A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation

Sample In-Class Activities

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Note: I would use different types of in-class activities for different levels of courses. In a DMin class I would run the class more like a seminar, with lots of discussion and case study exploration (often with the cases provided by the students). I would also, in DMin and some masters-level courses, employ “fishbowls,” where the students offer spiritual direction to one another by sharing personal stories in small groups or in front of the large group, after which they debrief by identifying agents, context, appropriate next steps, and so on. I would facilitate these times to target what we might want to explore in each session related to each chapter of the text. In other masters-level and undergraduate classes (where there may be less academic background, devotional familiarity, or pastoral experience), I would use activities like the ones below to introduce or develop key concepts from the book in an engaging manner. It all depends on what I see in the class.

# Chapter 1: Christian Spiritual Formation

## Clay (For)mations

Objective(s): get to know one another, introduce formation

Time: 15 minutes of creation, 15 minutes of sharing, 15 minutes of lecture/discussion

Materials: colored modeling clay

Sometime during the first day of class I like to give the students a “get-to-know-each-other” exercise that doubles as a reflection on the basic concept of formation. I make packets of colored modeling clay available and tell the students to take some time (around 15 minutes) and create little representations of themselves or their lives with Christ. I like to use colored clay because students make use of both color and shape in their representations. Then we share our creations in groups or as a whole (depending on the size of the class). This way we learn a bit about each other. Then I lead them in a discussion about the act of creating their representations. I talk about what went on in their minds—the idea of the object, the selection of resources (colors and such), the kneading and forming, and the final communication of their creations. I use what comes up in this discussion as a way to introduce some of the basic features of Christian spiritual formation: aim, means, process, and so on.

# Chapter 2: The Story of Christian Spiritual Formation

## The Big Story on the Big Screen

Objective(s): summarize the gospel story

Time: 15 minutes of planning, 5 minutes to present per group, 15 minutes to debrief

Materials: none, unless you have a costume box at hand. Students often can invent their own props with what they have available.

Most students these days are familiar with the genre of “big movie”: the epic story, the miniseries. The point here is to instill in students the idea of the Bible and the Christian message as *the* Big Story. I divide the class into groups of 4–7 people (sometimes assigning a facilitator, depending on the group or class). Then I tell them that they are going to write, produce, and perform the gospel story in five minutes or less. First, each group is to outline what this story involves (the storyboard): Who are the main characters? What is the basic plotline? Then they are to assign characters and other “staff” for the project (prop manager, camera operator [who films the drama on their phone], special effects, etc.). This way those who are shy can contribute through other means.

After the groups have prepared their dramas, each group presents their story before the whole. Then we debrief, asking how each group saw the story, what it was like to write the entire gospel as a brief play, how they chose the characters and presented them, why this or that scene was included or deleted from the script, and what the story as presented might mean for our understanding of what Christian spiritual formation is all about. This kind of discussion presents a tangible and engaged way of opening up the issues related to the subject of formation as story.

# Chapter 3: The Fullness and Aims of Christian Spiritual Formation

## The Jelly Bean Distribution

Objective(s): illustrate the breadth of Christian spiritual formation

Time: 15 minutes in the exercise, 15 minutes to debrief

Materials: enough jelly beans for each student to have 10–20 if needed. Presort them into seven separate bowls with a single color in each bowl.

When I teach this material, I usually spend a bit of time going over the human experience chart, drawing especially from *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (pp. 77–106, 352). I begin with the story of my philosophical journey and how I discovered the role of each of the “stages” of human experience. Then I talk about the series of conversions I have had in life and the different traditions somewhat reflected by each segment of the pie chart. At the end of this lecture, students have a sense of human diversity and interconnectedness and how this is illustrated within the various traditions of the Christian church.

Then I place the various bowls of jelly beans around the room so they are not all in one place. I write a color-key on the board (red = charismatic/experiencing, blue = contemplative / being aware, and so on). I make available a seventh bowl for “other” so that people have the freedom to identify with terms and aspects of human experience I might not have expressed in their language. I release the students to collect from the bowls the blend of jelly beans that they feel best represents their own current faith experience.

Then, after students have collected their beans, I have them talk about their collections in small groups. Some may have taken a few beans from one bowl/tradition to represent a recent experience. Others may have grown up in only one tradition and have lots of beans of one color. Still others may have collected many beans from one color to represent one point in time only to put some of them back later on in life. We appreciatively hear the story of each student’s fullness.

