

# Mennonite Brethren Encounters with Ignatian, Taizé, and Benedictine Spiritual Practices

*Andrew Dyck*

## ABSTRACT

Whereas it is common to speak of discrete traditions of Christian spirituality, Christian traditions remain in flux, influencing each other in various ways. This paper draws on the experiences of Canadian Mennonite Brethren to show how such influences occur at a grassroots level when Christians learn spiritual practices from other believers. Among Mennonite Brethren—whose spiritual life has previously been influenced by a number of other Christian communities—some people have recently adopted spiritual direction, Taizé singing, and *lectio divina*, thereby also being influenced by the Benedictine, Taizé, and Ignatian communities that are the sources for these practices.

## Introduction

The global diversity of Christian spiritual traditions defies easy categorization. Richard Foster, an evangelical Quaker, proposes six streams or traditions, each beginning in the New Testament church but developing variously through history.<sup>1</sup> Corinne Ware, drawing on Episcopal theologian Urban T. Holmes III, offers four personality-focused types of spirituality for individuals and congregations.<sup>2</sup> Catholic theologian and historian Philip Sheldrake, who writes about five types of Christian spirituality or wisdom, also edits “Traditions of Christian Spirituality,” a book series that has featured twenty-five traditions so far.<sup>3</sup> These range from Baptist to Carmelite and Orthodox to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* (Durham, NC: Alban Institute, 1995), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual Way: Classic Traditions and Contemporary Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), ix; Goodreads, “Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series,” [www.goodreads.com/series/137985-traditions-of-christian-spirituality](http://www.goodreads.com/series/137985-traditions-of-christian-spirituality),

Quaker, and are primarily rooted in the northern hemisphere. This diversity of spiritual expression speaks to two thousand years of change and motion that continue today. Traditions do not develop in static isolation from each other; they are always in flux, influencing each other, and dynamically coalescing as the spiritual life of particular groups of Christians.

Mennonite Brethren in Canada (hereafter MBs) are a group that has been shaped, both deliberately and unintentionally, by diverse Christian traditions.<sup>4</sup> While MB spiritual life has historically centered on conversion, singing, and scripture reading,<sup>5</sup> some MBs have recently engaged with three spiritual practices from traditions or communities that exist or extend beyond Protestantism, namely, the Ignatian tradition (spiritual direction), the Taizé Christian Community (singing), and the Benedictine tradition (*lectio divina*). In the process they also encountered the wellsprings of these practices. These encounters are noteworthy, because participants engaged traditions once considered foreign, and even, in some cases, unfaithful to the way of Christ.

In this article I offer an account of how MBs continue to look to other Christian traditions in the pursuit of a fuller spirituality. I will argue that the various MB experiences taken together strongly suggest that one path towards genuine Christian unity can begin at the grassroots level; that engagement with other traditions can be stimulating and truly fruitful; and that such engagement illustrates the dynamic always at work within congregations, denominations, and traditions. I will begin by identifying the primary traditions shaping historic MB spirituality, and then outline how MBs have engaged spiritual direction, Taizé singing, and *lectio divina*. I will identify perceived needs that prompted adopting a particular practice, describe the engagement with it, and comment on its reported contribution.

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accessed Dec. 18, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> MBs give a nod to this diversity of influences when describing themselves as “evangelical Anabaptists,” a phrase they have used since at least 1971. See Karla Braun, “Mega List of \_Evangelical Anabaptist\_ in MB Herald (Unpublished Research),” (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Dyck, “Praying Like the Catholics?: Enriching Canadian Mennonite Brethren Spirituality through Spiritual Direction, *Lectio Divina*, and the Taizé Community” (Ph.D. diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2017), 20. My working definition of Christian spirituality is the lived experiences—including convictions, practices and accounts—of a Christian community that nurture and reveal how that community’s life is shaped by the Holy Spirit.

I will pay more attention to *lectio divina* because it was the most widespread practice, and I will acknowledge criticisms made by MBs wary of adopting such practices.

### **Diverse Roots for Mennonite Brethren**

Describing themselves as evangelical Anabaptists, MBs have been variously ecumenical and sectarian in engaging with other Christian spiritual traditions. They have at times pursued, or at least demonstrated, the unity of the church across denominations and traditions; at other times they have lived as though they were the small, faithful remnant of true Christianity, resistant to interactions with other professing believers. In the early years, MBs engaged many other groups. The spirituality of the first MBs in Ukraine during the 1860s was not only Mennonite but Pietist, thanks to Reformed, Moravian, Catholic, and especially Lutheran influences. Eduard Wüst, a Lutheran pietist preacher, was particularly influential.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, a few MBs joined an effort to create a Russian pan-evangelical alliance together with German Baptists, Molokans, Doukhobors, and Stundists.<sup>7</sup> Soon, MBs also had many close interactions with German Baptists, whose leaders and literature shaped MB approaches to Scripture, organization, and evangelism.<sup>8</sup> During the following decades, they were shaped by the evangelical ecumenism of the Blankenburg conferences in Germany, bringing back to their home communities an emphasis on Dispensationalism and on having fellowship with all true believers regardless of denomination.<sup>9</sup>

Yet strong sectarian impulses persisted among the early MBs. They saw themselves at times as true believers among the unfaithful. Some congregations rejected all preachers other than their own and burned all

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Kasdorf, "Pietist Roots of Early Mennonite Brethren Spirituality," *Direction* 13, no. 3 (1984): 44-47.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory L. Nichols, *The Development of Russian Evangelical Spirituality: A Study of Ivan V. Kargel (1849-1937)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 118-28.

<sup>8</sup> John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers*, ed. Abe J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: The Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), 366-67; John B. Toews, *Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church 1860-1990* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1993), 128.

<sup>9</sup> John B. Toews, "Russian Mennonites and *Allianz*," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996): 50, 60.

religious books other than the Bible.<sup>10</sup> After prolonged debates about who was permitted to have access to the communion table, MBs settled on a restrictive ‘closed’ table.<sup>11</sup> This sectarianism was amplified among MB immigrants to North America through their association with fundamentalists.<sup>12</sup>

However, over time MBs came to see themselves denominationally—as one group of Christians among many. By the 1960s, they were identifying with the moderate evangelicals who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s as a corrective to fundamentalism.<sup>13</sup> As MBs opened themselves to renewed engagement with other Christians, they were also increasingly influenced by interactions with charismatics and Calvinists. During the past three decades, this openness led some to engage also with Christian communities beyond Protestantism, especially at the level of spiritual practices.

### **Mennonite Brethren and Ignatian Spiritual Direction**

The context for exploring the practice of “spiritual direction” was a spirituality centered on conversion. The MBs’ secession from other Mennonites in 1860 stemmed from believers’ dramatic, joyful experiences of conversion, as taught by Wüst, that in turn led to the upright way of life expected within the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition. However, a generation later conversion experiences were becoming routinized; by the time a century had passed, upright living was confined mainly to personal devotion and morality, with little focus on social ethics.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1900s, MBs experienced conversion primarily as a human act of the mind and will, with limited impact on the rest of one’s life.

