplaining” of an inadequate priest risks divine retribution:

⁹⁴ James of Vitry, “The Life of Marie d’Oignies” Book I, Chapter 18, translated by Margot H. King (2006), 58.

⁹⁵ James of Vitry, “The Life of Marie d’Oignies” Book I, Chapter 17, trans. Margot H. King (2006), 57.

What could he do, he who had been so thoughtless [and] had rebuked the handmaid of Christ? To his chagrin, he learned [what he had] not wanted to know because of [a lack of] humility and compassion... Long after mass had ended, [Mary] returned... “Now,” she said, “You have learned from experience that it is not in man’s power to restrain the intensity of the spirit.”⁹⁶

For these purposes, spirituality has been understood as the practice of being aware of God’s presence in one’s life connecting all creation, and the process of seeking in everyday life to deepen one’s relationship with God and the world. One avenue which commends itself to the practice of spirituality is to join in the ancient and living tradition of contemplative practice in the observance of services of Evening Prayer. It is this paper’s thesis that in order to magnify the spiritual experience of Evening Prayer, theologies of the medieval women mystics can be fruitfully incorporated into the Evening Prayer liturgy: the audacious reach for the cosmic heights of God; the vocabulary of the ineffable; the power of the Spirit to overwhelm faithful worshipers in contemplation of Christ’s sacrificial love. By such practices, the church may again offer the world a spirituality energetic and resonant enough to inspire love, humility, and the justice, recognition, and jubilation of the oneness shared by all human beings with God, creation, and each other.

⁹⁶ James of Vitry, “The Life of Marie d’Oignies” I:17, 57-58.

IV. Methodology

The present project is a phenomenological study whose purpose was to determine whether, and how, the incorporation of spiritual theologies of three medieval women of the mystic tradition into the online, pre-recorded midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church would impact the spirituality of the participants. Phenomenological studies “value understanding a research area from the point of view of a group of participants,” per Timothy D. Lincoln. “The phenomenological approach wants to discover the *experience* of study participants.”⁹⁷

The qualitative research at the heart of this project was a series of interviews with people who regularly attended the Evening Prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church, and who participated in a three-part series which specifically incorporated devotional writings by, about, or directly based on the spiritualities of three medieval women mystics. (For these purposes, I use the word “mystic” to indicate a historical figure whose own compositional works or whose personal reputation are associated with the tradition of Christian mysticism.) In the interviews, I was listening for themes that participants would voice about their experience of participating in the services. Would infusing elements of that branch of mystical spirituality into the church’s existing worship life be helpful for nurturing the spirituality of congregants? This project was to be a starting point in seeking an answer to that inquiry.

“At the start of a study,” per Lincoln, “a phenomenological approach does not have in mind an agenda for how the results of the research might be used [but celebrates]

⁹⁷ Timothy D. Lincoln, *Qualitative Research: A Field Manual for Ministry Students* (Atla Open Press, 2021), 65, 67. Emphasis added.

increased understanding of the phenomenon under consideration.” In the present study, I was anxious to discover themes that the participants would voice about the experience of participating in the Evening Prayer services and encountering the spiritual theologies of the medieval women mystics that I had chosen to incorporate.⁹⁸

I chose to highlight three women of the medieval mystical tradition based on a discernible, describable spiritual theology embodied by each. I then studied in depth each of the three mystical aspects and their exemplars, learning about their contexts in fields including history, theology, geography, ecclesiology, and Christian mysticism so that I could knowledgeably apply them to the present context of Montreat Presbyterian Church.

In order to be able to glean usable data on the impact on the spiritual life of worshipers from qualitative research interviews, I needed to establish a working definition of the notoriously ambiguous term “spirituality.” To construct a working definition, I first established a basic framework of understanding by compiling uses of the term in a sampling of academic and peer-reviewed materials from the early 1990’s to the present. Reading through the lens of that general understanding of the concept, I collected data from analyses of studies compiled in Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., eds., *Measures of Religiosity* (1999), to identify ways in which the term and idea of “spirituality” had been defined and used in clinical research. I then compared those clinical understandings with descriptions from Ruth Frankenberg’s qualitative research study, published in 2004, in which interview subjects spoke of their own experiences, understandings, and beliefs about spirituality. I also considered responses to a 2023 Pew Research poll of Americans’ own understandings of spirituality, and from all of these

⁹⁸ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 65, 67, 73

sources I synthesized a concise working definition for the purposes of this study.

Appendix 3 provides a detailed exposition of the process of gathering and synthesizing of the understandings of the word “spirituality.”

To create the conditions necessary to collect relevant data, I needed an informed understanding of the setting of this research project: the weekly, online, pre-recorded midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church. The services at the heart of the project are Evening Prayer services whose basic liturgies are found in the 2018 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* produced by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Evening Prayer service is descended from the monastic practice of the liturgy of the hours, which Benedictine and other monastic communities continue to practice. I observed, participated in, and studied the daily horarium of the liturgy of the hours in repeated visits and weeklong monastic stays at Mepkin Abbey (Moncks Corner, SC), Gethsemani Abbey (Bardstown, KY), the Monastery of the Holy Spirit (Conyers, GA), and New Melleray Abbey (Peosta, IA), and studied the origins and liturgical meaning and purpose of each of the daily prayers. This component of the overall study had two primary outcomes relevant to this project: it informed the construction of the “baseline” Evening Prayer services to which regular participants were accustomed, as well as the three services which I specifically constructed for this study, and it established the liturgical, historical, and theological context of the devotional practice in which the interviewees were participating. Appendix 4 provides an outline of the development of the Evening Prayer liturgy in the context of its monastic origins.

In my role as pastor, I create, produce, and distribute each pre-recorded service. Using the Evening Prayer liturgies found in the Daily Prayer section of the *Book of*

Common Worship, I choose one of the seven “days” of the Evening Prayer services. I select a psalm, as the psalms are historically essential to daily prayer services, and I select a New Testament reading, almost always from the gospels and almost always a narrative specifically about Jesus, in order to offer participants an ongoing opportunity for growth in familiarity with the church’s historical witness to his life, ministry, and meaning, enfolded in a liturgical rather than exclusively pedagogical context. The equipment I use to record each service consists of a laptop from which to read; a cell phone on a tripod stand, with which to make the video recording; a lighting tripod to create visual balance; and a variety of candles and other effects symbolic of light (lantern, oil lamp, candle holder, etc.) of which I choose two or three for any given service.

For the services, when I am on camera as the worship leader, I am seated on the veranda overlooking the front yard of my home in Montreat, with a natural backdrop behind me. The surrounding wooded mountain views are, along with the candles, the subject of “B roll” footage which I incorporate during the editing process. I plan the videography to coincide with diminishing natural light at or near sunset, also seeking to minimize the likelihood of human-made background noise such as traffic, conversations, and leaf blowers or other machinery.

When I have completed principal video recording, I use video editing software to construct the program. When I have finalized the service for distribution, I upload it to an online storage site and schedule the email distribution of the Evening Prayer via MPC’s email distribution service (Constant Contact).

To create the three prayer services necessary for the data collection phase of this project, I incorporated aspects of the spiritual theologies of the three women mystics into

the Evening Prayer liturgies. I chose prayers or passages of writing to include in each service, obtained clearances from the publishers of relevant materials pertaining to Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Mary of Oignies, and scheduled the series of three services so that they would be distributed after I had recruited and prepared the participants who would be drawn from the pool of potential interviewees.

My data gathering techniques for this qualitative research project included interviewing as well as questionnaires with which to obtain background information about the interview participants.⁹⁹ (The background and interview questions are attached as Appendix 2.) As a component of the background information, I asked participants to identify a number of demographic and other indicators such as religious affiliation, gender identification, employment status, sole occupancy, personality type, etc. By doing so, I sought to leave the door open to discern themes which could suggest further study. Are these services more appealing to introverts than to extraverts, or perhaps the other way around? Are there hindrances to participation for those who have fixed schedules at home or work? Do men respond differently than women when they are aware of the imprint of female theologians? Do non-Christians participate in these services despite, or because of, the Christian content? All of these and more could be the subject of future research.

Per Lincoln, “A purposive sample consists of persons who have the desired characteristics for a given study [and] differs from the random sampling commonly used in quantitative research studies, which attempt to generalize findings widely.”¹⁰⁰ I used a

⁹⁹ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 81-82.

purposive sampling approach to identify participants who had attended the online services and indicated personal benefit from their participation, ongoing interest in the program, and willingness to explore and try to articulate aspects of their own spirituality. These characteristics would help answer the research questions, as I wanted to hear specific responses to personal inquiries about how each of the interviewees understood their own spirituality and internally processed their own experience of the services. Lincoln refers to the “texture of human experience” being sought and studied in qualitative research, rather than the “broad-brush analysis” of quantitative research.

I chose to conduct between five and seven interviews (inclusive) based on two factors. The range of five to seven participants would produce enough data to provide rich descriptions of interviewees’ experiences and reveal common themes, and the conducting, transcribing and analyzing of seven or fewer interviews would fit within the limited time in which I needed to complete the project.¹⁰¹

I first identified a pool of potential interviewees (“the group of all possible participants for a given study [who] have certain characteristics that make them helpful to the researcher”).¹⁰² The pool consisted of people who had participated in the services regularly between May 1 and July 31, 2023. For purposes of this study, “the service(s)” refers to the pre-recorded, online, midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church; one who has “participated” in a service has viewed the service with intentionality; and I chose to measure “regular” participation as applying to those who participated in just under half or more: at least 46% of the weekly services (six or more of

¹⁰¹ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 85-87.

¹⁰² Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 83.

the thirteen issued between May 2 and July 25, 2023, inclusive): a time period beginning recently enough to demonstrate current involvement, and concluding at a point shortly before the publicly distributed three-part series of weekly services created for the study would begin, giving the researcher enough time to evaluate and discern appropriate members of the pool, recruit them, and introduce them to the project.

I was able to determine the pool by accessing information provided by Constant Contact, the digital and email marketing platform through which the church office distributes the services. Account owners are able to access information about which email addresses have received the mailings, as well as whether, and when, the users of those email addresses have opened the link to the recorded service. Within the group of candidates meeting the criteria of regular participation, I considered those who at any time had proactively commented on the services, which would further suggest familiarity with the practice. I identified the pool using the rationale that the named characteristics suggest people who are likely to have an interest in the services, would be familiar with the format (therefore not requiring introductory explanation), and may have already begun to consider how participating in the service contributes to their spiritual life, health, or practice, giving them a baseline to which the services created for the test study could be compared.

In identifying the pool, I recognized at least three “known unknowns” which the technology does not clarify. Constant Contact logs only “clicks,” which identify when a user has opened the link to view the recording, but not the duration of the user’s participation. A recipient could have “participated” for less than one second and still would be logged as a participant. I considered that regular participation in services would

suggest someone who is likely to have participated in most or all of any services they had attended, which I could confirm in the recruitment and invitation process. Another variable left ambiguous by the technology is that the name associated with the email address the participant is using may not be the member of the household who screened the service. And more than one person may be participating in the service using one person's email link: two or more people could be opening the email, clicking the link, and participating in the service together. These factors, too, I could ascertain in the invitation process. From the twenty-five who met the first criterion, I identified nine viable candidates. If, between their recruitment and the completion of the interview phase of the project, any of the five to seven recruited interviewees opted out or became unable to continue, I would be able to move on to the next candidates on the original list. Ultimately, in the course of the project, I conducted interviews with six regular participants in the midweek prayer services.

In designing the tool for collecting data, I understood the necessity of recognizing researcher reflexivity, “generally understood as awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher” per Barbara Probst and Laura Berenson.¹⁰³ The integrity, productivity, and value for study of the data collection for this project was at risk of researcher influence from at least four perspectives. One, I am the installed pastor of MPC, and my pastoral relationships with some of the participants dated back as much as ten years before the data gathering took place. Two, both on and off camera, my voice is the one participants

¹⁰³ B. Probst and L. Berenson, “The Double Arrow: How Qualitative Social Work Researchers Use Reflexivity,” *Qualitative Social Work*, 13 (6), 814. Quoted in Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 64.

hear in the services, so the creation and presentation are directly associated with the researcher. Three, congregants and the church as a whole have invested in and encouraged my progress through the Doctor of Ministry program. Four, in my preaching, praying, teaching, and other elements of church leadership, congregants regularly hear of my interest in the medieval women mystics. For all of these reasons, I recognized that participants may be disinclined to say things which might disappoint, offend, or discourage the pastor/researcher, and might be tempted to offer only words that they may think I want to hear.