Then, I ask if any students would like to try a jelly bean of a different color/flavor. I give students the option to receive jelly beans from those who might have something to offer, or perhaps from the bowls directly.

We close with a discussion about the fullness and aims of formation. How might different groups of Christians present this same material? The experience is helpful, but the analogy can break down in spots. Where and why does it break down? What do we learn from this exercise about Christian spiritual formation?

# Chapter 4: The Contexts and Agents of Christian Spiritual Formation

## Attention to Diverse Contexts

Objective(s): a first experience in paying attention to another

Time: 2 minutes of thinking, 5 minutes of sharing per person in each pair, 10 minutes to debrief per person, final debrief in large group

Materials: none

One of the most important parts of a classroom exploration for chapter 4 is the discussion of diversity. Building upon our conversation around the fullness and aims of formation in the previous chapter (which gave us a forward look), we now explore the contexts from which our place of formation arises (a backward look). I usually have students of various genders, ages, races, and so on, so I open up the conversation by talking about how some of the aspects of Christian spiritual formation might be experienced differently from different cultural backgrounds. I draw examples from the literature on spiritual formation and cultural diversity (What does discernment feel like for an Asian? What does spiritual direction feel like for an African American?). But the point is actually for me to say as little as possible and let the other students tell their stories and ask their questions. This conversation can be exceptionally powerful.

Another option is simply to break students up in pairs (with as much difference between each member of the pairs as possible). Then I tell them that they will have five minutes to tell each other a “formation” story. It might be spiritual, or it might not. I give them a couple of minutes to think of a story to tell. Then each student gets five minutes to tell their story, after which the other student—with help from the storyteller—gets another ten minutes to identify elements of context that were relevant to the story. Are there aspects of the story that are what they are because of the context from which the student was formed? How did culture, family, church, etc. play a part in formation? How is agency viewed in different contexts? See what you learn. After each student has had the opportunity to share and explore, bring the group back together and see what insights might be highlighted for the entire class.

# Chapter 5: The Process of Transformation and the Task of Formation

## Models of Transformation: The Puppet Show

Objective(s): illustrate stages of Christian maturity

Time: 2 minutes of preparation, 5 minutes of presentation, 15 minutes to debrief/lecture

Materials: a few sock puppets, a sheet spread between chairs (or something similar) to create a sock-puppet “stage,” a prepared script

Sometimes a good stereotype helps us understand the dangers of certain ways of approaching things. And a sock-puppet play is a good way of expressing stereotypes, so I write out a script expressing a dialogue between classic approaches to sanctification or Christian growth: the Reformed (slow growth rooted in faith), the Wesleyan (entire sanctification), the charismatic (baptism in the Spirit), the mystical (stages prior to an infused contemplation), and/or other models depending on the needs of the class. I write the script as if the characters are all eager to mature in Christ but are in dispute about how to get there. What is the proper process? I try to use key language from each approach and to bring up the key issues that are front-and-center in discussion about the process of sanctification and Christian maturity. (For an example of this sock-puppet lecture, see <https://vimeo.com/123691873>.)

Then in class (usually before my lecture on the topic), I state that we will have a play about the topic. I tell them that the script is already written, so they don’t have to invent their lines. I show them the puppets and their parts. Students then volunteer to use the puppets. I give them some time to review the scripts and get set up (class break). We have the presentation and and then evaluate the puppets’ discussion in terms of the material presented in *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*. I address, in lecture fashion, any points that were not brought up in the class discussion.

# Chapter 6: The Means of Christian Spiritual Formation

## Building a Bridge to Maturity

Objective(s): illustrate the wide range of means that we individually and together use to mature in Christ

Time: 5 minutes for thinking and writing, 5 minutes for building, 10 minutes to debrief

Materials: a large number of wooden blocks (in a box perhaps, larger blocks are better), blank labels that can be “stuck” to the blocks, a track (like a Hot Wheels track or some other board that can be somewhat attached to the blocks), a vehicle to ride on the track, and perhaps tape to attach the track to the blocks