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<sup>10</sup> John B. Toews, ed. *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren (1860-1869): Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2002), 111; John B. Toews, “The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58, no. 2 (1984): 100.

<sup>11</sup> Toews, “Russian Mennonites and *Allianz*,” 50-53.

<sup>12</sup> Toews, *Pilgrimage of Faith*, 110, 173; John B. Toews, “The Influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite Brethren Theology,” *Direction* 10, no. 3 (1981): 22, 23, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David W. Bebbington (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 29.

<sup>14</sup> John B. Toews, “The Early Mennonite Brethren and Conversion,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993): 92; J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists: Four Centuries Later—a Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975), 302, 98, 125, 92, 149.

In the 1990s, a handful of MB pastors, leaders, and others began receiving spiritual direction, a foundational practice for following the *Spiritual Exercises* developed during the 16th century by Ignatius of Loyola but also used apart from the *Exercises*. The practice became more widely known among MBs in the early 2000s, when the initial participants began training others in spiritual direction, promoted it through retreats with Ignatian features, and wrote about it in denominational publications.

The first MB group to be trained as spiritual directors received their instruction through the SoulStream community in Abbotsford, BC. SoulStream offered its first training course in 2002 with ten MB students and an MB instructor, Steve Imbach. (Full disclosure: I was one of five pastors in that first cohort.) Imbach consistently stressed Ignatian values and drew on the writings of Jesuit and Jesuit-influenced authors.<sup>15</sup> He emphasized that God is not only present but also active for salvation in all human experience; and that spiritual direction helps people attend to and respond to God's specific self-communication, as well as sift through their interior movements, nudges, and motives.<sup>16</sup> He also introduced Ignatian discernment, which emphasizes consolation and desolation, indifference, and making decisions in light of prior commitments.<sup>17</sup> MBs continued to participate in SoulStream as it expanded its course offerings and geographical reach, and came to support a dispersed community.<sup>18</sup> Over the next fifteen years, participants were trained as spiritual directors in a wide variety of centers representing Catholic, Protestant evangelical, liberal Protestant, Free Methodist, and non-denominational origins, and in turn were giving and receiving spiritual direction both in these centers and in their congregations and broader communities.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Authors included William A. Barry, William J. Connolly, Thomas H. Green, and Gordon Smith.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Imbach, "Spiritual Direction: Introduction," lecture, Abbotsford, BC, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Imbach, "Discernment," lecture, Abbotsford, BC, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> "SoulStream" 2016, soulstream.org, accessed April 16, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Reimer, conversation with author, Dec. 15, 2009; Gerry Ediger, conversation with author, Oct. 16, 2009; "CSD Practicum Students, [www.tyndale.ca/seminary/spiritual-formation/csd/tobecomeCSD/practicum/students](http://www.tyndale.ca/seminary/spiritual-formation/csd/tobecomeCSD/practicum/students), accessed July 3, 2014; "ESDA Spiritual Directors," Evangelical Spiritual Directors Association, 2014, [www.ecswisdom.org/index.php/esda/directors/usa](http://www.ecswisdom.org/index.php/esda/directors/usa), accessed July 3, 2014; "Workshops," KidBuilders, 2013, [www.kidbuilders.ca/workshops.html](http://www.kidbuilders.ca/workshops.html), accessed July 3, 2014; "The Church at Prayer: Speakers," Mennonite

Around the same time that spiritual direction and Ignatian teachings were introduced, several MB-sponsored retreats underlined these same emphases. In 2000, Steve and Evy Klassen founded The Mark Centre as a discipleship training site in Abbotsford, BC.<sup>20</sup> While not an official ministry of an MB Conference, the Centre has continuously had MBs on its staff, board, and advisory council.<sup>21</sup> Trained by SoulStream, Steve Klassen focused on helping people “slow down, experience God’s presence in a new way, and find real rest” through retreats, spiritual direction, and the prayer of *examen* (seeking God’s examination of one’s life).<sup>22</sup> A Jesuit form of examen, for instance, was used during their retreats.<sup>23</sup> Similar to the teachings of Ignatius, the Centre emphasized that people can be attentive to God in Scripture, in God’s work and communication in one’s daily life (e.g., providential coincidences), in times of silence and solitude, in individuals’ hearts, and in community.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, MB denominational ministries offered short retreats to help pastors and leaders experience personal renewal through such Ignatian practices as spiritual direction, imaginative contemplation on Scripture, and silence. In 2004, for instance, national and provincial MB conferences provided weekend retreats across Canada to introduce pastors and others to spiritual disciplines and prayer practices such as the prayer of examen, Ignatian discernment, and imaginative prayer in order to “assist in living a contemplative-in-action call to ministry.”<sup>25</sup> Retreatants learned to value

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Brethren Church of Manitoba, 2012, [assembly2012.wordpress.com/speakers/](http://assembly2012.wordpress.com/speakers/), accessed July 3, 2014); “Spiritual Directors in Manitoba,” Manitoba Spiritual Direction, [spiritualdirection.ca/spiritual-directors/](http://spiritualdirection.ca/spiritual-directors/), accessed April 16, 2016; “Spirituality Programs,” St. Benedict’s Retreat & Conference Centre, 2013, [www.stbens.ca/pdfs/brochure1314.pdf](http://www.stbens.ca/pdfs/brochure1314.pdf), accessed July 3, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> “Discipleship and Mission Training Centre Launched,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Nov. 17, 2000, 16; Steve Klassen, conversation with author, Aug. 26, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> “Mark Centre: About Us,” [www.markcentre.org/AboutUs.html](http://www.markcentre.org/AboutUs.html), accessed Nov. 19, 2009; “Mark Centre: People,” <http://www.markcentre.org/about/people/>, accessed Dec. 19, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Klassen, conversation; Cam Stuart, “Mark Centre Provides Solitude, Beauty,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, October 2007, 17. Spiritual Direction was central to the Mark Centre’s weekend retreat “Presence: Increasing Your Awareness of God” in 2007, which I attended.

<sup>23</sup> “Examen of Conscience,” Jesuit Provincial Offices, [www.jesuits.ca/prayer/examen\\_of\\_conscience.php](http://www.jesuits.ca/prayer/examen_of_conscience.php), accessed Nov. 19, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Steve Klassen, e-mail to author, Nov. 20, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Garry Schmidt, “Practices Explored at Refresh 2004” (handout), Refresh 2004, Discipleship

using their imagination for affective experiences of Jesus and explored the relationship between “contemplating and doing.”<sup>26</sup> Others subsequently sought out spiritual directors.