In recruiting and preparing interviewees, I emphasized and sought verbal agreement that the research data being collected were not intended to be an evaluation of the Evening Prayer services, nor of the pastor's method or style of designing and presenting the services; nor was the interview intended as a survey of how much or little congregants may "like" the services. Verbally and in writing, I clarified that data that would be relevant and helpful to this research project would pertain primarily to the participants' own sense of the spiritual impact on them of the spiritualities of medieval women mystics, and specifically *not* to whether they like or have critiques of the Evening Prayer services (or the pastor who designs and produces them). I also recognized that after the data collection, I would need to apply self-critical caution and remain focused on the research question itself rather than on responses interviewees may give pertaining solely to their appreciation for the pastor or their enjoyment of the services unrelated to the topic of spirituality.

Distinct from reflexivity is the concept of positionality, which has to do in part with implicit power disparities between researcher and participant. In the context of this

project, “social friction” between researcher and subjects was minimal, although one topic revealed itself as calling for researcher caution when the subject was tears. All of the female participants spoke of, and in some cases exhibited, occasional tearfulness in the context of spirituality. Two of the three men noted in the same context that tears did not come naturally and were uncomfortable to them. Although I was acting in the pursuit of disinterested objectivity, I needed to consider how I may have unwittingly exhibited inclinations of which I am not even consciously aware which have to do with the way males are socialized to respond to tearfulness itself, or to others who exhibit emotional responses. Lincoln also notes, “Doing qualitative research in one’s own congregation...poses distinctive challenges because of the tension between the role of researcher and that of a religious leader.”¹⁰⁴ Before and sometimes during the interviews, I reiterated for each interviewee, verbally and/or in writing, that if a congregant’s response to an interview question should begin to include sensitive subject matter suggesting a need for pastoral intervention, we could, at any moment, revert to the roles of congregant and pastor and terminate the interview between researcher and subject, at least until another time.¹⁰⁵

Having formulated a set of interview questions, I asked my spouse, who met the criteria for being in the pool of potential interviewees, to be the subject of a test interview, which would give my interview questions a trial run and whose results would not be included as data.¹⁰⁶ (Researcher reflexivity in this test case required a recognition

¹⁰⁴ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 102.

¹⁰⁶ Moschella, *Ethnography*, 67.

of not only our roles as pastor and church member, but also as life partners.) As a result of that interview, I realized that it would be more helpful for me to offer a working definition of spirituality “for purposes of this study,”¹⁰⁷ rather than asking participants to formulate their own definition without providing a point of comparison. I would present my suggested, working definition and invite them to critique and endorse, adjust, or replace the definition for themselves.

I asked participants to sit for the interview after they had participated in all three services in the series. I collected the data using semi-structured interviews, offering a set of questions that allowed the interviewees to explore their own reactions to the spiritual impact of the services. The interviews were held in a secure and “neutral” location, offsite from the church property and free from interruption or distraction. I had asked for and received permission and booking assistance from the Montreat Conference Center for the use of private meeting room space.

For the interview protocol, I followed the outline of six stages offered by Lincoln, who lists the steps for a qualitative research interview: *Preliminaries*, in which the researcher arrives at the designated site and sets up before the interview; *Introduction*, wherein the researcher greets the interview subject, breaks the ice conversationally, and offers a brief synopsis of the project; *Obtaining Consent and Background Information*, in which the researcher provides the consent form, printed in duplicate (one for the interviewee to read, ask questions, sign, and submit, and the other for them to keep), then presents a questionnaire for the participant to fill out, which provides potentially pertinent background information: clergy or lay, church affiliate or not, local or distant, etc.

¹⁰⁷ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

(“pertinent” for purposes of this study meaning anything “which could help the researcher interpret the meanings of findings”); *Questions and Answers*, the heart of the interview, which is recorded, and in which the interviewee responds to the researcher’s purposive series of questions; *Thanks*, when the researcher takes a moment after the interview phase to highlight the importance of what the interviewee is providing; and *Follow-up*, wherein the researcher makes notes as soon as possible, takes steps to safeguard the recording (both to be sure it is not lost and to protect confidentiality), secures the consent forms and background information, sends a note of thanks to the interviewee, and logs background data from paper forms in some kind of database.¹⁰⁸

To assist and save time in producing transcriptions, I subscribed to an online service (Happy Scribe) which offered AI-generated transcriptions. I used the original recordings to check the accuracy of the entirety of each transcription. I kept the retrieved data secure and informed interviewees of my plan to delete the recordings at the conclusion of the project. After correcting the transcripts, I began the “careful, iterative reading” process of coding, “the process of finding meaningful patterns in [the] interviews and questionnaire answers.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 116.

¹⁰⁹ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 199.

V. Results and Interpretation

The primary data collection tool for this project was a series of interviews wherein participants described the impact on their own spirituality of the infusion of spiritual theologies of three medieval women mystics into the pre-recorded, online midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church. I will identify themes that emerged in the participants' descriptions of aspects of spirituality that are important to them, establishing a baseline of the extent to which the traditional Evening Prayer services impact participants' spiritual lives. I will then collate, analyze, and offer an interpretation of the data of the interviewees' descriptions of the spiritual impact (or lack of spiritual impact) of each of the three incorporated mystical theologies on the spirituality of the participants in the Evening Prayer context. All interviews were confidential; each interviewee agreed that the researcher would preserve anonymity.

Connection

In discussing their own sense of spirituality, interviewees repeatedly invoked the theme of *connection*. Several described spirituality itself as an awareness of or a desire for connection to God, to others, to self, and to the communion of saints. "For me," said a retired, male layperson and church member who is active in service-oriented programs both within and outside the church,

spirituality is simply that I wish to know God. I wish to be part of God's kingdom. I want to be lifted up in the community, the faith community, any faith community that I'm part of. I also want to make a significant part of my time available to glorify God and to lift up other people and to take care of—[to] help out; love people who are different from me. They don't have to think like I do. I want my spirituality to be inward and outward, is the way I put it.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Interview with participant coded as 1116D, November 16, 2023.

Some interviewees reported *connection to God* as an outcome of participation in the Evening Prayers. “The services just ring true with connecting me to God in a way that I don’t often find in my everyday life,” said a professionally employed, “sandwich generation” mother (caring for parents as well as young adult children) who holds more than one volunteer position in the church. “I think that being part of [the Evening Prayer services] has enriched my own spiritual experience on Sunday, and in other places. I think it’s fostered a deeper connection with God for me, and that carries over into lots of different things.”¹¹¹ A retired pastor who does not live in the community reported regularly engaging with the services late at night as a matter of ritual connection with God. “In many ways, that’s the ‘me and God’ time. Is it more likely that you’re going to reach God in the middle of the night? Yes, I think it is, because you’re tired and your defenses are broken down... It’s the concept happening that I’m not all there is, and I need help to do what I need to do.”¹¹²

Some interviewees saw *connection with others* as an essential aspect of what spirituality means to them. One interview subject agreed “absolutely” that participation in the services provided him with a sense of connection to others who are worshiping, as well as to all the people whom he would like to serve. “It’s the ultimate. I mean, it’s an ultimate dimension of my spirituality, my sense of it, for sure.”¹¹³ A full-time professional artist and active local congregant also identified an important part of her spirituality to be “service to people as your connection with God, because that’s how I find I use my

¹¹¹ Interview with participant coded as 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹¹² Interview with participant coded as 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹¹³ 1116D, November 16, 2023.

spirituality, or I live my spirituality, is in service, as opposed to just trying to deepen my relationship [with God]. I need that fulfillment. I mean, the spirituality that I am seeking is by the service that's being done.”¹¹⁴

In addition to the relationship with God and being of service to others as components of the connectional aspect of spirituality, participants also spoke of *connection within the communion of saints*: both the worldwide living communion and the communion of those who have gone before. From a practical perspective, the retired pastor expressed appreciation that the services are online, noting, “I have become aware of a different way of [being] the communion of saints—these are the non-dead saints—that there is now a church that exists online. I think more importantly, we can *have* church online. Two or three can gather in different towns, and it is now church. We couldn't do that before.” Regarding the liturgical content of the services, the pastor reported finding the traditional liturgies spiritually engaging “because that immediately connects me with previous worship. Previous people.”¹¹⁵ The retired layperson active in service ministries noted:

I like the Lord's Prayer as a part [of the Evening Prayer service]. To think that I am praying not only with the people that I'm with, which is just you and me, but it's all the other people that are doing it sometime today or tomorrow; and all the other people. I just can't imagine how many people over two thousand years have prayed the prayer, and how happy some of them were, and how anguished some of them were. But it calls us to attention about what we were about.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Interview with participant coded as 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹¹⁵ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹¹⁶ 1116D, November 16, 2023.

Rest, Calm, Healing

In addition to connection, themes of rest, calm, and healing emerged as spiritual needs which the participants identified for themselves, needs which they address at least in part by participating in the Evening Prayer services. “It’s just a step away from being in the ever present crazy world. It’s a place apart. I think about Montreat as a place apart in and of itself. [The services] have come to be my go-to thing when I need to step away and I need something to fill *me*.”¹¹⁷ Several interviewees cited similar personal circumstances: “Our heads are so full, at least mine is. It’s like a cacophony in there some days.”¹¹⁸ “I’m a worrier.”¹¹⁹ “My brain’s trying to think too much.”¹²⁰ The silences, pauses, and lingering views of nature within the recorded services address the need for rest, calm and healing for these interviewees because “in the silence, there is God.”¹²¹

Many of the participants identified the setting—the natural environment in general and Montreat specifically—as intrinsic to the themes of rest and comfort as spiritual considerations. “Creation is spiritual,” said one participant, “the natural world that *is* the cosmic world of God.”¹²² The retired pastor found spiritual enrichment in visual moments in the services when the camera lingers on a natural scene, appreciatively noting the mountain scenes that often start and end the services, because, “Well, you can’t

¹¹⁷ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹¹⁸ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Interview with participant coded as 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹²⁰ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹²¹ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹²² 1031H, October 31, 2023.

do anything. You just have to sit there and wait for it.”¹²³ The female retired layperson reported, “I feel like where we live [in Montreat], I can connect with spiritual things. And I thank God for that.”¹²⁴ Similarly, the artist cited a concept from the Celtic spirituality tradition, often referenced in regard to Montreat: “It’s a thin place,” meaning the membrane between the divine and the earthly is perceived as a thinner boundary in Montreat than in other places. “If I were doing this service from someplace else, that would be a very comforting thing for me, because it would take me back to that happy space... [The setting] is very calming and contemplative.”¹²⁵

Most of the interviewees specifically mentioned the presence of candles in the visual frame of the service, in relation to the theme of rest and calm. Several interviewees used the terms “centering” and “peaceful” to describe the spiritual impact of candlelight scenes on their spirituality. The researcher made attempts during the interviews to distinguish pleasant feelings—redolent, for example, of the Danish concept of *hygge*—from the Christian theological-spiritual content of the liturgy. In many cases the practitioners reported finding the liturgical content of the recorded services inextricable from the setting, blurring lines between theology and feelings of peace and calm. One subject reported, “If I’m frazzled, then the quiet and the candlelight bring me into a more spiritual place.”¹²⁶

Participants, including the interview subjects, attend the online services on any day and at any time of their choosing, once the link has arrived in their email. Most of the

¹²³ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹²⁴ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹²⁵ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹²⁶ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

interviewees reported spiritual significance related to the time of day, whether referring to the twilight/nighttime setting of the recorded services or the time at which the participant chooses to engage with the service. Most used the words “end of the day” to identify a time that is, for them, ripe for spiritual connection. The prayer service at the end of the day, in the words of one participant, “becomes a concluding thing, like a benediction at the end of the campfire.”¹²⁷

But the time at which the participants engage with the service is also a moveable feast. One participant reported that when the email arrives with the link to the service, “Sometimes it just makes me say, ‘Okay, we’ve got to... This is a moment of self-care.’”¹²⁸ Another respondent offered, “Sometimes, when I feel that deep sort of longing for connection, I’ve watched them in the middle of the day, particularly surrounding the drama of [crises I am dealing with]. Sometimes I just need to say, ‘okay, I need to walk away and I need to come to a different place,’ and [the prayer services] help me do that.”¹²⁹ Another subject responded to the question, “What is it like for you to participate in Montreat Presbyterian church’s midweek prayer services?” saying: “I like it because it slows me down. In eight to twelve minutes, I learn things. I think about things that I already—we know, but maybe in a slightly different light... It’s a worship experience, and it’s a learning experience, and it relates me to the rest of what’s important in my life.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹²⁸ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹²⁹ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹³⁰ 1116D, November 16, 2023.

