Being in a Covenant Discipleship Group was a foreign concept to me prior to being in the class Spiritual Formation for the Practice of Ministry. The idea of a Covenant Discipleship Group was something that I had never heard of before and if I am honest, I was apprehensive at first to engaging in a group with people that I had not known, met, or had any experiences with prior to being in the group. In being in this group with my peers, I have learned about myself, my own personal spiritual formation, and feel that I am a better person because of the knowledge and experiences that I have had with this group of fellow seminary students and fellow spiritual sojourners.

One of the hallmarks of Covenant Discipleship Groups is the concept of commitment. Not only are we committed to meeting each week, but there is also an importance on commitment to each other and God. I learned extensively about the value of commitment during my experiences with my Covenant Discipleship Group. In his work, *Disciplines of the Spirit,* Dr. Howard Thurman discusses at considerable length, the meaning of commitment. One of the ways that he explores the topic of commitment is in discussing how a person can find the meaning of commitment for themselves by asking three simple questions, "Who am I? What do I want? How do I propose to get it?" (Thurman, pg. 26). In the Covenant Discipleship Group, this topic was discussed at great length. It was a practical application to Thurman's questions and I gained wonderful insight into not only the experiences of others, but was provided invaluable feedback from my group members about my own faith journey and spiritual formation.

Continuing with Thurman's questions, he explores how these three questions can guide an individual towards understanding and exploring commitment for themselves. In the question, "Who am I?" He discusses how individuals cannot exist in isolation and how important familial connections impact a person. In the question, "What do I want?" he explores several examples of

how, once someone knows what they want- they go after it. In the final question, "How do I propose I get what I want?" (Thurman, pg. 34), he discuss that goals can be difficult to obtain; however, a person should not revise their goal solely because it is difficult to obtain. My group provided guidance as I struggled to make decisions about my life, goals, and aspirations. For example, my husband had relocated recently to another city for a job after being unemployed for eight months. It was by the prayers, support, advice, and guidance of my group members that I was able to get through this challenging time and by their support, was able to apply and successfully obtain a job in the same town as my husband.

In further examining Thurman's concept of commitment, these questions that Dr. Thurman proposed- "Who am I? What do I want? How do I propose to get it?" (Thurman, pg. 26) are ones that I have struggled with my entire life. They are ones that as a group, we struggled with together. At first, I was apprehensive to share about myself in my group, but the members were able to provide an environment where I was comfortable to freely express myself. I explored the concepts that as a gay man seeking to be an ordained pastor, it can be easy to lose my sense of self in a church/denomination that has not been kind to members of the LGBTQIA+ community. At times, I have questioned if I really want to be a pastor and if God is really calling me towards this path of ministry. When it comes to getting what I want- the barriers of becoming ordained have been a difficult. In the end, my group members helped me to see that Dr. Thurman is right: I cannot revise my goal solely because it is difficult for me to obtain. God has called me and therefore I will go.

Another area of my spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines where I experienced growth as a result of my Covenant Discipleship group was prayer. Of all the different types of prayer that were featured in Adele Calhoun's book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices*

that Transform Us, the Praying Scripture section really resonated with me and is one that I utilized frequently as well as the members of my Covenant Discipleship Group. This is the type of prayer utilizes scripture- "prayers, psalms, teachings and hopes found in the Bible" (Calhoun, pg. 231). While I have prayed scripture before, this idea became fresh to me in my Covenant Discipleship Group because two members of my group utilized it in new and inspiring ways, taking us on mental journeys to expire prayers and scripture in ways I had not experienced. One of the aspects of praying the scriptures that I have comet to love, adore, and appreciate is that its not only something that believers do now, but also something that connects us to believers in the early years of the church. My Covenant Discipleship Group members helped me to see this in new and very tangible ways.

I learned a lot about meditation and ways to practice meditation that I had not previously known or experienced. One of my Covenant Discipleship Group members leads a spiritual disciplines group at her church. She has done workshops on meditation and share a lot of knowledge and experiences that I had never heard about previously which opened my mind up to new possibilities. I have never been very good at meditation, and I think the primary reason for this is because I have misunderstood the core concepts of meditation. In Adele Calhoun's book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*, she talks about how, "meditation is not about emptying the mind so there is nothing there. Christian meditation opens us to the mind of God and to his world and presence in the world" (Calhoun, pg. 192). In my Covenant Discipleship Group, I learned that Christian meditation can be different than in other cultures and religions. I appreciated the suggestions of my group members on how to handle the wandering mind- one of the members suggested that I write down thoughts, questions, etc. they arise and gently guiding our minds back to the scripture, passage, etc. that I am meditating on. They

suggested that I have a journal near by to write down these phrases so that I have a place to reference later when I need to return to those thoughts. These tangible and concrete suggestions have been transformative to my spiritual disciplines and spiritual practices. I have been able to try new things and experience God on levels that I had not experienced in the past.

One area that there was extensive discussion in my Covenant Discipleship Group where I experienced growth was found in the week of Solitude and Silence. In each of the readings for that week, Bennett, Calhoun, and Foster discussed practical ways to engage in silence and solitude. While these practical written applications were helpful, hearing from my Covenant Discipleship Group members about the ways in which they engage in this spiritual discipline was extremly transformative. Reading about experiences is one way of learning, but hearing about the experiences of others and being provided opportunities to ask questions and hear suggestions was deeply impactful. One group member talked about the ideas that were discussed in Richard J. Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth.* In Foster, he talks about "Steps into Solitude" and outlines ways in which we can find "little solitudes" in the everyday occurrences of our lives. Calhoun writes that we can engage in solitude by communicating with God while we run or by practicing other spiritual disciplines alone such as prayer, study, journaling, etc. There are a multitude of ways to engage in silence and solitude. I really appreciated the practical applications from both the texts and my Covenant Discipleship Group members.

While being in a Covenant Discipleship Group was a foreign concept and I was apprehensive about the experience initially, I am a better person for it. I have grown spiritually in ways I had not expected. I was challenged, stretched, and encouraged throughout the experience. When my life had periods of challenge and instability, my group was there beside me, supporting

me in ways I had not expected. I am grateful for the members and look forward to growing with them in the future.

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