The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches not only published reports about these events, but also provided articles and a booklet that introduced spiritual direction, and promoted aspects of Ignatian spirituality. In 2003, the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* featured *Imago Dei*, an MB network of home groups, whose leader Rob des Cotes “[encourages] people in the spiritual direction they are already sensing; serving as a co-discerner so that they can know themselves and see where God is working in their lives. . . .”<sup>27</sup> A 2004 issue includes an article titled “Spiritual Direction: The Gift of a Companion in the Messy Places.”<sup>28</sup> In 2007, a coach and retreat director writes that leaders “regularly need spiritual guidance” from a spiritual director, especially when threatened by cynicism.<sup>29</sup> Other articles commend Ignatius for being missional, for the examen, and for using the imagination in prayerful contemplation; one author recommends certain Jesuit sources.<sup>30</sup> The prayer of examen and imaginative contemplation on Scripture are taught in *A Lifelong Apprenticeship: Study Guide for Growing Disciples*, a denominational resource for small groups written by a student in

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Ministries of Canadian Conference of MB Churches, Langley, BC, 2004; “Refresh 2004,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 30, 2004, 17; Kathleen Klassen, “Pastors and Spouses Meet,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, June 11, 2004, 16.

<sup>26</sup> “Evaluation of the Come Away Retreat,” written by retreatants, Stillwood Camp and Conference Centre, Lindell Beach, BC, 2003); anonymous retreat feedback in e-mail to author, Dec. 4, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> James R. Coggins and Paul G. Hiebert, “A Church in the Image of God,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, May 2, 2003, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Cam Stuart, “Spiritual Direction: The Gift of a Companion in the Messy Places,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Jan. 16, 2004, 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> John Neufeld, “With a Little Help from a Mature Believer,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, March 2007, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Willy Reimer, “Pray and Work,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, February 2014, 8; Shawna Peters Penner, “A Small-Town Mennonite Girl’s Journey: Growing in the Way of the Contemplatives,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 28, 2006, 5; Andrew Dyck, “Examen the Day: 1 John 1:8-2:2, 3:18-24,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Nov. 2007, 18; “Reflections on Renovaré,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Aug. 12, 2005, 14; Roland Balzer, “The With-God Life: A Report on the Renovaré International Conference,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Aug. 12, 2005, 14-15.

SoulStream's first course on spiritual direction.<sup>31</sup> As well, a few MB churches offered spiritual direction as one of their congregational ministries. Waterloo (Ontario) MB Church, for example, described spiritual direction in terms of attentiveness to God and listening to the Holy Spirit, as well as dialogue with God. With prayer as a central component, spiritual direction was also associated with personal transformation, trust, and companionship.<sup>32</sup>

MBs who practiced spiritual direction and learned from its Ignatian roots now saw conversion as more than a one-time choice to believe. Instead, the initial commitment to believe in and follow Jesus Christ could continue seamlessly as an ongoing transformation touching every aspect of one's experience, including one's affective life. The believer's initial 'assurance of salvation'—long a hallmark of evangelical spirituality—could, as Ignatius taught, be extended into a lifetime of discerning which experiences are consolations or desolations, which lead toward faith, love, and hope, and which lead away. A community, even a dyadic community of a director and a directee, helps a believer to develop attentiveness to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, for the Ignatian tradition insists that God continues to lead and communicate to his children. Their faithful responses to that communication are the grounding for a life of uprightness in personal morality, social ethics, and mission. In these ways, spiritual direction and its Ignatian roots provided valuable learning for MBs.

### **Mennonite Brethren and Taizé Singing**

From their earliest days, MBs sang joyfully and exuberantly in ways that reflected and supported their initial conversion experiences. Within a few years of secession, the rhythmic singing of gospel songs from the American revivalist tradition, complete with instruments and four-part harmonies, characterized MB congregational singing (albeit with a five-decade interval of a cappella singing—1865 until the 1920s—because some of the initial enthusiasm had become excessive). During the mid-1900s, MBs made forays into more artistically sophisticated musical forms, from classical hymnody

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<sup>31</sup> Cam Stuart, *A Lifelong Apprenticeship: Study Guide for Growing Disciples* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2005), 40-45.

<sup>32</sup> "Spiritual Direction," [www.waterloomb.org/sites/default/files/Spiritual%20Direction%20web%202012.pdf](http://www.waterloomb.org/sites/default/files/Spiritual%20Direction%20web%202012.pdf), accessed June 3, 2015.



to oratorios. However, gospel songs persisted through most of the 20th century, because their accessible music and texts and lack of pretension were felt to better convey a spirituality that touched the heart. This changed in the 1980s and later with the introduction of praise and worship music typical of charismatic churches. This genre eventually became the predominant form of MB singing across Canada. While this genre shift brought a renewed openness to affective encounters with God, it also brought losses. One was a decline in song texts about conversion, evangelism, confession, reconciliation, discipleship, peace, justice, and service. Instead, texts focused on praising and adoring God, and proclaiming and affirming faith.<sup>33</sup> Another loss was a de-emphasis on participating with others when singing; the more important value was that individuals encountered God.

It was into this context that Taizé singing entered the picture. For 25 years, some MBs have used songs from the Taizé Christian Community in France, along with demonstrating that community's practices and values.<sup>34</sup> Taizé is known worldwide for its singing of simple, compelling chants often drawn directly from Scripture. However, these songs are only one facet of its ministries of reconciliation, hospitality, solidarity with marginalized people, Bible discussions, and prayer. MBs engaged with the Community in several congregations and post-secondary schools. Four songs from Taizé entered into congregational use in 1995 via the *Worship Together* hymnal: "Bless the Lord," "Eat This Bread," "Hosanna," and "Jesus, Remember Me."<sup>35</sup> With the publication of these pieces, many congregations were singing Taizé songs for the first time.

The ecumenically-minded Imago Dei house churches made extensive use of those songs in services designed to "help Christians 'respond to God's

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<sup>33</sup> James Anthony Funk, "Neither Tradition-Bound nor Exclusively Contemporary: Discipling Believers to Accept and Embrace Diversity in Worship" (Master's diss., Canadian Baptist Seminary, 1993), 70, 86, 98, 99. Funk used data from a 1990 survey of Canadian and American MB congregations to zero in on the 100 songs sung most often by the 21 responding congregations in BC.

<sup>34</sup> Taizé was founded during World War II by Brother Roger, who came from a Swiss Reformed background, in order to pursue reconciliation between Christians—first Protestants and Catholics, and later also Orthodox.