Reaching for the Cosmic Heights of God

The researcher invited each interviewee, after participating in the service which included prayers and writings by or based on the theological cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen, to describe their experience of worship or prayer when it includes an emphasis on reaching for the cosmic heights of God. While more than one respondent indicated affirmation of the concept as an expression of spirituality or general interest in the subject, none reported significant impact on their spirituality as a result of the specific emphasis being incorporated into the Evening Prayer service liturgy.

One interviewee expressed a degree of bafflement and a certain sense of finding both the topic and its emphasis in the liturgy somewhat alienating. “I realized that all three of these women, they *have* reached, and they are feeling, something that I don’t think I’ve ever reached. I don’t know how to get there. So when you say, ‘reaching for the cosmic heights of God,’ I’m not sure I know how to do that.”¹³¹

Several responses indicated that the interviewee was conscious of the idea of naming or pursuing the soul’s reach for the cosmic heights of God, or at least some part of that formulation (“You can’t acknowledge God without acknowledging the cosmos. That’s just part of my reality of who God is”).¹³² In several cases, the interview subject felt that the awareness is enough; their spirituality was not enhanced by the emphasis of it in the service, which was, in that sense, simply redundant. A retired, male layperson responded to a reiteration of the question, “Thinking about the cosmic vastness of God and stretching out toward that: does that do anything for you in terms of your

¹³¹ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹³² 1031H, October 31, 2023.

spirituality?” by saying, “I probably *assumed* that, as opposed to thinking about it. Assuming that it’s there; that’s what it *is*. And it’s not a discovery. And it’s not even a realization. I mean, it’s already there.” The researcher asked a follow-up question: “Is that something you would find helpful to just meditate [on, or] to sink into the celebration of that?” to which the respondent answered, “I don’t think that I would go there. I may be *taken* there, but I don’t think I would go there. We’re already here [in God’s cosmic vastness] and we’re under that care.”¹³³ Another interviewee responded similarly: “I don’t have to question it. I’m not on a journey. I’m there.”¹³⁴ In none of these cases did the respondent report significant spiritual engagement with the idea of the soul reaching into the cosmic heights of God, as the researcher had posited was an aspect of spirituality that could be extrapolated from the style of Hildegard’s composition of liturgical music.

Another respondent did engage with the idea of the soul’s reach for God, but without reporting any spiritual impact from its emphasis in the service:

I think effective prayer reaches beyond the ceiling or the cloud level. When I feel that I am in prayer myself or being led in prayer, I want to feel that happening. I want prayer to be transcendent... Now, I don’t always reach that in the prayers that the *Book of [Common] Worship* has to offer, because those are specific petitions, which tend to pull me back down—and [I agree that] they need to be done. I will more likely reach that [transcendence] in the New Testament lesson or in the Psalms. The more often I pray from the Psalter, the more I feel that I’m reaching God.¹³⁵

The closest any participant came to indicating that the suggested theme had had spiritual impact was one who responded to the question, “How would you describe your experience of worship when it includes an emphasis on humanity—us—reaching out for

¹³³ Interview with participant coded as 1026K, October 26, 2023.

¹³⁴ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹³⁵ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

the cosmic heights of God?” by saying, “Well, I’m not afraid of it. I have to believe in the cosmic heights, I think. If I appreciate the Holy Spirit, and the communion of all of us, ... I feel that reaching for the cosmic heights includes my understanding of what eternal life is like. That’s pretty thrilling in the whole scheme of things. It’s still so cloudy, mystical...” And is that spiritually helpful for you, to have a worship service wherein there’s some acknowledgement of that reach for the cosmic? “Yeah.”¹³⁶

Ineffable God, Ineffable Love

After participants had experienced the service which included prayers written by, or based on the theological vocabulary of ineffability in, Catherine of Siena, the researcher invited each interview subject to describe their experience of worship or prayer when it has an emphasis on God, and God’s love, being deep, mysterious, and beyond definition. The results proved similar to those from the inquiry into the spirituality of reaching for the cosmic heights of God. Most respondents did not report any substantial impact on their spirituality as a result of the emphasis on God’s ineffability being added into the Evening Prayer liturgy. While one participant acknowledged that the theme “definitely resonates,” another said, “I would have to say I probably don’t go there very often, quite honestly...but I don’t feel the need to.”¹³⁷

Like spirituality and mysticism, the word “ineffable” is itself somewhat resistant to a clear and consistent common understanding. For these purposes, “ineffable” is understood as exceeding the ability of language to express adequately. In posing the

¹³⁶ 1116D, November 16, 2023.

¹³⁷ 1031H, October 31, 2023. 0423C, April 23, 2024.

question for participant interviewees, the researcher initially framed ineffability as being about that which is deep, mysterious, and beyond definition. When one interviewee asked for clarification, the researcher suggested “unspeakable” as a synonym. Yet these explanations of the meaning of ineffability do not adequately convey the sense of God being greater, more wondrous, more deeply loving than words can convey. “Beyond definition” does not suggest greater love than humans can describe, simply greater ambiguity. While most interviewees endorsed the general idea of God’s ineffability, several spoke less about God and God’s love being beyond words and more about God being beyond human understanding, a nuanced but observable distinction which, in retrospect, the researcher did not effectively clarify in several instances. Consequently, although no participants reported finding the “ineffable God” additions to the Evening Prayer service to have brought any spiritual impact in themselves, this line of inquiry proved to be less than fully effective as a tool for gathering data directly related to the research question.

Nevertheless, interviewees did provide data pertaining to their spirituality, specifically giving voice to themes of holy mystery and beauty. In one interview, the researcher reiterated the line of inquiry by stating, “Catherine of Siena often uses words like ‘ineffable,’ ‘unspeakable.’ Does that do anything for your spirituality, or resonate with your spirituality at all?” The respondent offered, “It definitely resonates... There is so much mystery, and mystical, about God. Not fathomable. Not understandable in our little human brains... Just the whole beauty of the world shows a God that— How in the world did all this stuff come to be? I mean, it’s just pretty darn amazing.”¹³⁸ Another, also

¹³⁸ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

citing the “beauty” of creation and amplifying the theme of holy mystery, said, “I feel like God is beyond our understanding... I look around and I’ll think, ‘How do we get here? How do we have all this beauty?’”¹³⁹

Some respondents reflected on their own inner tension between the desire for concrete explanation and an acknowledgement of the primacy of the holy mystery of God. As one noted,

I just think there is a lot to learn from the whole mystical approach to things. And in our twenty-first century world of “we have to explain everything,” we’ve lost a little bit... In my own delving into becoming Catholic, which I did at one point, that was one of the appeals. There is more mystery than we who like to explain everything... God has a lot of mystery. And it’s easy to forget that.¹⁴⁰

But among all respondents, ambivalence toward the subject of ineffability manifested in participants’ muted responses regarding its impact on their personal spirituality, combined with observations that ranged from more academic than personal to explicit lack of interest in ruminating on it in prayer or worship. Interviewees who did have a clear impression of ineffability did not report finding themselves spiritually engaged or theologically interested in it as a result of participation in the service. One interviewee, when asked “Does it do anything for you to spend time in worship having [God’s ineffability] emphasized?” responded, “Emphasized, yeah. I take it as reassurance... But I guess that’s the assumptive part. I *assume* that it’s there. It’s for me. It’s not something that I create; it’s created in me.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, a respondent who was

¹³⁹ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹⁴¹ 1026K, October 26, 2023.

asked to describe her experience of worship or prayer “when it has that emphasis on the ineffability, the ‘beyond words’ for the depth of God and of God’s love” responded,

I would have to say I probably don’t go there very often, quite honestly. I don’t often go deep. And not because I have a fear of it, but I don’t feel the need to. I can go to the point where I believe in the everlasting love, and I will serve with that [in mind]. But I don’t feel that I have to wrestle with [defining] it. I can accept it. I don’t fight it. It’s there, and I’m comfortable there. I don’t feel I need to go any further. God is feeding me what I need, where I am, and the opportunity is there if I want it. But I’m good. I’m good where I am.

When the researcher then asked the respondent if she finds any “spiritual resonance” when God’s ineffability is woven into the liturgy, she responded, “I think saying it out loud is valuable because some days you need to hear that. Even though I might feel it a lot, it’s just like telling somebody you love them. Maybe they know you love them, but you need to hear that sometimes... It brings it back to the forefront... It’s good for me to hear.”¹⁴² For these participants, the ineffability of God may be worth hearing mentioned in worship, but it does not measurably impact their spirituality when incorporated into the Evening Prayer service.

The reported lack of impact of the ineffability theme on the participants’ spirituality may be suitably summarized in one respondent’s words:

Well, I think I’m one of the more simple thinkers about our spiritual life, who we are as spiritual people, who God is... I just think—it’s mysterious, but to me, it seems reasonable. I’m pretty simplistic in my thought. I don’t worry about the things that [some advanced theologians] worry about, and I don’t mean that in a negative way at all, because they are illuminating. But it just seems like we’re being lifted up, and the journey is pretty simple to hear. Harder to follow.¹⁴³

¹⁴² 0423C, April 23, 2024.

¹⁴³ 1116D, November 16, 2023.

Tears

After participants had experienced the service which included accounts describing the mystical phenomenon of Mary of Oignies's effusive tears, the researcher invited each interview participant to describe their experience of worship or prayer when it includes an emphasis on the power of the Spirit to create relationship with God that can be deeply emotional, even tearful, for the faithful follower who ruminates on the love and sacrifice of Jesus.

To a far greater extent than with the previous two spiritualities, the respondents reported engagement with the service incorporating the mystical narrative of Mary of Oignies. Some of the respondents indicated an affinity for Mary in their words as well as demonstrating a sympathetic response in their own tearfulness. All of the women respondents exhibited an emotional response to the Mary narrative. Two of the men discussed their disinclination to tearfulness in worship, while the third made an explicit point of not being "afraid" of the phenomenon. In most interviews, the researcher reiterated the research question to focus on the spiritual impact on participants of infusing the Evening Prayer service with aspects of a spirituality related to Mary's mystical phenomenon.

Several participants indicated an identification with Mary's tears, although the degree to which they identified their own tearfulness as being related to mystical or spiritual phenomena was often ambiguous. A segment used in the Evening Prayer service quoted a narrative of Mary trying to constrain her tears during worship and eventually leaving the sanctuary to weep in private. When the researcher asked one participant to describe her experience of worship that involves an emphasis on having a relationship

with God that evokes emotions as powerful as tearfulness, she responded, “They talked about [Mary] crying,” then became tearful herself, and said, “I do that, too... I tear up in church sometimes, and the whole time I’m thinking, ‘I don’t want anybody to see me.’ Well, I’m embarrassed a little bit.”¹⁴⁴ Another, responding to the prompt about the emphasis on having a relationship with God that can be deeply emotional, even tearful, paused to become emotional, recovered, and said, “That is often what it is.”¹⁴⁵

One of the retired men related, in response, a memory from childhood: “I can recall being in church camp... You go there for a week, and you have these [spiritual] moments where that [tearfulness] would occur. [*Pause.*] Then you go swimming.”¹⁴⁶ One of the women recalled her own response from years earlier when she had heard “a female pastor. I remember her preaching one Sunday, and [in the course of her sermon], she said, ‘And I cried.’ She said, ‘Because God gives me those tears to tell me when something is...’ I thought, that’s what *I* do.”¹⁴⁷

Several respondents did invoke here the theme of spiritual connection, most frequently (though not exclusively) speaking of connection to God. While becoming tearful again in the midst of responding to the question, one interviewee invoked connection to others as well as to God: “When I just get real emotional, I’m *very* emotional.” Why? “I just want it all to be good, I want everything to be good for other people. So I don’t know, I feel like maybe sometimes because... I mean, I’m crying. Well, maybe that’s God’s love. I mean, instead of thinking I’m crazy or something like that, it’s

¹⁴⁴ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ 1026K, October 26, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

just...I don't know. It's hard to explain."¹⁴⁸ Other respondents similarly interpreted their tears in the worship setting as indicators of a personal, direct connection to God:

I have that deep, emotional feeling and belief that God is there. And so when my conversations—and I've had many with God, where I've screamed and yelled and carrying on—and probably the most meaningful and the deepest one when I was so sick [with cancer]. And I just said, "Okay, God, I can't do this. So if [*laughs*] if you want to just take me out, please just take me now. And I got the clear answer: "No, no. That is not what we're going to do here. And so, stay with me, and I will stay with you." It will be twenty years in March, when I had that conversation, and I still can remember it like it was yesterday.¹⁴⁹

Another respondent voiced the theme of connection to God while relating to Mary's attempt to remove herself from the worshiping community during an episode of effusive tears. When the interviewee finds herself tearful in a worship setting, "God is telling me I have to be aware of this moment because it is important right now. I'm okay with that. I [used to] try to stop, but now it's just like, no, it's just coming out. We're good." In response to a follow-up question regarding the spiritual impact of the Evening Prayer service that reflected the idea of a relationship with God that elicits tears, the interviewee responded, "I think that that's pretty powerful. To have that total sense of connection. That's the only way it's coming out. But to have that emotional connection is pretty cool."¹⁵⁰

Respondents, both women and men, cited various liturgical triggers that can elicit worshipful tears. One of the respondents who reported being generally uneasy with tearfulness noted that memory can be a trigger: "There are some times in later life that

¹⁴⁸ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ 0423C, April 23, 2024.