After an initial discussion of the means of grace (practices, community, trials, expressions of the Holy Spirit’s work), pass out the labels to the students. Instruct the students that they are aiming for maturity or increase in likeness to Christ and the gospel. Then have them write on the labels the means of grace that have been most valuable for them to that end (or for a group if you are exploring corporate formation). Let them feel free to use as many labels as they want in the five minutes assigned for thinking and writing. Then show the students your box of building blocks. Have each student come up, get however many blocks they need, and affix one label per block. Tell the students that you will now show how the body of Christ—together employing the means of grace—builds a bridge to maturity. Get the group together to pile blocks with like names on top of each other. The tallest piles are at one end and the shortest piles are at another, all with labels showing. Then bring out the track, attach the track to the block piles making its way from the top of the tallest pile across to the end, and then bring out the car and run it along the track. Use of the various means of grace enables the car to get from one place to the other. Then explore the different means used or not used and develop the analogy further (again, as with all analogies, this one will have its weaknesses, and that itself can teach us).

# Chapter 7: Formed into Prayer

## Modeling Communication

Objective(s): to show a class the basic components of prayerful communication

Time: 5 minutes of conversation, 15 minutes to debrief

Materials: none

When teaching formation into prayer, it is very important for me, particularly with groups who may not have experience with a wide range of prayer styles/forms, to introduce new ways of communicating with God. I will lead classes in an imaginative encounter with a story of Jesus. I will give students an opportunity to pray for healing. I will facilitate a nature (or urban) walk with God. I will lead a session of contemplative silence. The possibilities are endless. It all depends on the needs of the class. But something I have found helpful to communicate the basic principle of communication that grounds much of what I say in chapter 7 is to model communication publicly in the class. I ask for two volunteers. They stand at two ends of the front of the class, walk toward each other, “meet and greet,” have a very brief conversation, and then depart. When the public conversation is over, we deconstruct what is going on. What did the students notice? Depending on how well they are thinking about the material of the chapter, usually they will all notice hearing and listening. It takes more to notice “the space in between,” but sooner or later it comes out. Why did this person speak in this manner with that person? What about the literal silences? What was going on between the people? What would it have been like if this same conversation were conducted between a married couple? And so on. We explore the nature of communication in general as displayed in class. We ask what it might look like for people to improve their communication: What is involved in listening, in speaking, in the space in between?

When we have sufficiently explored the conversation displayed in class, we then move to explore prayer: speaking, listening, and the space in between. What is it like? How do we listen to the Spirit? What is improvement in speech like in prayer? What about this space in between thing? The illustration of the people in front of the class serves as a great stimulus to help the class explore prayer in a way that is fresh and engaging.

# Chapter 8: Formed Together

## Our Network

(Note: This exercise is taken from Ivana Franović, et al., *Reconciliation?!: Training Handbook for Dealing with the Past* [Belgrade/Sarajevo: Centre for Nonviolent Action, 2014], 54.)

Objective(s): to discover our network connections

Time: 15 minutes or more

Materials: none

First, instruct a student volunteer to stand in the middle of the room. Then have this student invite someone else into the middle and briefly explain what connects them. Both individuals remain in the middle of the room. Now the second person calls out to the next and gives a brief explanation of what connects the two of them. The third person calls the fourth one and so on—until all participants are connected through a single chain in the middle of the room or time runs out. You can also begin again with a different person who may point to a new connection. Thus the entire process can be repeated several times, if there is a need for it. Each new chain reveals unexpected connections between people who may have thought they had little connection with others in the room.

# Chapter 9: Formed in Thinking, Feeling, and Acting

## Habit Forming

Objective(s): illustrate how habits are formed

Time: perhaps 15 minutes for the initial lecture. After that, nothing, except some final debriefing at the end of class.

Materials: a signal (a bell perhaps?)

This exercise is best done throughout the entire course, but it could be introduced even in a single classroom session. It is best done in the midst of a class where lecture, discussion, and other elements are going on at the same time.

First, early in the class introduce the idea of tiny habits as presented in the work of psychologist B. J. Fogg. Describe Fogg’s idea of MAT: Motivation, Ability, and Trigger. Developing Fogg’s research, describe how actions—which are associated with sufficient motivation, with steps that require little ability to complete, and with simple triggers—facilitate change (not to mention the work of the Holy Spirit). Then present further psychological research to show the significant benefits (for health, longevity, spiritual life, and so on) of gratitude. By now students will be motivated to improve in gratitude.