<sup>35</sup> *Worship Together*, ed. Christine Longhurst, Clarence Hiebert, and Holda Fast Redekopp (Winnipeg, MB: Board of Faith and Life, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1995), 181, 244, 339, 355.

presence in their lives' [with] a contemplative service featuring Taizé-styled worship of sung prayer and communion."<sup>36</sup> In 2004, Imago Dei pastor Rob des Cotes and Highland Community Church (Abbotsford, BC) pastor Roland Balzer led MB pastors and spouses on retreat in a Taizé service notable for its experience of "quiet beauty."<sup>37</sup>

Highland Community Church began offering regular Taizé-styled services in 2001. Balzer introduced them out of a desire for worship that was explicitly God-focused.<sup>38</sup> He was frustrated with the praise and worship genre because he felt its music stimulated only a shallow emotional response. Highland worship leaders wanted authentic affective experiences of God instead. Their Taizé services became more ecumenical through the influence of Cathy Hardy, who had been introduced to Taizé songs through an Episcopalian church.<sup>39</sup> She helped Highland join with St. Matthew's Anglican Church in offering monthly Taizé services. Eventually, these churches also held an annual Taizé service in the church of Westminster Abbey, a nearby Benedictine monastery and seminary. Balzer also led a Taizé service during Abbotsford's annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.<sup>40</sup>

These services used only songs from Taizé and incorporated many features of the Taizé Community's practices: periods of silence, readings from Psalms and the New Testament, and prayers of intercession (both read and spontaneous).<sup>41</sup> As well, the worship space was augmented with candles, icons, and paintings. After a decade, Highland discontinued these monthly services but retained certain aspects of them in regular morning

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<sup>36</sup> Coggins, "A Church in the Image of God." In 2019, 12 Imago Dei groups existed in 9 Canadian cities, and in 5 locations outside Canada: [imagodeicommunity.ca/our-services](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/our-services), accessed April 12, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Klassen, "Pastors and Spouses," 16.

<sup>38</sup> Roland Balzer, conversation with author, Dec. 15, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Cathy A. J. Hardy, "Testimony: An Invitation to Trust: The Healing Music of Taizé," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, March 2007, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Cathy Hardy, e-mail to author, Nov. 18, 2008. See the *Abbotsford News*: "Together in Troubled Times," Jan. 17, 2009; "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Benefits Charity, Drop-in Centre," Jan. 18, 2007; "Week of Prayer Coming," [www.abbotsfordtimes.com/life/Week+Prayer+coming/2793183/story.html](http://www.abbotsfordtimes.com/life/Week+Prayer+coming/2793183/story.html); [www.abbotsfordtoday.ca/?p=53096](http://www.abbotsfordtoday.ca/?p=53096), accessed Dec. 22, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> These observations are based on a sampling of five printed orders of service from Highland Community Church's monthly Taizé services: Mar. 18, 2001, Mar. 25, 2001, Dec. 2, 2001, Oct. 25, 2009, Mar. 28, 2010.

services. For her part, Hardy continued to cooperate with churches of several denominations to offer monthly services with a clear Taizé imprint.

More MB congregations experimented by using Taizé songs occasionally. House Blend Ministries in Manitoba frequently used Taizé songs, silence, and repetition as a refreshing, even “holy,” contrast to the energetic, highly stimulating music used in most other churches.<sup>42</sup> The community also favoured Taizé music because it was readily accessible to people without church experience and musical training, yet without sacrificing theology or beauty. Also in Manitoba River East Church began offering Taizé services in the 1990s, even experimenting with a jazz Taizé service.<sup>43</sup> At Forest Grove Community Church in Saskatchewan, a one-time experiment with a Taizé service contrasted sharply with typical worship services featuring a full praise and worship band.<sup>44</sup> Afterwards, Forest Grove’s music minister continued using Taizé songs periodically in Sunday services; in 2010, the church began holding services at a second location where practices akin to those of Taizé were included each Sunday: visual symbols of the faith, opportunities to ask probing questions, and a weekly communal meal.<sup>45</sup> Finally, church members were introduced to Taizé songs and Taizé-inspired songs in three recordings by Hardy reviewed in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*.<sup>46</sup>

During the early 2000s, two of Canada’s five MB post-secondary schools made use of Taizé songs. At Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, one or two chapel services each semester were offered in a Taizé style.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Taizé was studied in church music courses; and students in CMU’s Outatown French program spent time in the Taizé Community.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rachel Twigg-Boyce, e-mails to author, Dec. 7 and 20, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Christine Longhurst, conversation with author, Dec. 8, 2011; Mary Anne Isaak, conversation with author, Aug. 15, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Dale Dirksen, conversation with author, Dec. 16, 2011. “What Are FGCC Worship Gatherings Like?” Forest Grove Community Church, 2010, [www.forestgrovecommunitychurch.com/?p=137](http://www.forestgrovecommunitychurch.com/?p=137), accessed Dec. 18, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.; “FGCC Broadway,” Forest Grove Community Church, 2011, [www.forestgrovecommunitychurch.com/?p=2287](http://www.forestgrovecommunitychurch.com/?p=2287), accessed Dec. 28, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> See these *Mennonite Brethren Herald* articles: Dora Dueck, “Notes,” Dec. 15, 2006, 29; Heather Pauls Murray, “Music Is ‘Thought-Calming,’” January 2010, 38; Martin Blumrich, “Love Shines,” November 2011, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Longhurst, conversation. As of 2019, Taizé songs and liturgical style are still in use at CMU.

<sup>48</sup> “CMU: School of Music; Programs and Courses,” Canadian Mennonite University, 2011,

Similarly, Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, BC not only used Taizé music in chapel services but also arranged for students to visit the Taizé community as part of a semester-long worship arts course in Europe.<sup>49</sup>

Where Taizé songs and influences were adopted, MBs continued seeking heartfelt encounters with God, but now with a larger musical and emotional palette. There was now opportunity for calm and silence, not only joyful praise. By singing scriptures, a wider theological diet was available. Participants also demonstrated an openness to a range of human responses to God, and to worshiping with believers from diverse traditions.

### **Mennonite Brethren and Benedictine *Lectio Divina***

The third practice in view is *lectio divina* or sacred reading (literally “reading from God”).<sup>50</sup> Widespread adoption of this practice is not surprising in light of MBs’ long-standing emphasis on reading Scripture, an emphasis typical of evangelicals. When they first met for worship services (in homes, not church buildings), they would read a number of Bible passages and everyone could join in discussing the readings. As worship services moved into church buildings especially after MBs came to North America, Bible discussions became larger-scale events in which all the congregations of a region would participate.<sup>51</sup> However, once MBs began hiring pastors in the 1950s and as those pastors—and many of their parishioners—received formal theological education through Bible schools and then seminaries, Bible reading and interpretation increasingly became the domain of experts and authorities. By the late 1900s, Scripture reading had tended to become quite individualistic, not dialogical. As well, devotional and knowledge-centric readings of Scripture were becoming difficult to hold together, as were the Pietist and Reformed arms of evangelicalism. Furthermore, despite the influence of the

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[www.cmu.ca/academics.php?s=music&p=programs](http://www.cmu.ca/academics.php?s=music&p=programs), accessed Dec. 29, 2011; Karla Braun, “Gap Year for God: The Risk, Prayer and Faith of Discipleship Programs; God in the Stillness,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 2014, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Renee Evashkevich, conversation with author, Dec. 13, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Terrence G. Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 384; Joan D. Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, ed. John Farina (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 133.