I'm reminded of things that affect me."¹⁵¹ Another recalled his first youthful sharing of faith: "I signed on for this gig as a Christian somewhere around [age] twelve, and I remember telling my parents, and sharing it with a few people, and it was an extremely emotional experience." Beyond the act of faith sharing, he said, "It doesn't have to be the focal point, but it's part and parcel of being a Christian and living a Christian life, it seems to me." When asked to clarify what he considered "part and parcel of a Christian life," he explained that all parts of liturgy are, for him, potential prompts for emotional reaction to the spirituality of the worship environment: "Having emotional response to the words that we read, the prayers that are made, other people talking. I get emotional at minutes for mission."¹⁵²

Two respondents mentioned music as a channel of connection to a powerful relationship with God. When the researcher invited one interviewee to follow up a response she had given by asking, "Does it help to have that depth of emotion recognized and even brought into worship?" the participant responded, "Absolutely. And it often is! Often in music—there are hymns I can't get through without tears, because they speak to my soul, and that's God speaking to my soul."¹⁵³

Almost all of the respondents spoke of having had, at some point, discomfort with tearfulness in worship settings. Some reported having eventually come to accept the phenomenon as a sign of connection with God; others reported continuing discomfort. When asked, "How would you describe your experience of worship or prayer that

¹⁵¹ 1026K, October 26, 2023.

¹⁵² 1116D, November 16, 2023.

¹⁵³ 1031H, October 31, 2023.

involves an emphasis on a relationship with God that can be deeply emotional, even to the point of tearfulness?” one interviewee paused to consider his response before saying, “Generally, I’m scared to death of it.” What’s frightening about it? “Because that involves a little bit of being out of control. Contrary to what we say, I still like to be in control.”¹⁵⁴ A female respondent echoed the theme of discomfort with the loss of control: “I tear up in church sometimes, and the whole time I’m thinking, ‘I don’t want anybody to see me.’ Well, I’m embarrassed a little bit. It’s a weakness feel. It’s like, ‘Oh, I need to have control of that.’”¹⁵⁵ The retired pastor observed,

I think I am more aware now of the emotions involved in faith. Having grown up in an academic Presbyterian church in the ’50s, with [the cultural influence of] World War II, and science and math, logic—that was not even a possibility. If we had it, we were very quiet about it. And I don’t know what would have happened if I didn’t have music. Because music is the only safe output I have with that.¹⁵⁶

Another male interviewee, when asked the question, also paused before saying, “I expect I protect myself from that... I don’t get emotional in those kinds of services. I feel peace. So, yeah, I maybe don’t let myself get that deep.”¹⁵⁷

In a number of these interactions, the researcher did not adequately distinguish between the participants’ *experience* of being overcome by tears during worship and the *theological concept* of the Spirit’s power to overwhelm people of faith and rattle the foundations of their self-control. Consequently, much of the data collected in this segment of the research more directly reflects participants’ engagement with their own spiritual-emotional responses than their responses regarding whether an emphasis on the

¹⁵⁴ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ 1102Q, November 2, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ 1026K, October 26, 2023.

concept of the spirituality of tears in an Evening Prayer service had had an impact on their spirituality. Still, the themes of identification with the mystic who experienced miraculously effusive tears, the spiritual connection to God and others through tears, and the spirituality of tears as a spiritual response to elements of the liturgy all indicate a greater resonance among participants with the third spirituality in this series than with either of the previous two (the soul's reach for the cosmic heights of God, and God's ineffability). One of the respondents offered a statement that encapsulates the observation that interviewees spoke about their engagement with the spirituality of tears with greater ease than when they interacted with the more esoteric concepts of cosmic reaching and ineffability: "I can go to church services [where I listen to] some of the most renowned theologians in the world, and they say nothing to me because all it is is—their theology is all right and good, I'm sure. But it doesn't ever connect to real life or to everyday life."¹⁵⁸

The data that the participants provided in the interviews was rich with, in Timothy Lincoln's words, "the texture of human experience."¹⁵⁹ It is left to the researcher to develop conclusions based on the data collected.

Critique of the Project Construction and the Data Collection Tool

The researcher's attempt to infuse three Evening Prayer services with spiritual theologies of three medieval women mystics produced mixed results. The interview participants, drawn from a pool of those who had established a record of regular participation in the pre-recorded, online midweek prayer services, reported occasional bafflement at the insertion of new, unfamiliar and unexplained liturgical elements

¹⁵⁸ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 85.

(narrative readings or additional prayer segments) into the familiar pattern of the Evening Prayer services. The resulting extended length of the prayer services, from well under ten minutes to about twelve, was itself distracting in its novelty.

Some respondents reported finding the appearance of words on the screen to be a distraction which, though occasionally required for copyright clearance, interrupted the natural worship environment and the flow of the service.

The attempted infusion of theologies was, in practice, often less a subtle, flavorful influence than a discomfiting tacking-on of elements: wooden rather than nuanced; clumsily inserted; awkward and disorienting. As the sole producer of the services, the researcher actively addressed reflexivity in regard to the researcher's intersectional relationships with participants, but did not account for the researcher's own involvement and personal investment in the creation of the services. The researcher played different and competing roles, and in the role of producer and director of the pre-recorded services, the producer-director seemed to have only grudgingly given in to an assignment issued from outside the creative bubble, adding in the experimental elements without the nuanced touches that usually characterize the weekly production.

The questions for the collection of research data were therefore less clear, and less helpful, to both the participants and the researcher than they might have been. Participants may have sensed the disconnect, and consequently found the additions inserted for this research project somewhat alienating—especially those that addressed esoteric concepts which the Evening Prayer service does not provide adequate time and

space to introduce, and in any case, for some participants, “[don’t] ever connect to real life or to everyday life.”¹⁶⁰

Unexpected Confirmations

The interviews confirmed two findings that had informed the researcher in the pre-interview reading phase in regard to the nature of spirituality. The fundamental relationship between spirituality and everyday life *as a defining feature* of spirituality had emerged unexpectedly as a primary theme during the academic segment of the project, and was reinforced by unprompted testimonies during the collection of original data from the participants.

Similarly, the theme of connection (with others, self, and the communion of saints, as well as with God) as not a mere byproduct, but a fundamental aspect of spirituality, practically muscled its way into the discussion during the early phases of scholastic research, when the researcher had initially approached spirituality as an internal state of being, concerned primarily with the condition of the relationship between God and the individual, a relationship which then, necessarily, *produced* connection with others. Later, in the data gathering, participants voiced the theme of connection as a fundamental aspect of spirituality, proactively and assertively, often in contexts in which the respondents were clarifying their baseline, starting assumptions of what spirituality is and what their most essential spiritual needs are.

¹⁶⁰ 1006F, October 6, 2023.

VI. Conclusions

Four primary conclusions emerged from the research into the question of whether, and potentially how, the infusion of spiritualities of three medieval women mystics impacted the spirituality of participants in the pre-recorded, online midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church.

First, the research found that the Evening Prayer services, without the experimental infusion of spiritual theologies of the medieval women mystics, already significantly impacted the spirituality of participants.

Unsolicited feedback from participants indicated that many already turned to the services for the nurturing of their spirituality. The researcher drew the interviewees from a pool of possible candidates, defined for these purposes as those who had participated in just under half the services that were distributed between May 1 and July 31, 2023.

Dozens of participants have, since 2021, communicated to the pastor their appreciation for the spiritual impact of the Evening Prayer services. More than one hundred have participated in eight or more services during each calendar year since the beginning of 2022, suggesting at least a minimal level of spiritual impact. The participants selected for the study all voiced aspects of spiritual impact from the Evening Prayer services more richly than the researcher had expected. Given these observations, the services hardly called out for a redundant infusion of Christian spiritualities from additional sources.

Second, the mystical theologies of medieval women visionaries already permeated the liturgies of Evening Prayer, and were reflected in both the audible aspects of the services—the traditional liturgies—as well as the visual aspects of the pre-recorded services (light in the darkness; creation; the vastness of the sky).

The liturgies contained in the 2018 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* are rife with suggestions of a reach for the cosmic heights of God (“Shine in our hearts this night with the light of your good news and illumine our dreams with the vision of your holy realm”; “You made the lights of the heavens: the sun in the day to brighten and warm the earth; the moon at night, and countless stars”; “We thank you [for] the vast universe of galaxies and stars”; “We remember in our own hearts the needs of others, that we may reach up to claim your love for them, and reach out to give your love in the name of Christ”), the ineffability of God and God’s love (“God reveals deep and mysterious things, and knows what is hidden in darkness”; “Glory and praise to you, Lord of light—perfection of beauty, splendor of majesty, brilliance of wisdom, bright holiness, deep mystery, refining fire”), and the power of the Holy Spirit to overwhelm people of faith through Christ’s self-giving love (“You have come to us in Jesus Christ and shared our life so that we may share his resurrection. Especially we pray [for] those in whom we see Christ’s suffering”; “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a humble spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” [Psalm 51:17]; “We pray for those who weep with the grieving”; “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night”).¹⁶¹ Practitioners of the Evening Prayer services do not need to be aware of the connection between medieval women’s mysticism and the tradition of these liturgies in order to engage spiritually with them every time they participate.

Third, the spiritual theologies of the medieval women mystics are already present in the spirituality of participants: “Reaching for the cosmic heights includes my understanding of what eternal life is like... It’s still so cloudy, mystical...”

¹⁶¹ PC(USA) *Book of Common Worship*, 835-871.

“There is so much mystery, and mystical, about God. Not fathomable. Not understandable in our little human brains.”

“God is telling me I have to be aware of this moment [when tears come uncontrollably during worship], because it is important right now. I’m okay with that.”

As these mystical spiritualities are already shared in common by the medieval women visionaries and participants in MPC’s Evening Prayer services, the insertion of additional readings and prayers proved unlikely to enhance the measure of the spiritual impact of the services.

Fourth, tinkering with the Evening Prayer services as they have evolved risks becoming a net negative in regard to what participation in the Evening Prayer services offers for participants. Interviewees reported finding the inserted passages disorienting and distracting, interfering with rather than enhancing their devotional practice. Like liturgy that feels designed to impress with verbal cleverness rather than carrying humble prayers to the foot of the cross; like sermons whose illustrations attempt to manipulate emotions rather than trusting the Spirit to invite hearers into discipleship and communion with Christ; like music and visual art in church services that highlight the skills of the artists rather than pointing beyond themselves to the truth and beauty of God; and like novel spiritual exercises in worship that may have seemed to planners like they *ought* to have been faith nourishing, but are effectively only empty calories, the attempt to enhance the spiritual impact of liturgies which have evolved through centuries of use by faithful worshipers risks the counterproductive phenomenon of “trying too hard.” The responsibility of worship leaders is not to move or impress, but to make available to worshipping communities opportunities to connect with God, others, the communion of

saints, and their own spiritual selves: connectional transformations that only God can make effective.

Whether an increased emphasis on the spiritual theologies of the medieval women mystics may offer spiritually helpful nuance to aspects of worship other than the Evening Prayer services is a question for further investigation.