Then show the bell (or some other signal) to the class and announce that every time they hear it they will be required to quickly say one thing they are grateful for (or at least one thing they like). Then periodically, at random, make the signal. Everyone must say something immediately each time. After a while, re-instruct the class to shift from needing to speak their gratitude to merely thinking of it. Don't drown the class in signals, but offer enough to secure reinforcement. Talk to them of how they might respond to bells from now on. By the end of the class (or the course) you will have taught the class a habit—and something about how to learn a habit.

# Chapter 10: Formed into Mission

## Group “Field Trip”

Objective(s): to give the students a common exercise in ethnographic observation

Time: 15 minutes of observation, 20 minutes of discussion

Materials: audio-visual equipment appropriate for showing the entire class a video recording

Ideally, the best way to teach a class to observe difference and think missionally about populations is to go together to a place with the goal of observation and missional evaluation: a shopping mall, a city park, a particular neighborhood. Introduce the complexities of communication (you can, for example, describe the differences of communication in high-context and low-context communication cultures), send the class out with a set of instructions for observation of cultures, and then share what each of you observed. (For other examples of cross-cultural communication exercises, see <http://www.culture-at-work.com/xcexercises.html>.) But if this is not possible, then you can take one small step forward by watching and evaluating examples of cultures together after receiving observation instructions. Perhaps you could watch a few sample “gutter punk” YouTube videos, or you could show video footage of a Rainbow gathering (to use Western cultural examples). After watching, facilitate an evaluation of worldview, language, values, and practices and then begin to explore what missional life and practice might look like in the midst of this culture. You can expand the conversation to discuss the cultures that surround your own location. I think that it is best in these situations to start with a very “foreign” example, then to show an example of something more similar (still evaluating this culture missionally), and then to consider a shopping mall or something else right at home.

# Chapter 11: Discerning Formation

## Noticing the Signs

Objective(s): to give the students instruction in discernment through practice

Time: This depends on how many “signs” you want to model. Perhaps 10 minutes for presentation, 15 minutes per sign for reflection, and another 10 minutes for debrief.

Materials: none

The best way to learn discernment is to do it, and the easiest way to do it is through practice with real material. Instruct the students to think of some discernment issue in their own life. It could be a decision about their future, a question about an experience, an opinion about a trend or a relationship—any area where they might have a question about the presence or will of God or some issue of wisdom.

When students have thought of their situation, lead them through an exercise of exploring areas where the Holy Spirit might lead (see the earlier sections of the book for this, or see also Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment*). Help them to examine their feelings—for example, taking note of the kinds of feelings that have been associated with the Spirit's work in their own past and then seeing what kinds of feelings are present when they reflect on their “discernment issue.” You can also have them review their communication with others (respected or not) and see what might be signs of the Spirit. There are lots of options here (again, see Liebert’s guide). The point is to give them a tangible experience of noticing the indications of the leading of the Spirit, both in terms of what they have generally known to be true and in the context of a concrete situation in front of them.

# Chapter 12: The Ministry of Christian Spiritual Formation

## Doing the Ministry

Objective(s): to give students hands-on practice at helping another determine the next appropriate step

Time: sufficient time for one or two in a group of three or four to share a story, respond, and debrief

Materials: none

By the time we have reached the end of the book, even undergraduate students are ready to step out and practice the ministry of Christian spiritual formation, at least in some small scale. What I like to do is divide the class into groups of about three or four. Then I let them know that one person (or two if there is time) will have an opportunity to share something real from their life with regards to their relationship with God (and perhaps I warn them about this assignment in advance so they can come to class with something prepared to bring to the group). I let one member from each group volunteer to be the storyteller. I also say that another person in the group will be the primary “minister of spiritual formation.” This person, the minister, will help the storyteller to discover some appropriate next step by attending to context, agents, means, and so on. The other people are silent observers. The conversation should be safe (if necessary you can develop rules for creating a safe communication atmosphere). First, the storyteller shares their story. Then the minister may ask questions or respond. There may be interaction. When the time is up, sit silently for a moment taking in the interaction. The storyteller shares what came up in the process. The minister then shares what she or he noticed. Then the observers share. The point is not to critique the “success” of the conversation but to notice where progress was made. Remember this is only a brief exploration. Perhaps very little progress was made, but you may still be able to notice that movement. Use this experiment as a springboard for talking about the ongoing ministry of Christian spiritual formation and all the challenges and possibilities mentioned in the text.