<sup>51</sup> These Bible discussion events eventually morphed into study conferences, which Canadian MBs continue to offer every other year.

charismatic movement, MBs seemed to lack consensus about how the Holy Spirit communicates through Scripture.

It was in this context that they began practicing *lectio divina* more extensively than either spiritual direction or Taizé singing. *Lectio divina*, as taught in the Rule of Benedict, is a “leisurely savoring of biblical texts,” more of an attitude than a method.<sup>52</sup> This was in addition to hearing the scriptures read during mealtimes, studying the scriptures after Compline, and praying collectively during the Divine Office. Benedict (ca. 480-550) expected monastics to spend three hours a day in *lectio*.<sup>53</sup> In the twelfth century, Carthusian monk Guigo II taught a four-stage approach to *lectio divina*: reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating.<sup>54</sup> Evidence for the widespread engagement of this Benedictine practice among MBs is found in their teaching and publications, and in three groups noted below that chose to live according to a Rule of Life. Similar to MBs who engaged spiritual direction and Taizé singing, those who used *lectio divina* often drew on other aspects of the practice’s underlying tradition.

MBs began teaching *lectio divina* in retreats and workshops. In a series of “Refresh” weekend retreats, depleted ministers were taught *lectio* so they could develop healthier ways of living.<sup>55</sup> They were also encouraged to practice “solitude, *Gelassenheit* (‘the holiness of letting go’) and Sabbath rest”—which correspond well with Benedictine life.<sup>56</sup> The Mark Centre, which taught *lectio divina* as a key tool for listening to God,<sup>57</sup> defined *lectio* as a “prayerful reading of Scripture . . . meant to be an experience of hearing and receiving words from God in the here and now. *Lectio Divina* has been compared to feasting on the Word.”<sup>58</sup> During a one-day workshop, *lectio divina* and stillness were introduced as ways of “hearing God’s voice and

<sup>52</sup> Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule*, 400.

<sup>53</sup> Chapters 38 and 42 in the Rule of Benedict.

<sup>54</sup> Guigues (Guigo II) du Chastel, “Letter of Dom Guigo the Carthusian to Brother Gervase about the Contemplative Life,” Fish Eaters, [www.fisheaters.com/guigo.html](http://www.fisheaters.com/guigo.html), accessed Aug. 4, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> “Refresh 2004 in B.C.,” *Menmonite Brethren Herald*, Dec. 17, 2004, 12.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> “Tools for Listening to God,” The Mark Centre, [www.markcentre.org/listening-to-god/](http://www.markcentre.org/listening-to-god/), accessed Aug. 10, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> “*Lectio Divina*: Reading and Savouring the Word,” The Mark Centre, 2015, [www.markcentre.org/listening-to-god/lectio-divina/](http://www.markcentre.org/listening-to-god/lectio-divina/), accessed Aug. 10, 2015.

refreshing your relationship with him,” and of “[paying] attention to the Spirit’s still small voice” during the evangelical practice of “Quiet Time.”<sup>59</sup> As part of a convention, pastor Mary Reimer introduced *lectio divina* “as a refreshing way to read Scripture” that “opens us, makes us attentive to God’s presence within us.”<sup>60</sup> In these various settings, participants were taught *lectio divina* as a way of noticing God, listening for God’s word, and being refreshed thereby.

Remarkably, another pastor, Rachel Twigg Boyce, was invited to lead retreats—at a Benedictine retreat center. She used *lectio* as one of several practices intended to help retreatants “take a breath, a pause, from your everyday life and enjoy a sustained period of rest, reflection, and contemplative prayer.” The other practices were “visio divina, spiritual direction, reflection, prayer practices, corporate prayer and silence.”<sup>61</sup> This was a uniquely reciprocal engagement between MBs and Benedictines.

Before long, MBs were publishing accounts of the experiences of those learning *lectio divina* and related practices. *Lectio* was usually said to provide a subjective experience of communicating with God. People read the Bible “not for study but ‘with the heart’” because *lectio* is “an interactive experience with Scripture, the living and active Word. . . . The shiver I feel when a word ‘shimmers’ for me in Lectio Divina [helps me] feel the joy of *really communicating* with God.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the pastor of Central Heights Church, a large congregation in Abbotsford, BC, described *lectio* as writing down what impresses one’s heart about a passage, expressing oneself to God in prayer, and then having a deep conversation with God.<sup>63</sup> This pastor

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<sup>59</sup> “Day in the Word: Being with God in Stillness and Scripture,” Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 2013. [events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?llr=bwatvmcab&oeidk=a07e82odozp134c7152](http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?llr=bwatvmcab&oeidk=a07e82odozp134c7152), accessed Aug. 10, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Laura Kalmar, “Manitoba MBs Fall to Their Knees in Prayer: Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba Assembly 2012, Mar. 2–3,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 2-12, 2012, 22; Mary Reimer, “Praying the Scriptures,” workshop presentation, Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, audio recording, [assembly2012.wordpress.com/media/](http://assembly2012.wordpress.com/media/), accessed Aug. 10, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> “Spirituality Workshops and Retreats: July 2015-June 2016,” St. Benedict’s Retreat and Conference Centre, 2015, [centre.stbens.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2015-16.pdf](http://centre.stbens.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2015-16.pdf), accessed Aug. 10, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Penner, “A Small-Town Mennonite Girl’s Journey,” 5. Italics are original.

<sup>63</sup> Chris Douglas, “My Prayer Habits,” document for pastoral team, Central Heights Church, Abbotsford, BC, 2005.

encouraged practicing *lectio divina*—alongside examen and the Jesus Prayer—because he counted on God to speak and communicate.<sup>64</sup>

In a few cases, MBs made a point of practicing *lectio divina* in ways that not only engaged readers subjectively but also integrated their minds, actions, and communities. Waterloo MB Church, a large established congregation, named it as one of many recommended spiritual disciplines by which people can receive God’s love and express love for God, and also “learn how to live out Christ’s life in the world.”<sup>65</sup> Artisan Church, a newer urban neighborhood parish church in Vancouver, employed the four-stage *lectio divina* laid out by Guigo, so that participants would “[use] both the head *and* heart to integrate God’s Word in us.”<sup>66</sup> Participants were to attend to their “memories, images, feelings, thoughts or connections with other passages” as they hear the Scriptures. Several churches practiced *lectio* in group settings.<sup>67</sup> A booklet titled *DGD: A Lifelong Apprenticeship* introduces “Contemplative Bible Reading” (*lectio divina*) in a communal way that leads to transformed living.<sup>68</sup> Participants share “how this passage touches their life today” and say whether “[God is] inviting me to do, say or be something through this word or phrase.”<sup>69</sup> By conducting *lectio divina* as both an individual and communal practice, and by encouraging various ways of engaging Scripture subjectively, intellectually, and with actions, these churches were seeking to practice it in a holistic, integrated manner in keeping with Benedictine tradition.