An Epic Tragedy Precludes Public Presentation

On September 27, 2024, Hurricane Helene brought catastrophic flooding to Western North Carolina, with massive destruction in Montreat and surrounding communities, in several of which many lost their lives. For weeks, congregants and community members were without clean water, plumbing, electricity, or communication technology, and many were unable to evacuate their significantly damaged homes for days or weeks due to fallen trees and power lines, destroyed roads, and washed-out bridges. Montreat Presbyterian Church became a congregation in diaspora while all local efforts necessarily shifted to emergency rescue and relief.

With the setting of the public presentation inaccessible and most of the citizenry finally evacuated—not to mention the preposterousness of the idea of halting emergency recovery operations for a symposium on the impact of medieval mystics on twenty-first century worship—the Dean of faculty granted a “very rare exception,” allowing the researcher, in lieu of gleanings from a public presentation, to incorporate perspectives from academic and church professionals who had already reviewed and commented on the research.

One scholar suggested that I clarify the point at which the mystics had claimed my interest, and noted that “personal reflection on what types of encounters with the

mystical tradition succeeded in sparking your own interest might be worth bringing into the mix as you reflect on what worked and what didn't in the project." In the formative stages of research, a noted scholar of medieval Christian mysticism, who did not live to see the completion of the project, had asked me why it was specifically *women* visionaries whose mysticism resonated so profoundly within me, and when I confessed to having absolutely no idea, encouragingly affirmed my response. These inputs, taken together, encouraged me to foreground the aspect of research focusing on the mystics, and to preserve sections on the definition of spirituality and the historical development of the Evening Prayer service as appendices.

I am grateful to the theologian whose gentle admonishment cautioned me to steer clear of appearing to suggest that worship is about worship leaders orchestrating experiences and manipulating emotions, rather than about the worshiper's encounter with God, which is entirely dependent on the Spirit to make real and effective. Another prominent scholar inspired me to revise the section assessing my unsatisfactory experiences of worship by viewing the experience through the lens of empathy as a fellow exhausted pastor. A pastor and a seminary professor were not the only mentors whose appreciations of the services came with reminders that the traditional language and cadences of the liturgy offer consolations beyond the theology embedded in the words.

I continued to distribute the midweek prayer services throughout our temporary diaspora. Participants reported their appreciation of the spiritual benefits of connection and of having a time of rest and reflection in the midst of trauma. Amid our tears, our shared reach for communion with God magnified for us the ineffable love of Jesus Christ and the connection that the Spirit makes real among all humankind.

Appendix 1

Leader's guides and production notes:
 Montreat Presbyterian Church Evening Prayer Services
 with Material from Hildegard of Bingen,
 Catherine of Siena, and Mary of Oignies

The basis of the three liturgies is "Evening Prayer" in Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 834-855.

Evening Prayer – September 12, 2023
Incorporating themes from, and inspired by, Hildegard of Bingen
Liturgy and Visual Notes for Pre-Recorded, Online Service
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpAjH3YBbzA>

[Visual – candle/nature]

[onscreen text]

Tonight's Evening Prayer liturgy includes words, lines, images and ideas drawn from liturgical texts composed by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Three prayers are offered from Barbara Newman's direct translation or Dr. Newman's English language renderings of Hildegard's liturgical compositions.

Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening
 and the day is almost over.

OPENING SENTENCES: Dan. 2:22–23 – Sunday EP
 God reveals deep and mysterious things,
 and knows what is hidden in darkness.
 God is surrounded by light.
 To you, O God, we give thanks and praise.

EVENING HYMN

[Visual: candle]

[Visual: text is overlaid]

"Antiphon for God the Father (O eterne Deus)" 7, p. 107

O eterne Deus

Burn everlasting one in love
 as you loved when you first were
 father in the burning
 dawn before the world's day!

Loving your son you loved
us all into being; let us
all be his limbs.

See the need that befalls us!
Lift it away from us
and for your child's sake lead us
into safety, into bliss.¹⁶²

THANKSGIVING FOR LIGHT

The Lord be with you.
[wait silently through response "And also with you."]
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

O fiery Spirit, Power of Wisdom,
In your mercy, reveal to us eternal things,
that we may begin to understand
what you want to show us
for your own glory, and that we may be perfected in you.
Help us not to be afraid of the time we are given,
though it bring us sorrow or adversity,
but to reach out eagerly for you, and for time.
Help us reach up for the joy of heaven,
to a brightness beyond human understanding
amid the mystical darkness which surrounds all creatures,
that we may find in the heavenly height
joys that are spiritual, eternal, and beyond measure.¹⁶³

Through Christ Jesus our Savior
and in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all honor and glory are yours, O God, now and forever.
Amen.

PSALTER

Psalm 86:1-8

¹Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

²Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;

¹⁶² Hildegard of Bingen, "O Eterne Deus"/"Antiphon for God the Father," in *Symphonia*, 106-107.

¹⁶³ Images and themes inspired by Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of the Rewards of Life*, Translated by Bruce W. Hozeski (New York: Oxford Press, 1994), 241, 242, 286, and Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, translated by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 526.

save your servant who trusts in you.
 You are my God; ³be gracious to me, O LORD,
 for to you do I cry all day long.
⁴Gladden the soul of your servant,
 for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
⁵For you, O LORD, are good and forgiving,
 abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
⁶Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.
⁷In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.
⁸There is none like you among the gods, O LORD,
 nor are there any works like yours.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:13-22

¹³Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”
¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

CANTICLE

The Magnificat (The Song of Mary), Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
 My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor
 on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations
 will call me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud
 in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Let my prayer rise before you as incense, O Lord,
the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Eternal God, we thank you for being with us today,
and for every sign of your truth and love in Jesus Christ.

Especially we thank you for
all works of Christian compassion...
the good earth that is our home...
examples of wisdom and righteousness...
energy and strength to share your love...
each new insight into your grace...

“Antiphon for the Redeemer”

Pastor of our hearts and voice
primordial:
you spoke before the world was,
we sprang to hear.
Now we languish,
we are wretched, ill.
Set us free! We beseech,
make us well.¹⁶⁴

Gracious God, we remember in our own hearts
the needs of others,
that we may *reach up* to claim your love for them,
and reach out to give your love in the name of Christ.

Especially we pray for
those subjected to tyranny and persecution...
those who are outcasts or strangers...
those who offer welcome and hospitality...
the renewal of those who despair...

Traditional close of Prayer

God of all who worship you,
make us one with all your saints
and with any who are in need.

¹⁶⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, “Antiphon for the Redeemer,” in *Symphonia*, 103.

Hildegardian close of prayer

Even as we are frail and concealed in a dusty covering,
unable to see the brightness,
strengthen us to give our total effort
toward our innermost devotion for heavenly things,
just as you faithfully encourage us to cast out bitterness
and cling to you with joy.¹⁶⁵

Teach us to befriend the weak, and welcome the outcast,
that we may serve the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray,

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

EVENING HYMN

[Visual: sky]

Song to the Creator (O Verbum Patris)

You, all-accomplishing
Word of the Father,
are the light of primordial
daybreak over the spheres.
You, the foreknowing
mind of divinity,
foresaw all your works
as you willed them,
your presence hidden
in the heart of your power,
your power like a wheel around the world,
whose circling never began
and never slides to an end.¹⁶⁶

DISMISSAL

¹⁶⁵ Images and themes inspired by Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of the Rewards of Life*, Translated by Bruce W. Hozeski (New York: Oxford Press, 1994), 242, 285.

¹⁶⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, "O Verbum Patris"/"Song to the Creator," in *Symphonia*, 258-259.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all.

Amen.

Bless the Lord.

The Lord's name be praised.

[Onscreen text]

The prayer which appears onscreen at the beginning of tonight's Evening Prayer service is used by permission of Cornell University Press and Dr. Barbara Newman.

“Antiphon for God the Father (O eterne Deus)”

“Antiphon for the Redeemer (O pastor animarum)”

“Song to the Creator (O Verbum Patris)”

Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the “Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum,”* Second Edition, translated by Barbara Newman. Copyright © 1988, 1998 by Cornell University. Used by kind permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

Evening Prayer – September 19, 2023

Catherine of Siena

Liturgy and Visual Notes for Pre-Recorded, Online Service

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9xeEQaeGpg>

[Opening visual – nature scene (no candle or lantern), with overlaid prayer excerpt:]

“In whatever direction I turn

I find unutterable love.”

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

[Visual continues WITHOUT seeing the speaker]

Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening
and the day is almost over.

OPENING SENTENCES

You are our lamp, O Lord.

You lighten our darkness.

You are our God, our strong refuge,
and you have made our way safe.

EVENING HYMN

[fade from nature scene to unlit red candle holder]

[overlaid onscreen text]

Phos Hilaron (“Joyful Light”),
one of the most ancient surviving Christian hymns,
to be sung at the lighting of lamps in the evening.

Third century Greek

Φῶς ἱλαρὸν ἀγίας δόξης ἀθανάτου Πατρός,
 οὐρανόιου, ἀγίου, μάκαρος, Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ,
 ἐλθόντες ἐπὶ τὴν ἡλίου δύσιν, ἰδόντες φῶς ἐσπερινόν,
 ὑμνοῦμεν Πατέρα, Υἱόν, καὶ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, Θεόν.
 Ἄξιόν σε ἐν πᾶσι καιροῖς ὑμνεῖσθαι φωναῖς αἰσίαις,
 Υἱὲ Θεοῦ, ζωὴν ὁ διδούς· διὸ ὁ κόσμος σε δοξάζει.

[Words fade from screen]

[Show candle being lit; continue to show candle]
 Soul-lifting light of the divine glory of the Eternal Godhead,
 the heavenly, the holy, the blessed Jesus Christ,
 As now comes the setting of the sun,
 having seen the evening light, we raise a hymn
 to our Great God, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
 O God, most worthy at every hour
 to be lauded with voices of unspeakable joy;
 O Son of God, giver of life
 for which the whole universe sings your praises.

[Fade to view of speaker]

THANKSGIVING FOR LIGHT

The Lord be with you.
 [Allow time for response "And also with you."]
 Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
 It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We praise you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe,
 by whose word the shadows of evening fall.

Your wisdom opens the gates of morning;
 your understanding orders the changes of time and seasons;
 your will controls the stars as they travel through the skies.

You are the creator of both night and day,
 making light recede before darkness, and darkness before light.
 You cause day to pass, and bring on the night, setting day and night apart.

You are the Lord of hosts.
 Living and eternal God, rule over us always, to the end of time.
 Blessed are you, O Lord, whose word makes evening fall.
 Amen.

PSALTER**Psalm 19:1-9**

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God;
 and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
²Day to day pours forth speech,
 and night to night declares knowledge.
³There is no speech, nor are there words;
 their voice is not heard;
⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
 and their words to the end of the world.
 In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,
 ⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
 and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
 and its circuit to the end of them;
 and nothing is hid from its heat.
⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
 the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
 the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
 the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

SCRIPTURE**Mark 7:32-37**

³²They brought to Jesus a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

CANTICLE**The Magnificat (The Song of Mary), Luke 1:46-55**

And Mary said,
 My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor
 on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations
 will call me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud
 in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Let my prayer rise before you as incense, O Lord,
 the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Give us your peace, O God,
 that we may rejoice in your goodness
 to us and to all your children,
 and be thankful for your love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Especially we thank you for
 the faithful witness of Christian people...
 the vast universe of galaxies and stars...
 friends with whom we have shared...
 the courage to be bold disciples...
 the labors of those who have served us...

Give us your peace, O God,
 that we may be confident of your care
 for us and all your children,
 as we remember the needs of others.

Especially we pray for
 racial justice and reconciliation...
 those who are poor or vulnerable...
 agents of caring and relief...
 help for those who are abused or neglected...

Catherinian Close of Prayer

As you have made this day, O God,
 you also make the night.
 Your beauty is beyond description.
 Your truth is too great for words.
 Your power is immeasurable.
 The depth of your love for us is inexpressible.
 Your goodness to us is unspeakably kind;
 your mercy is unutterably gentle.
 For what and who you are, language has no adequate words.

Ineffable God, give us your holy light this night and always,
 we pray in the name of your Son, our savior,
 who taught us to pray,

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
 For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

EVENING HYMN

[Visual: sky]
 [overlay onscreen:]
 Catherine of Siena
 Prayer 1, Vigil of the Assumption, August 14, 1376
 At Avignon

O eternal Godhead,
 ineffable love,
 in you I see the love that compelled you
 to open the eye of your compassion...