Alongside *lectio divina*, MBs were being introduced to other Benedictine practices and emphases, especially though the *Mennonite*

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<sup>64</sup> Chris Douglas, conversation with author, Sept. 22, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> “Prayer and Spiritual Disciplines,” Waterloo (Ontario) MB Church, 2009, [www.waterloomb.org/resources/prayer-spiritual-disciplines](http://www.waterloomb.org/resources/prayer-spiritual-disciplines), accessed June 3, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> See Artisan Church web information: “The Artisan Movement,” [artisanvancouver.ca/who-we-are/vision-and-values.html](http://artisanvancouver.ca/who-we-are/vision-and-values.html); “Spiritual Practices,” [artisanvancouver.ca/resources-a-media/spiritual-practices.html](http://artisanvancouver.ca/resources-a-media/spiritual-practices.html); “Lectio Divina (Spiritual Reading),” [artisanvancouver.ca/images/stories/lectio\\_divina.pdf](http://artisanvancouver.ca/images/stories/lectio_divina.pdf), all accessed Aug. 13, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Gregg Baker, “Experience God: Holy Week,” *Connection* newsletter, Sardis Community Church [Chilliwack, BC], (Summer 2014), 6; “Sardis Community Church,” Sardis Community Church, 2015, [www.sardiscommunitychurch.com/f/SCC\\_Brochure\\_June2015.pdf](http://www.sardiscommunitychurch.com/f/SCC_Brochure_June2015.pdf), accessed Aug. 11, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Stuart, *A Lifelong Apprenticeship*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

*Brethren Herald*. The *Herald's* first references to Benedictine life pointed out that 16th-century Anabaptist Michael Sattler was a Benedictine, and that Catholic emphases persisted in his version of Anabaptism.<sup>70</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, some MBs visited Benedictine monasteries for working and personal retreats.<sup>71</sup> The unfamiliar simplicity and beauty of these locations were expected to “unsettle” attendees so that “although we have an agenda, we are here primarily to think, pray, reflect, challenge, support and to listen to God and each other.”<sup>72</sup> A national leader regularly visited St. Benedict’s on the Red, in Manitoba, “so that my soul can be refreshed and the voice of God not only heard but adhered to.”<sup>73</sup> Another woman, after visiting Westminster Abbey in BC learned how to forgive the man who had killed her brother.<sup>74</sup>

Other MBs drew on Benedictine liturgical forms. One writer in the *Herald* relied on the Benedictine Daily Office to pray the Psalms and other Scriptures systematically, although without necessarily employing all of the Office.<sup>75</sup> The *Herald* promoted the revised common lectionary for use by congregations and individuals, thus echoing the Benedictine way of praying and reading Scripture.<sup>76</sup> One university student even described using MB-sponsored lectionary resources to lead worship among incarcerated teenagers because the communal readings and prayers helped unite them.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the pastor of a relatively new church in Vancouver explained that the liturgical elements provided helpful reliability and predictability for people

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<sup>70</sup> Vernon Ratzlaff, “Pilgrim Aflame,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Aug. 22, 1969, 21; James R. Coggins, Paul G. Hiebert, “Anabaptist History: Where Is It Leading Us?,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 5, 1985, 7.

<sup>71</sup> “MEI Teachers Review Their Aims,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Oct. 3, 1969, 15; “People and Events,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Dec. 24, 1976, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Lorina Marsch, “Executives Use Retreat to Look to Future,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Sept. 24, 1993, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Sherryl Koop, “Learning to Listen, and Heed,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Jan. 16, 2004, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Elsie Neufeld, “Joseph: Chapter One—Who Is My Neighbour?,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Nov. 10, 1989, 6-7. Cf. Elsie Neufeld, “Joseph: Chapter Two—Doors,” *ibid.*, 8-9, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Friesen, “Praying in Time,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, November 2010, 33.

<sup>76</sup> See these *Mennonite Herald* items: James N. Pankratz, “Hear the Word of the Lord,” March 18, 1988, 4-5; James N. Pankratz, “Worship and the Word of God,” March 17, 1989, 8; Brad Sumner, “Future-Fitted Faith: Jeremiah 29:10-14,” January 2007, 13; “Personalalia,” Oct. 6, 2000, 27; Sarah Bergen, “Seminary Creates Web-Based Lenten Devotional,” February 2009, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Esau, “Music for the Masses: Blog Takes Worship World by Storm,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, September 2013, 37.



returning to the church.<sup>78</sup> The Benedictine emphasis on time was reflected in the use of the Christian calendar, as outlined in a 2010 issue of the *Herald*.<sup>79</sup> Congregations such as Bakerview MB Church in Abbotsford followed it because it “emphasizes Christian participation in [the] memorable events” of Jesus’ life.<sup>80</sup> As another writer explained, bodily rituals and practices—also part of Benedictine worship—are valuable because they train worshipers’ hearts to desire the kingdom: “though some might question the value of ritual practices . . . I feel affirmed in my church’s practice of blending some elements of other traditions (communal prayers, responses, confession, use of the lectionary, etc.) with MB traditions.”<sup>81</sup>

Finally, the monastic life itself was said to have many instructive features: prayer and worship, self-denial and rejection of worldliness, hard work, scholarly study and preservation of the Scriptures, moderation and good judgment,<sup>82</sup> and an approach to evangelism that consists of being an “embodied alternative culture while genuinely embracing the lost and needy.”<sup>83</sup> The Benedictine commitment to stability was upheld in opposition to the tendency to wander from church to church.<sup>84</sup>

Three groups of MBs went so far as to live according to a Rule for Life. The first example, SoulStream, which initially taught students how to develop a personal Rule, subsequently became “a committed contemplative community of partners” who made basic commitments to a Benedictine-like Rule.<sup>85</sup> This Rule included regular times of prayer and solitude, responsiveness to the Holy Spirit in daily choices, nurturing healthy community and

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<sup>78</sup> See Faithwerks Church web information: “Most Recent Sermons,” [www.faithwerks.org/brainwerks.html](http://www.faithwerks.org/brainwerks.html), accessed Aug. 14, 2015; “Faithwerks Church,” [www.faithwerks.org](http://www.faithwerks.org), accessed Aug. 14, 2015. Nick Suen, conversation with author May 4, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> “A Rough Guide to the Liturgical Calendar,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, November 2010, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Gay Lynn Voth, “Anabaptist Liturgical Spirituality and the Supper of Christ,” *Direction* 34, no. 1 (2005): 14.

<sup>81</sup> Daphne Kamphuis, “Training Bodies and Hearts for God,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, November 2010, 33.

<sup>82</sup> John Longhurst, “The Story of the Church: Preserving the Christian Tradition—Part V,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Nov. 27, 1987, 18-19.

<sup>83</sup> Len Hjalmarson, “Another Option,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, May 2009, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Daphne Kamphuis, “Many Facets of God,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Nov. 25, 2005, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Jeff Imbach, “Developing a Rule of Life,” lecture, Abbotsford, BC, 2004; “About SoulStream,” [soulstream.org/about-soulstream/](http://soulstream.org/about-soulstream/), accessed Aug. 14, 2015.

relationships, welcoming others, and practicing compassionate justice and peace.<sup>86</sup>

The second example, Imago Dei, an MB church since 2003, also encouraged its dispersed members and communities (house churches) to follow a Rule of Life. Initially taking a strong interest in the Vancouver arts community, Imago Dei eventually became “an ecumenical network” of “small communities of faith who gather weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly for the encouragement of real and sustained transformation in Christ.”<sup>87</sup> These communities assembled “to spend time in worship, prayer, discussion, silence and communion” across Canada and, as of 2019, in five other countries.<sup>88</sup> (The leader of the group in Winnipeg, Mary Reimer, is a retired MB pastor.) *Lectio divina* played an important role by contributing to “the conversion of the heart more than the accumulation of knowledge.”<sup>89</sup> Participants were also invited to pray with a Psalm each morning.<sup>90</sup> The Rule included both general or ongoing rules—meet with a small group and a spiritual director or friend, serve others, equip yourself, take regular retreats—and particular or daily rules—spend time daily in prayer and silence, reflect on the Lord’s Prayer, and pause “as you can” to rest and “recollect your soul before God.”<sup>91</sup> Rob des Cotes, the founder, responded to critics who do not consider such prayer to be part of Christian spirituality:

[C]ontemplation is not a different type of prayer...but its receptive side, “offering time for the Lord to communicate with us, often simply in the form of love and peace.” Distinct from yoga and Buddhist meditation that seek peace ‘self with self,’ the

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<sup>86</sup> “About SoulStream.”

<sup>87</sup> Coggins, “A Church in the Image,” 17; See also Imago Dei Christian Community web information: “A Way of Life,” [imagodeicommunity.ca](http://imagodeicommunity.ca), accessed Aug. 15, 2015; “Starting an Imago Dei Group,” [imagodeicommunity.ca/starting-an-imagodei-group/](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/starting-an-imagodei-group/), accessed Aug. 15, 2015.

<sup>88</sup> “Starting”; “Imago Dei Groups,” [imagodeicommunity.ca/our-services/](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/our-services/), accessed Aug. 16, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> “A Way of Life,” [imagodeicommunity.ca/weekly-meditations/a-way-of-life/](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/weekly-meditations/a-way-of-life/), accessed Aug. 26, 2015; “Weekly Meditations,” [imagodeicommunity.ca/category/weekly-meditations/](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/category/weekly-meditations/), accessed Aug. 26, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> “Psalms for Prayer,” [imagodeicommunity.ca/psalms-for-prayer/](http://imagodeicommunity.ca/psalms-for-prayer/), accessed Aug. 27, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> “A Way of Life.”

nature of Christian prayer is ‘self with God...’<sup>92</sup>

House Blend Ministries in Winnipeg, the third example, was legally registered not as a church but as a “community-oriented Christian religious order,” undoubtedly a unique status in the denomination.<sup>93</sup> House Blend was created in 2008 as an intentional community passionate about living in relationship with poor people in Winnipeg’s inner core.<sup>94</sup> Some members lived in the same house and others in the surrounding neighborhood, but all were “committed to sharing our lives with each other and with our neighbours” as inspired by Jesus and taught by Paul.<sup>95</sup> Guided by a Rule of Life, members chose to follow sustainable rhythms of contemplation (solitude for prayer), community (weekly fellowship with close friends), and connection (actively engaging people in need).<sup>96</sup> Many elements echo Benedict’s Rule: Sabbath-keeping, prayer, regular meals and prayer together, mutual accountability (including meeting monthly with a spiritual director or friend), volunteering in the immediate neighborhood, simplicity and generosity, hospitality to friends and strangers, peacebuilding, and caring for God’s earth.<sup>97</sup> *Lectio divina* was important for the community’s founding pastor, Rachel Twigg Boyce, who was deeply influenced by the St. Benedict on the Red monastery.<sup>98</sup> After House Blend was underway, participants discovered that their way of life had much in common with the wider New

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<sup>92</sup> Angeline Schellenberg, “When One Song Doesn’t Fit All: MB Churches Creatively Engage in Worship,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, January 2013, 13.

<sup>93</sup> “House Blend Ministries Inc.,” 2015, [donate2charities.ca/en/House.Blend.Ministries.Inc.0\\_801278862RR0001](http://donate2charities.ca/en/House.Blend.Ministries.Inc.0_801278862RR0001), accessed Aug. 28, 2015. Rachel Twigg Boyce, conversation with author, July 9, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Laura Kalmar, “Manitoba Dreams On! The 97th Convention of the MB Church of Manitoba Assembles,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 7, 2006, 13; Karla Braun, “Warmed Inside and Out on February Holiday,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, May 2009, 17; “Our Mission – Our History,” [houseblendministries.com/mission/](http://houseblendministries.com/mission/), accessed Aug. 28, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> “We Are ...,” [houseblendministries.com/home/](http://houseblendministries.com/home/), accessed Aug. 28, 2015. Cf. “House Blend Ministries,” Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, [mbcm.ca/about-us/churchplanting-projects/house-blend-ministries/](http://mbcm.ca/about-us/churchplanting-projects/house-blend-ministries/), accessed Aug. 28, 2015.

<sup>96</sup> “We Are ...”

<sup>97</sup> “House Blend Ministries’ Rule of Life,” [houseblendministries.com/rule/](http://houseblendministries.com/rule/), accessed Aug. 28, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Twigg Boyce, conversation; Karla Braun, “Ministry Hosts Radical Prayer Gathering,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, January 2011, 32.

Monasticism movement exemplified by Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hargrove. By living as a gathered and dispersed religious order committed to the urban poor, House Blend sought to bridge MBs' zeal for evangelism and church planting with Benedictine community living. After Twigg Boyce resigned from House Blend, this ministry closed in fall 2017.<sup>99</sup>

According to MBs who practiced *lectio divina* and drew on its Benedictine roots, the practice provided a subjective experience of not only hearing from God but entering into communion with God. Some also found ways to integrate study and community with this practice, with transformation and mission in the world as their goal. Other liturgical practices often accompanied *lectio* when undertaken by a community of believers. MBs who developed a shared Rule for Life most fully represented its core elements.