...you, high eternal [one],
 sent us the Word Incarnate, your only-begotten Son,
 veiled in our poor flesh
 and clothed in our mortality.
 And you, Jesus Christ,
 our reconciler,
 our refashioner,
 our redeemer—
 you, Word and love,

were made our mediator.
 You turned our great war with God
 into a great peace.

You have drawn me to yourself in unutterable love,
 and you draw all of us to yourself
 not because you must
 but freely—if only we choose to let ourselves be drawn to you,
 that is, if our will does not rebel against yours.¹⁶⁷

DISMISSAL

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all.
 Amen.
 Bless the Lord.
 The Lord's name be praised.

[Final screen overlay (extend into black)]:

Catherine of Siena, "Prayer 1: Vigil of the Assumption, August 14, 1376. At Avignon" in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, edited by Suzanne Noffke, OP. Copyright © 1983 by Paulist Press, Inc., Ramsey, NJ. Used by kind permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com

Words, short phrases, and ideas heard in the liturgy have been drawn from Catherine's prayers and writings, including *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke, OP; preface by Giuliani Cavallini, Copyright © by Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ.

Phos Hilaron was translated and paraphrased for this service by Keith Grogg.

Evening Prayer – September 26, 2023:
Mary of Oignies
Liturgy and Visual Notes for Pre-Recorded, Online Service
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9FunSZifr8>

[onscreen]

Mary of Oignies (1177-1213) was among the earliest of the beguines, women who lived in semi-monastic communities and devoted themselves to constant prayer and service to the poor. Mary undertook extreme acts of devotion, and was purported to display mystical gifts: manifest indications of God working miraculously through her to speak prophetically to the Church and the world.

¹⁶⁷ Catherine of Siena, "Prayer 1: Vigil of the Assumption, August 14, 1376. At Avignon" in *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, 17-19.

[next screen]

Tonight's Evening Prayer liturgy includes writings about Mary from James of Vitry, the influential church figure who was her friend, confessor, and champion. Parts of his *Life of Mary of Oignies* (1215) are address to God as prayers.

[Visual: sky]

Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening
and the day is almost over.

OPENING SENTENCES

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes."
(Revelation 21:2-4)

EVENING HYMN

[onscreen – fade from nature scene to blue candle]

[Words fade from screen]

[Onscreen:]

The Life of Marie d'Oignies

Jacques de Vitry

Book I, Chapter 16

Translated by Margot H. King

Your Cross and your Passion marked the beginning of her conversion...

She considered the benefits that you had generously shown forth in the flesh to humanity.

She found such grace...that a great abundance of tears was pressed out by the winepress of your cross in the Passion, and her tears flowed so copiously on the floor, that the ground in the church became muddy with her footprints. [After] this visitation she could neither gaze at an image of the cross, nor speak, nor hear other people speaking about the Passion of Christ, without falling into ecstasy...

Therefore she sometimes moderated her sorrow and restrained the flood of her tears and, disregarding Christ's humanity, would raise her consciousness to his divinity and majesty so that she might therein find some consolation in his impassibility.

But when she tried to restrain the intensity of the flowing river, then a greater intensity of tears wondrously sprang forth...¹⁶⁸

[Fade to view of speaker]

THANKSGIVING FOR LIGHT

The Lord be with you.

[Allow time for response “And also with you.”]

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Eternal God, by your word you commanded:

“Let there be light!”

By your Spirit you have revealed

the light of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Shine in our hearts this night with the light of your good news

and illumine our dreams with the vision of your holy realm;

through Christ our Lord, and in the unity of the Spirit,

we give you thanks and praise now and forever. Amen.

PSALTER

Psalm 42:1-4

¹As a deer longs for flowing streams,

so my soul longs for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God?

³My tears have been my food day and night,

while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:

how I went with the throng,

and led them in procession to the house of God,

with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,

a multitude keeping festival.

SILENCE

SCRIPTURE

Luke 7:44-50

⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, Jesus said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has

¹⁶⁸ James of Vitry, “The Life of Mary of Oignies: Her Compunction and Tears (chapters 16-18),” translated by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* edited by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 56-57.

anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” ⁴⁸Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God!

[silence]

CANTICLE

The Magnificat (The Song of Mary), Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor
 on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
 will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
 in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

[Onscreen:]

The Life of Marie d'Oignies

Jacques de Vitry

Translated by Margot King

Book I, Chapter 17

One of the priests of the church softly but firmly exhorted her to pray in silence and to restrain her tears... Conscious of the impossibility of [this], she slipped out of the church unknown to him and hid herself in a secret place which was removed from everyone. There she tearfully implored the Lord that he show this priest that it is not in man's power

to restrain the intensity of tears when the waters flow with the vehemence of the blowing spirit.

[When] the priest celebrated mass that day...His spirit was drowned in such a flood of tears that he almost suffocated, and as much as he tried to repress its intensity, by that much more was he drenched with his tears...

Long after mass had ended, the handmaid of Christ returned and...told the priest what had happened. 'Now,' she said, 'You have learned from experience that it is not in man's power to restrain the intensity of the spirit.'¹⁶⁹

[Silence]

THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Let my prayer rise before you as incense, O Lord,
the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives,
and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ.
Especially we thank you for
the communion of the Holy Spirit...
time to savor the goodness of creation...
the enjoyment of friends and family...
the pleasure and wonder of living...
all beauty that moves and delights us...

We hold up before you human needs, God of compassion,
for you have come to us in Jesus Christ
and shared our life so that we may share his resurrection.

Especially we pray for the one holy catholic and apostolic church...
peace and justice in the world...
those in whom we see Christ's suffering...
those who offer Christ's compassion...
particular concerns of this day...

[Onscreen:]

The Life of Marie d'Oignies

Jacques de Vitry

Translated by Margot King

Book I, Chapter 18

¹⁶⁹ James of Vitry, "The Life of Mary of Oignies: Her Compunction and Tears (chapters 16-18)," translated by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* edited by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 57-58.

[After] long fasts, after many vigils, after great floods of tears, I asked whether she felt any injury or pain...

These tears, she said, are my refreshment,
they are my bread day and night.

They do not afflict the head,
but nourish the mind;
they twist without pain,
but refresh the soul with a kind of serenity;
they...fill the soul to the full,
and soothe it with a kind of smooth ointment;
they are not extracted through violence,
but are delivered freely by the Lord.¹⁷⁰

Prayer

As you have made this day, O God,
you also make the night.
Give light for our comfort.
Come upon us with quietness and still our souls,
that we may listen for the whisper of your Spirit
and be attentive to your nearness in our dreams.
Empower us to rise again in new life to proclaim your praise,
and show Christ to the world,
for he reigns forever and ever.

Hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

DISMISSAL

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all.
Amen.
Bless the Lord.
The Lord's name be praised.

¹⁷⁰ James of Vitry, "The Life of Mary of Oignies: Her Compunction and Tears (chapters 16-18)," translated by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* edited by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 58.

[Visual: sky/nature]

[*Final screen overlay (extend into black):*

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James of Vitry, “The Life of Mary of Oignies: Her Compunction and Tears (chapters 16-18),” translated by Margot H. King, in *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, Vol. 7), edited by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. Copyright © 2006 Brepols Publishers n.v., Turnhout, Belgium.

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Appendix 2

Background Questionnaire and Interview Questions

Background Questions Document (to be filled out and returned)

How would you describe your religious identification in one or a very few words (for example, “Hindu,” “Christian,” “agnostic,” “Catholic,” “spiritual but not religious,” “Shiite Muslim,” “atheist,” “Jewish Reformed,” “Evangelical,” “PCUSA,” etc.)?

Do you consider yourself to be affiliated with Montreat Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), whether formally (as a member) or informally (as a regular or occasional visitor)?

Are you ordained to the clergy, in any denomination or faith tradition?

Whatever the word “spiritual” may mean to you, do you seek to be a spiritual person?

Please circle all that apply to you:

retired

semi-retired

professionally employed

sole member of household

caregiver for a loved one at home

female male non-binary prefer not to answer

more extravert than introvert—I usually gain energy from interacting with people, and can only spend limited time being alone, even when the private time is enjoyable.

more introvert than extravert—I usually gain energy when I am on my own, and can only spend limited time being around others, even when I enjoy the company.

Interview Questions (to be asked)

I would like to suggest one possible understanding of the word spirituality: “Spirituality is the practice of being aware of God’s presence in one’s life connecting God and all creation, and the process of seeking in everyday life to deepen one’s relationship with God and the world.” What is your own understanding of what the word “spirituality” means? This question is about your own understanding, and so has no wrong answer.

What is it like for you to participate in MPC’s midweek prayer services?

What aspects of the service are most meaningful or important to you?

What parts, if any, of the spoken liturgy do you find spiritually engaging?

What parts, if any, of the visual presentation do you find spiritually engaging?

How would you describe your experience of worship, or prayer, when it includes an emphasis on reaching for the cosmic heights of God?

How would you describe your experience of worship, or prayer, when it involves an emphasis on God, and God’s love, being deep, mysterious, and beyond simple definition?

How would you describe your experience of worship, or prayer, when it includes an emphasis on the power of the Spirit to create relationship with God that can be deeply emotional, even tearful?

In what ways, if any, does your experience of MPC’s online prayer services impact other parts of your life?

Appendix 3 Synthesizing a Working Definition of Spirituality

In order to proceed toward a working definition of “spirituality” for the purposes of this study, I will first reckon with the term’s ambiguity, out of which some identifiable meaning nevertheless remains discernible. I will note some ways the term has been used in recent decades based on a sampling of peer-reviewed sources, and suggest a definition of “contemporary” in this instance as beginning with the last decade of the twentieth century. I will review the chapter on scales of spirituality and mysticism in Hill and Hood, eds., *Measures of Religiosity* (1999) to identify ways that “spirituality” has been defined in modern clinical studies. I will then compare scientific criteria from *Measures* with the descriptions in Frankenberg’s qualitative research study in *Living Spirit, Living Practice* (2004) in which interview subjects spoke of their own experiences with, and understandings and beliefs about, spirituality. From these gleanings I will synthesize a concise working definition of “spirituality” for the purposes of this study.

The Elusiveness of a Definition of Spirituality

A clear-cut definition of “spirituality,” one that bears broad enough consensus to be meaningfully studied, is notoriously elusive. Doctoral level students in a two-week introductory course on Christian Spirituality in 2016, each of them accomplished clergy, were given a daily assignment to draft a definition of “spirituality,” to be shared, critiqued, reconsidered, and reformulated each morning. At the end of the two weeks, the three students shared a mutual sense that they were no closer to a definitive description

than they had been on the first day.¹⁷¹ Yet developing an understanding is crucial to the task of being able to articulate a coherent sense both of what religious participants are seeking and what religious services can offer.

The elusiveness of consensus on a clear definition of the word “spirituality” was further illustrated when the Pew Research Center declined even to attempt a definition as part of a 2023 study on the distinction between “spirituality” and “religiosity,” in which interviewees were asked “how their spirituality and religiosity have changed.”¹⁷² The researchers clarified: “We did not define the words ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ in the survey.” Instead of being provided with a definition, respondents were asked to offer their own description of “what the word ‘spirituality’ means to them.” Around 25% connected spirituality with organized religion. About one-third named what the Pew researchers termed “beliefs in something else”—belief in a higher power and/or invisible or ethereal “otherworldly” realities.¹⁷³

Various Meanings of “Spirituality” Post-1990

Frankenberg cites the historian Catherine L. Albanese in noting that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are a period “in which individuals have felt empowered to articulate and rearticulate for themselves the meanings of the word

¹⁷¹ Introduction to Christian Spirituality course taught by Haruko Nawata Ward and Marcia Riggs at Columbia Theological Seminary. The class consisted of the present author and two classmates.

¹⁷² Asta Kallo, “Around 4 in 10 Americans have become more spiritual over time; fewer have become more religious” (Pew Research Center, Jan. 17, 2024) https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/17/around-4-in-10-americans-have-become-more-spiritual-over-time-fewer-have-become-more-religious/?utm_campaign=2024-01-24+Rundown&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Pew&subscriberkey=00Q0P00000l6xuSUAQ.

¹⁷³ Kallo, “Around 4 in 10 Americans,” 2024

[spirituality].”¹⁷⁴ Indeed, Hill and Hood, Jr. note that “the contemporary conception of spirituality as separate from religion has a surprisingly short history” rooted in the widely reported decline of institutional religion, at least in the United States, in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁵ If Albanese’s observation holds true, with people feeling newly empowered to devise their own iterations of “spirituality” as the old century waned, a consensus definition will have become even more elusive in the new one.