### **Alternate Assessments**

While some MBs were keen to draw from Ignatian, Taizé, and Benedictine wellsprings, a handful of individuals criticized these interactions in letters to the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. Not everyone thought that these new developments were helpful or even faithful. Critics warned against subjectivity and imagination, which they felt can open people to demonic influences.<sup>100</sup> Others opposed any suggestion that human effort or spiritual discipline plays a role in ongoing conversion, especially because they viewed conversion as a one-time event, not a process.<sup>101</sup> A few people criticized anything associated with Roman Catholic Christianity.<sup>102</sup> With respect to

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<sup>99</sup> The denomination announced that it was closing House Blend after reviewing its resources and vision in the light of related ministries in the city. "House Blend Ministries Closing Fall 2017," Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, <https://mbcm.ca/house-blend-ministries-closing-fall-2017/>, accessed April 6, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> See these items in *Mennonite Brethren Herald*: Lynda Magner, "Labyrinth Satanic?," July 12, 2002, 7; Carla Kamps, "Dangers of Contemplative Meditation," April 7, 2006, 12; James Toews, "People of 'the Logic,'" Oct. 13, 2006, 28.

<sup>101</sup> Kamps, "Dangers," 12; Nancy Warkentin, "Don't Crawl Like Caterpillars," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, April 28, 2006, 3; Jake Peters, "Why Dialogue," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Sept. 3, 2004, 12.

<sup>102</sup> See these items in *Mennonite Brethren Herald*: Lynda Magner, "New Age Influence," Sept. 23, 2005, 13; Wolfgang Binder, "Prayer Misdirected," Aug. 12, 2005, 11; Réginald Fauteux, "Catholics Need to Hear Gospel," July, 2013, 5.

specific Ignatian or Taizé practices, critics opposed experiences that were either too foreign, repetitive, emotional, or associated with inter-religious interactions.<sup>103</sup>

In response, the *Herald* published an article affirming spiritual formation and its associated practices.<sup>104</sup> Walter Unger, chair of the Board of Faith and Life of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference, asserted that these practices have longstanding precedents among evangelicals and have roots in Scripture; that Catholics and the pre-Reformation church have much to teach about spiritual disciplines; and that many disciplines are common to all people, regardless of their faith commitments. Unger therefore welcomed all practices that are

in line with biblical teaching and practice regarding holy living and growth in Christlikeness. . . . We must always remember that Scripture is the primary source (John 17:17) and our highest authority in the process of sanctification. No teaching or practice regarding spiritual formation can ever be allowed to trump Scripture.<sup>105</sup>

Given the non-negotiables of Scripture and lifelong transformation, Unger affirmed MBs who were drawing on diverse traditions for their spiritual formation.

### **Moving Onward**

Let me offer several observations about the ways that the denomination has recently engaged with spiritual direction, Taizé singing, and *lectio divina*. First, this engagement with practices from traditions usually considered “foreign” took place primarily at a grassroots level. It was not the high-level engagement typically associated with ecumenism—that is, pursuing Christian unity across denominations and traditions by creating

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<sup>103</sup> Andrew Dyck, “Come Away: Worship Leaders and Youth Workers Meet for Contemplative Prayer Retreat,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Jan. 16, 2004, 5; anonymous retreat feedback; Dan Huget, conversation with author, Dec. 14, 2011; Diane Bowker, conversation with author, Dec. 7, 2011; Dale Dirksen, conversation.

<sup>104</sup> Walter Unger, “Relieving Anxieties over ‘Spiritual Formation,’” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, March 17, 2006, 30.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31. Unger rules out practices that “promote altered states of consciousness.”

organizational ties, conducting theological dialogues, or sharing in ministries of mission. Instead, MB spiritual life was being cross-pollinated with outside influences at the level of devotional practices and personal experience. Not surprisingly, this engagement was relatively unplanned and organic. Nor was it universal; MBs were inconsistent in how far they embraced the three practices. Yet a lack of institutional oversight did not hamper the significant impact that these practices had on many individuals and congregations.

Second, each practice was bound up with certain histories, associated actions, and theological assumptions. These elements also shaped the spiritual life of those adopting the practice. There was an integrity to this broader engagement.<sup>106</sup> That is, instead of ripping the practices out of their traditional contexts, members allowed elements of those contexts to influence them. For example, spiritual direction, with its emphasis on discerning the Holy Spirit in all of life, suggested a more expansive view of God's work of conversion.

Third, the unplanned grassroots ways of encountering new practices and their associated communities highlighted the ongoing, never-ending dynamic inherent within congregations, denominations, and traditions. A kind of perpetual motion is at work, whereby learning, borrowing, and discarding are always taking place. The account I have provided indicates that however peripheral, MB involvements with Ignatian, Taizé, and Benedictine communities and practices are only the latest of many connections that members have made with other Christians. When a group's spirituality calls for a course correction or reinvigoration, these involvements may offer what is needed, as when *lectio divina* provides a way to re-integrate knowledge-centric and prayerful approaches to reading Scripture.

Finally, MB engagement with the three practices and their respective roots has the potential to achieve the Christian unity for which Jesus prayed.<sup>107</sup> While my account does not represent the mutual exchange of gifts promoted by such leaders as Brother Roger and Pope John Paul II,<sup>108</sup> the peacemaking

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<sup>106</sup> For an expanded perspective on the ethical appropriation of spiritual practices, cf. Erwin D. Klassen, "Grave Robber: Spirituality and the Art of Theft," *Direction* 34, no. 1 (2005); Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2011).

<sup>107</sup> John 17:11, 20-24.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Brother Roger, *And Your Deserts Shall Flower: Journal 1977-1979*, trans. Emily Chisholm and the Taizé Community (London: Mowbray, 1983), 59; Pope John Paul II, "Novo Millennio

work needed for unity requires more than the efforts of theologians and church leaders. It requires a generosity of spirit by grassroots believers seeking to live ever more faithfully to Christ. When they display an openness to exploring and receiving gifts from previously unfamiliar traditions, a vital movement towards enjoying fellowship across old divides could arise. Such communion would be a gift for the church—and for the world.

An exploration of the prayers of MBs could provide further insight into the ways that MBs have engaged other traditions, although such an exploration would be difficult because MBs have generally prayed extemporaneously. Meanwhile, I believe that if grassroots MBs—and other Christians—who at times are tempted by the siren song of sectarianism and fundamentalism will continue to embrace a generous spirit towards Christians of other backgrounds, the resulting exchange of spiritual practices and traditions will offer the hope of Christian unity amidst diversity. That unity will be a reconciling witness—a gift for all people.

*Andrew Dyck is Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality and Pastoral Ministry for MB Biblical Seminary at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba.*