Moreover, the advent of an era of empowerment to self-articulate has not seemed to instigate much more clarity or certainty. For a chapter of *Lift Every Voice* (1990), Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite interviewed the church executive, seminary teacher and post-sexual assault counselor Mary D. Pellauer. Thistlethwaite at one point interjects, “When you use the word ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual,’ I think it might be important to say what you mean by that.” Pellauer responds, “Oh, I don’t know what I mean by it. [...] I guess I mean something like the depth and the breadth and the width of experience or...I don’t know. I truly don’t know. Do you have a working definition?” Thistlethwaite relays a quote from Beverly Harrison, “that God is in the connections,” and suggests a corollary, “that the spiritual is the recognition of God in the other.”¹⁷⁶

What are some other contemporary understandings of spirituality, and are there commonalities among them that might suggest areas of consensus?

¹⁷⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *Living Spirit, Living Practice: Poetics, Politics, Epistemology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 196.

¹⁷⁵ Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., eds., *Measures of Religiosity* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999), 359.

¹⁷⁶ Mary D. Pellauer with Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Conversation on Grace and Healing: Perspectives from the Movement to End Violence Against Women,” in Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 180.

Rice writes of “a sense of God’s presence” at the heart of discussions about spirituality.¹⁷⁷ Westerhoff describes the spiritual life as “ordinary, everyday life lived in an ever-deepening and loving relationship to God and therefore to one’s true or healthy self, all people, and the whole of creation.”¹⁷⁸ Coles derives a humility-based understanding of spirituality as living to pray to the sky rather than to conquer it.¹⁷⁹ Tickle, noting that by 2008 the term had been “bandied...about with such abandon” so as to have lost any practical definition, states for her own purposes “that spirituality means to name those experiences and values that are internal to the individual or to the individuals who compose a society.”¹⁸⁰ Tickle is exceptional in identifying the meaning of spirituality with a verb (“*to name* those experiences...”). While Wolpe has derided spirituality as simply a soothing, self-satisfied emotion, as opposed to rallying adherents to fight for a just cause, as religion might,¹⁸¹ Thistlethwaite and Engel articulate a framework of Christian spirituality in which “Christianity is the practice of freedom, and the empowering spirit of God is known most vitally in community” and note the urgency of addressing questions of, among other imperatives, “the everyday practice of a spirituality that will nourish Christian communities in their struggles for justice.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 8.

¹⁷⁸ John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 1.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 25-26.

¹⁸⁰ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 36.

¹⁸¹ David Wolpe, “The Limitations of Being ‘Spiritual but Not Religious,’” *Time*, March 21, 2013. <https://ideas.time.com/2013/03/21/viewpoint-the-problem-with-being-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

¹⁸² Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 215.

Within this brief sampling, spiritual themes include sensing the presence of God in an ever deepening way; a recognition of the connection linking God, self, and others (community/society/humanity/creation); and spirituality as a facet of everyday life. As Dreyer and Burrows acknowledge (2005), the twenty-first century finds the meaning of spirituality still evolving: “the work of definition goes on,” as does the importance of recognizing that all of today’s definitions are tentative.¹⁸³

Discernible Enough to Study

Tendencies are evident for popular notions of the meaning of “spirituality” either to incline toward vagueness in themselves or to be so subjective that consensus becomes ambiguous. But rigorous, peer-reviewed studies have been undertaken which have necessitated the provision of comprehensible definitions in order to collect data suitable for analysis. Hill and Hood, Jr. recruited specialists to review scores of “measures in the psychology of religion” which are compiled in the 1999 volume *Measures of Religiosity*;¹⁸⁴ one chapter offers reviews of six “Scales of Spirituality and Mysticism.” It must be noted that Hill and Hood and many of their contributing reviewers specify that these studies are to varying degrees “culture bound” with questionable relevance to non-Western religious life and practice.¹⁸⁵ As the present project is undertaken with specific regard to Reformed Christian religious practice in the United States, we may look to

¹⁸³ Dreyer and Burrows, *Minding the Spirit*, XIV.

¹⁸⁴ Peter C. Hill, and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., eds. *Measures of Religiosity*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999.

¹⁸⁵ Hill and Hood, *Measures of Religiosity*, 359.

these measures to identify vocabularies that are used in the collection of measurable data on spirituality *in this context*.

The 1991 “Index of Core Spiritual Experiences” of Kass, Friedman, Lesserman, Zuttermeister and Benson defined “characteristic elements of core spiritual experiences” as a combination of two factors: a singular incident, which upon reflection leads the one who experiences it to believe in the existence of God, and a conviction that the person is in relationship with God.¹⁸⁶

Stace’s 1960 *Mysticism and Philosophy* offered nine “phenomenological criteria for mystical experience.” Hood’s “Mysticism Scale” (1975) attempted to make quantitative use of eight of them.¹⁸⁷ Criteria offering measurable concepts of spirituality included diminishment of the ego; a sense of the unity of all things; seeing inanimate things as being sentient; a feeling of “distortion of time and space”; a sense of having attained an uncommon gnosis or intuition; a struggle to be able to put experience into words; the attainment of a feeling of peacefulness or ecstasy; and a new discernment of “sacredness or wonder.”¹⁸⁸ Hill and Hood have included the review of this study on the debatable conviction that “mystical” experience, such as any of the eight phenomena described above, is “a phenomenon central to spirituality.”¹⁸⁹ Yet these have not appeared as commonalities among the non-quantitative voices sampled above. Indeed, the “everyday” is mentioned with much greater regularity than the rapturous phenomena

¹⁸⁶ Laura Hinebaugh-Igoe, in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 360.

¹⁸⁷ Christopher T. Burriss, “The Mysticism Scale: Research Form D (M Scale),” in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 363-364.

¹⁸⁸ Burriss, “The Mysticism Scale,” 364.

¹⁸⁹ Hill and Hood, *Measures of Religiosity*, 359.

listed in the Mysticism Scale, and it is notable that the 1975 instrument, and the 1960 work on which it is based, precede Albanese's new era of self-articulated spirituality by at least a generation.

The 1996 "Spiritual Assessment Inventory" of Hall and Edwards begins with the assumption that the quality of one's relationship with God and the degree to which one is aware of God's presence in one's life together compose a fully formed spirituality.¹⁹⁰

Assessment is measured on responses to statements such as "I have a good sense of how God is working in my life" and "Listening to God is an essential part of my life."¹⁹¹

A review of Saur and Saur's 1993 "Spiritual Themes and Religious Responses Test" found both its reliability and its validity challenging to establish,¹⁹² and applicability to the quest for consensus on a definition of "spirituality" is limited since, like the 2023 Pew Research Center study, it leaves the provision of descriptors to the test subjects themselves.

The "Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire" (Moberg, 1984) invites test subjects to respond to questionnaires regarding beliefs and attitudes, social activities, feelings, religious activities and identity, and personal characteristics,¹⁹³ suggesting practices that may be part of a life that includes religious practice or observance, but offering little in terms of definitions of spirituality. A mix of practical and psychological theological

¹⁹⁰ Theresa C. Tisdale, "Spiritual Assessment Inventory," in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 367.

¹⁹¹ Tisdale, "Spiritual Assessment Inventory," 367.

¹⁹² Beth Fletcher Brokaw, "Spiritual Themes and Religious Responses Test," in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 373-374.

¹⁹³ Michael J. Boivin, "Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire," in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 377-381.

statements with which respondents may agree or disagree are stated both in the positive (“I have inner peace,” “I have a personally meaningful relationship with God,” “My religious faith gives meaning to my life”) and negative (“I don’t find much satisfaction in private prayer with God,” “I do not want a group resident or halfway house for ex-convicts, alcoholics, drug addicts, or mentally ill people near my home”).¹⁹⁴ In identifying behaviors more in the realm of the practical than the ineffable in the “social activities” section, the possibility of a life of “religious” activity with minimal sense of the spiritual is discernible (contributing money to church or charities, engaging in political causes, donating goods or time to help others, etc.).¹⁹⁵ At the same time, these questions also make conceivable the possibility of a life in which spirituality is continuously evidenced in everyday behaviors.

The “Spiritual Well-Being Scale” (1982/1983) is a non-sectarian tool which examines “well-being in relation to that which lies beyond oneself” from a psychological rather than theological standpoint.¹⁹⁶ One section poses questions of relationship with God; the other asks questions of “self, community and surroundings,” including such ideas as “life purpose, life satisfaction, and positive or negative life experiences.” The latter avoids religious vocabulary altogether,¹⁹⁷ indicating a stance that measurable spirituality does not necessarily require a particular religious belief—or any religious faith at all.

¹⁹⁴ Moberg, quoted in Boivin, “Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire,” 377-379.

¹⁹⁵ Moberg, “Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire,” 379.

¹⁹⁶ Michael J. Boivin, Allison L. Kirby, Laura K. Underwood and Heather Silva, “Spiritual Well-Being Scale,” in *Measures of Religiosity*, ed. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., 382.

¹⁹⁷ Boivin, et. al., “Spiritual Well-Being Scale,” 382.

Commonalities among the indicators of spirituality in these instruments fall into three discernable categories: those that specifically have to do with deity (belief in God, awareness of God's presence, being in relationship with God), those which are more about the ephemeral or ineffable (sense of something beyond, perceptions of unity, attainment of inner peace, discernment of sacredness or wonder), and practical behaviors in which spirituality is manifested in the everyday.

These terms and understandings have been devised for the technical work of seeking to measure spirituality. How do they compare to the descriptions or definitions offered by self-described spiritual practitioners in their own words?

Testimonies from Frankenberg's Qualitative Research

Ruth Frankenberg, Professor of American Studies at the University of California-Davis, interviewed fifty subjects of various religious and demographic backgrounds. Each had responded in the affirmative when asked, "Are you a person for whom religious or spiritual practice is a central practice of your daily life, work, and identity?"¹⁹⁸

Having identified three overarching thematic categories in the language of spirituality from recent instruments of measure, it is possible to view testimonies from Frankenberg's subjects through the lens of those themes: deity, the ineffable, and "everydayness," which I here use in the sense of practical, unexceptional, even mundane behaviors that manifest a spirituality.

¹⁹⁸ Frankenberg, *Living Spirit, Living Practice*, 1.

Deity and the Ineffable

One interview subject alluded to a deific reality (“the spirit”) in describing her spirituality in terms of the effect of allowing the ineffable into everyday life: “If you really pay attention in a non-judgmental way to whatever you’re experiencing, and if you really are in the truth of the moment, then the spirit comes in and works and you get a felt shift. You can feel something change within.”¹⁹⁹

When one test subject was asked if he would interpret a series of synchronous events leading to his decision to become a deacon as “divine guidance, as explicit direction,” he responded, “Oh, I think so, yeah. That’s very explicit for me...very definitely, very definitely.”²⁰⁰ He had attended a cursillo which “put me in touch with God, convinced me that there was a God, and that God was manifested in the world through love.” At the end of the cursillo event, a priest invited anyone who wished to do so to come forward and assist in offering the final blessing. Derek’s testimony also suggests the ineffable, saying he “didn’t join in, but my heart started beating at a high rate. I almost started hyperventilating. I couldn’t understand what was happening. It was just a very strange experience.”²⁰¹

Similarly, another respondent reported: “My experience of life [is] very visceral. I register a lot of sensations, gut instincts, God whooshing over my head will turn my stomach. A lot of times something I pray is, ‘God, if you want me to do this, either

¹⁹⁹ Nancy McKay, interview in Ruth Frankenberg, *Living Spirit, Living Practice*, 49.

²⁰⁰ Derek Jones, interview in Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 46.

²⁰¹ Jones, *Living Spirit*, 43.

increase my desire or decrease it,’ and I feel the physical sensation happen.”²⁰² She offered her definition of spirituality: “the practice of my relationship with what I believe is the force that is all things. And I use the terms *God*, *universe*, and *life* to all mean the same thing, and to identify that force.”²⁰³

Another also alluded to deity within a spiritual framework of the ineffable, including a mention of the subtheme of the unity of creation: “Spirit is guidance, spirit is oneness, spirit is higher self, spirit is the all in all, which is Allah, you know. It is the uncomprehendable. It’s bigger. Spirit is also right here. Spirit is the earth as well as the sky. But spirit in my life is— [...] It’s a feeling, you know. [...] So, spirit doesn’t necessarily translate into religion, spirit just translates into the higher knowing, the higher self...”²⁰⁴

“Everydayness” and the Ineffable

Also naming the theme of unity, another subject combined a sense of the ineffable with her everyday occupation. Her work to oppose oppression was, she said, “the everyday practical application of my spiritual practice,”²⁰⁵ which entailed “a sense of connectedness with all that there is...the part of me that I can get in touch with when I know I am right in line with the universe.” She also alludes to the deity theme in describing her spirituality: “It’s a sense that there is something of which I am a part—of which we are all a part—and is therefore much more vast than any one of us, and yet is

²⁰² Pamola Tan, interview in Frankenberg, *Living Spirit, Living Practice*, 82.

²⁰³ Tan, *Living Spirit*, 83.

²⁰⁴ Sadiqa, interview in Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 1.

²⁰⁵ Akaya Windwood, interview in Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 193.

not greater than any one of us. [...] I do believe in a universal consciousness, if you will. I call it Spirit. Others call it God, or Goddess, or any number of names. But it's that notion that I'm in the mix. I'm connected. And we're all connected."²⁰⁶

The quest for the ineffable in the midst of, and as a component of, everyday life and work was also descriptive of spirituality for another interviewee, who saw a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* as “a lovely metaphor for the way in which most of us experience our lives—trying to develop consciousness and self-engagement as we live our lives. You know, as we battle all of our battles of living to be present for the pain, the joy and the mystery, all of it.” He described his spiritual practice with a guru as deeply satisfying in the sense that it had “helped me experience life in a much richer tapestry.”²⁰⁷

Frankenberg's Findings

Frankenberg's gleanings from her interviews include the observation that for her test subjects, spirituality, as a term and an idea, “tended to convey that which was spontaneous and direct in the process of communing with divine and/or energetic forms”²⁰⁸—in theological terms, a sense of the immediate presence of God.

Frankenberg cites Albanese's argument that “spirituality” had “gathered into itself” ideas including a sense of personal connection with the Deity and interconnectedness with other people.²⁰⁹ Interconnectedness as an identifier of spirituality was confirmed among a significant number in Frankenberg's study who specified

²⁰⁶ Windwood, *Living Spirit*, 194, 195.

²⁰⁷ Michael Bell, interview in Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 188.

²⁰⁸ Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 2-3.

²⁰⁹ Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 196.

connection *to others* (community, society, humanity). Yet the 2023 Pew Research Center study of spirituality in the United States determined that, while 24% of adults in the U.S. identified “connection” in relation to spirituality, only 2% identified “connections with other people/humanity”²¹⁰ (as distinct from connection with God, self, or nature).

However, among those in the Pew study *who consider themselves spiritual*—

Frankenberg’s demographic—the percentages rise significantly, including 39% among both the religiously affiliated and the unaffiliated.²¹¹ Still, while large majorities of spiritual people cite belief and relationship with a higher power (God) as being fundamental to their spirituality, well under half identify connection with others as fundamental.²¹²

On the topic of everydayness, “There was for these men and women no real separation between ‘spiritual life’ and other aspects of daily activity.”²¹³ And for a certain set of interviewees, Frankenberg surmised that the term “Spirit” implied not only the concept of deity, but also “the recognition that all activity is undertaken with a particular set of ideas, values, and goals in mind.”²¹⁴ For some, the application of that conceptual ethic into everyday life is what they experience as “spirituality.”

²¹⁰ Chart: “Many Americans Say ‘Spiritual’ Means Belief in Higher Power or God.” Becka A. Alper, et. al., “Measuring Spirituality” (Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/measuring-spirituality/#What-does-‘spiritual’-mean>

²¹¹ Chart: “What Spiritual Americans Consider Essential to Their Spirituality.” Becka A. Alper, et. al., “Measuring Spirituality” (Pew Research Center, December 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/measuring-spirituality/#What-does-‘spiritual’-mean>

²¹² The Pew survey uses random sampling, as opposed to Frankenberg’s purposive sampling of those who self-identified as persons “for whom religious or spiritual practice is a central practice of your daily life, work, and identity” (Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 1).

²¹³ Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 28.

²¹⁴ Frankenberg, *Living Spirit*, 209-210.

A Working Definition of Spirituality

The application of “spirituality” as a word and a concept remains both subjective and ambiguous enough that, in terms of coming to a general understanding, individual *descriptions* are at least as significant, if not more so, as any concise *definition* could be. Nevertheless, for purposes of this study, **spirituality is the practice of being aware of God’s presence in one’s life connecting God and all creation, and the process of seeking in everyday life to deepen one’s relationship with God and the world.**

It is possible to discern and formulate a coherent articulation of the word “spirituality”—even as, with Dreyer and Burrows, I concede unreservedly that the formulation above may appropriately be, and should be, rearticulated for the next study of spirituality.

Appendix 4 Evening Prayer Context: Historical, Theological, and Liturgical

The liturgy that forms the basis of the online midweek prayer services of Montreat Presbyterian Church is the Evening Prayer liturgy from the 2018 edition of the Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Common Worship*. In this appendix, I will situate Evening Prayer within the monastic tradition of the Opus Dei (also called the Liturgy of the Hours or the Daily Office), described historically by Benedict of Nursia (St. Benedict),²¹⁵ William Law,²¹⁶ and Benedictine monasteries that observe the tradition in the twenty-first century, placing the meaning of the Evening Prayer service in its historical and contemporary theological context.

The Opus Dei

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547) has been called the patriarch or the “founding father”²¹⁷ of Western monasticism. His *Rule of St. Benedict* “offered definitive direction and established an ordered way of life” for monastics that provided “security and stability”²¹⁸ in implementing a “balanced life of active service and contemplative prayer.”²¹⁹ The *Rule of St. Benedict* outlines the “offices,” or prayer services, that are

²¹⁵ *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Timothy Fry, ed.). Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982.

²¹⁶ William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (John W. Meister, et. al., eds.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955.

²¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 327, 177.

²¹⁸ Timothy Fry, “Preface,” St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, (Fry, ed. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 11.

²¹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 275.

interwoven throughout and define the structure of each day in the monastery: the Opus Dei. Benedict's goal was that the Opus Dei would give monks an opportunity to learn love ("See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life") and humility, explicitly aspiring to "that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life...A monk always manifests humility in his bearing no less than in his heart, so that it is evident at the Work of God [that is, the Opus Dei services], in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey in the field, or anywhere else."²²⁰ The tradition is carried on in the twenty-first century in monasteries around the United States. "Each monastery develops from the continuous living of the Rule of St. Benedict," writes Father Joseph Tedesco, Superior of Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, "and our Cistercian Constitutions that shape our lifestyle and ministry of praising God through the Liturgy of the Hours, our solitude and silence, sacred readings, and living out of our vows."²²¹

Specific hours vary among the monasteries, and are subject to change as the needs of the particular community evolve. In November, 2023, Mepkin Abbey's daily horarium began with Vigils in the darkness of 4:00 A.M., Lauds at 7:00 A.M., and then the hours of the day: *terce*, or "third" hour (in the Biblical reckoning of time which began the day with sunrise, so "terce" is theoretically the "third hour" after sunrise), followed by *sext* (noon). Mepkin had eliminated the midafternoon *nones* prayer service from the Daily Office,

²²⁰ Benedict, *Rule*, 16, 32, 37.

²²¹ Joseph Tedesco, "Foreword," in Robert R. Macdonald, *Between the Marsh and the Skies: The Mepkin Abbey Story* (Charleston, SC: Evening Post Books, 2023), 8.

resuming with Vespers at 6:00 P.M. and concluding with Compline at 7:30, which ushered in the “grand silence.”²²²

In the eighteenth century, William Law articulated an horarium (structure of hours), which he pronounced “the best, the happiest, and most perfect way of life,”²²³ based on the Daily Office but designed for those living outside the monastery. Like the Opus Dei, Law’s horarium offers a “balanced life of active service and contemplative prayer.”²²⁴ Law followed the monastic principle that placed the psalms at the center of the daily offices. “[Psalms 34, 96, 103, 111, 146, and 147] wonderfully set forth the glory of God. You may keep to any one of them at any particular hour, or you may take the finest parts of any psalm and so adding them together may make them fitter for your own devotion.”²²⁵

Also echoing monastic practice, Law attached specific themes to each of the hours, such as Lauds being a time to dedicate the coming day to God; terce focusing on personal humility; and sext as a time for prayers of intercession for the world.²²⁶ At nones, or “the third hour of the afternoon,” wrote Law, “consider the necessity of resignation and conformity to the will of God.” Vespers marked the end of the working

²²² These were the hours as experienced by the present author at Mepkin Abbey in the first week of November, 2023. Mepkin’s specific hours have evolved throughout the author’s occasional stays at Mepkin beginning in 2009. The author has experienced similarly individualized hours of the monastic day at Gethsemani Abbey in Bardstown, Kentucky; Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia; and New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa.

²²³ Law, *A Serious Call*, 134.

²²⁴ McGinn, *Foundations*, 275.

²²⁵ Law, *A Serious Call*, 103.

²²⁶ Law, *A Serious Call*, 104.

day and a time for examination of conscience.²²⁷ The night service of Compline is so named as it “completes” the day’s cycle.

Yet there has long been the recognition that for many, the complete Daily Office is a practical impossibility. Tradition has commended two of the daily offices especially: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. In the fifteenth century, the massively popular, unsigned collection of four pamphlets collated into one volume by Thomas Hermeken²²⁸ (“Thomas à Kempis,” c. 1380-1471) and titled *The Imitation of Christ* implored, “If you cannot continually enter into religious contemplation, do it sometimes, at least twice a day, morning and night.”²²⁹ Six centuries later, the Catholic Church maintained the same disposition: in the modern *Liturgy of the Hours*, Morning and Evening Prayer “were assigned the most prominent role” as a means of making the Liturgy “more easily related to...the circumstances of contemporary life.”²³⁰

The Book of Common Worship

The 2018 *Book of Common Worship* (hereafter *BCW*) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) self-identifies as “the sixth major service book to be published for American Presbyterians,” and traces its lineage back through “the teachings of the Protestant reformers, the traditions of the ancient and universal Church, and the sacred words of the Bible.” A painstakingly curated, “carefully edited” guide to worship marshalling

²²⁷ Law, *A Serious Call*, 140 and 147.

²²⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2012), 100.

²²⁹ Thomas à Kempis, “Admonitions Useful for a Spiritual Life” (Book I, Ch. 19, Paragraph 4) in Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete, 2008), 57.

²³⁰ Pope Paul VI, “Apostolic Constitution,” in James P. Mahoney, ed., *The Liturgy of the Hours Vol. 1* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1975), 14.

millennia of liturgical resources, two priorities stated “above all” by the book itself are “to bear witness to the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ” and “to respond with gratitude to the good news of God’s grace.”²³¹

The Evening Prayer Service

In its Evening Prayer template, the *BCW* cites the Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order*, the second volume of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): “The Church’s pattern of daily prayer may be adopted as an individual practice of faith... [Prayer] is an opportunity to draw inspiration and strength from one’s relationship with God in Jesus Christ. It is a way of continually seeking the gifts and guidance of the Holy Spirit for daily living.”²³²

The Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order*, the denomination’s governing mission document, articulates a liturgical theology that “Services of daily prayer offer us a way of joining Christ’s ceaseless intercession for the Church and world,” clarifying that such prayer services may follow the Opus Dei tradition of being held regularly at certain hours, or might be held in whatever circumstances work best within “the demands of daily life and the needs of the individual or community.” Daily prayer services may be held as corporate gatherings in public, or at home in private.²³³

The *BCW* lists “three basic ingredients” in the order of worship for Evening Prayer: psalms, scripture reading, and prayers, whether silent, traditional, or offered

²³¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), xiii, xv.

²³² Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “Directory for Worship,” *Book of Order 2023-25* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2023), W-5.0102, 115.

²³³ PCUSA Directory for Worship, W-5.0202, 118.

extemporaneously. Additionally, sentences of scripture open and close each service, and hymns and other readings may be included. “Thanksgiving for light” is a distinguishing element of the Evening Prayer service: “As the day closes and darkness gathers, we give thanks for the light of Christ that has come into the world, the light that even death could not extinguish.”²³⁴

The *BCW* notes, in summary, that the Evening Prayer service offers for twenty-first century people seeking a spiritual moment “a simplified, streamlined version of the ancient daily office, a tradition with origins in the Jewish temple and monastic life.”²³⁵

²³⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship*, 828, 834.

²³⁵ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship*, 828.

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