

Towards a Model of Spiritual Practice for the Spiritual Transformation of Midlife Christian Professionals in Hong Kong

邁向建立香港中年基督徒專業人士靈性轉化的靈修實踐模式

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摘要：在中年期間及之後的金齡，尋找新的生命意義過程，就像是從物質到精神，從外在到內在，最終從世俗到神聖的一個旅程。生活在一個競爭激烈及步伐迅捷的香港社會中，很多中年基督徒的專業人士，雖然積累了許多成就，但仍然未能感到滿全。我的個人經歷，正呼應著這種現象。在過去的十年中，我通過實踐神學的博士研究，將這種情感體驗，置於學術的分析和靈性的默想中，演變成為了研究的主題：「香港基督徒專業人士的中年轉化：演化中的靈修實踐模式」。本文選擇了這博士研究的重要成果，來說明經驗，尤其是依納爵所提倡的「情感經驗」，如何演變成一種情感的知識，進而演化成一種更深層的靈性體驗。從我個人的體驗，將情感經驗轉化為神

學知識的旅途中，造就了這項研究及靈修實踐的發展模式，並幫助中年基督徒理解個人的經驗，尋找新的生命意義。本文採用了一種自傳式民族志學的方法，來講述我個人的靈性歷程，從 Bob Buford 人生下半場的事工開始，然後通過心靈教育的正念練習，最終吸納了依納爵靈修。這段旅程，最終幫助了我發展一套適合中年基督徒專業人仕的工具和方法，從而加強基督徒靜默與默想的修練。

關鍵詞： 中年基督教專業人士，人生下半場，依納爵靈修，佛教正念，情感體驗

***Abstract:** The search for new meanings in life during and after midlife is like a journey from material to spiritual, external to internal and, ultimately, from secular to sacred. Living in a competitive and fast pace society of Hong Kong, there are midlife Christian professionals who have accumulated many achievements but are still not feeling fulfilled. My personal experience echoed this phenomenon. In the last ten years, I placed this affective experience under a process of academic analysis and spiritual meditation through my doctorate research in practical theology under the title: “Exploring midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong: evolving a model of spiritual practice.” The present paper selected an important outcome of this research to illustrate the process of how experience, especially the*

Ignatian advocacy of “affective experience,” may evolve into a kind of affective knowledge, which in turn may lead to deeper dimensions of spiritual experience. In my own case, this journey of transforming affective experience into theological knowledge also facilitated my attempt to develop a pilot model of spiritual practice for midlife participants in the research to interpret their own experience and search for new meanings of life. In the present paper, I have adopted an autoethnographic approach to tell my story of this journey of spirituality starting with Bob Buford’s Halftime ministry, then through Inspired Education mindfulness practice and ultimately to Ignatian spirituality. This journey has ultimately helped me develop the tools and methodology appropriate for midlife Christian professionals to reinforce the Christian practice of silent meditation.

Keywords: midlife Christian professionals, halftime, Ignatian spirituality, Buddhist mindfulness, affective experience

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is a highly commercial and competitive society. The materialistic and results-oriented nature of this society is particularly evident in the financial sector where I have worked for thirty years. I have come across numerous cases of successful professionals completely submerged in the fight for success, but with an accompanying strong sense of lost orientation in their lives. In particular, the issues of faith and calling keep coming up for Christian professionals at their midlife stage. The search for new meanings in the second half of life is a recognized phenomenon in the business and Christian communities, where competition for success is endlessly intense. The identification of this midlife struggle has prompted me to journey from the external to the interior and look for ways to facilitate the midlife transformation in this contemporary world.

Looking at the relevant literature on midlife and spirituality, I discovered that psychological perspectives dominate the discussion. In general, people look at midlife transition as issues of psychological and biological needs, a development life cycle or midlife crisis. A relatively small amount of efforts have made in addressing spiritual direction of midlife Christians. In his book *Soul and Self: Parallels between Spiritual and Psychological Growth*, Paul Fehrenbach¹ writes that “the midlife period of development seems to provide special circumstances that stimulate the reflective attitude necessary for this process (of recognizing the presence of the soul) to begin.”²

¹ Paul Fehrenbach, *Soul and Self: Parallels between Spiritual and Psychological Growth* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006).

² *Ibid.*, p. x.

In the book *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development*,³ Raymond Studzinski conducts a dialogue between direction and other disciplines with reference to those experiencing midlife. “The goal of my bringing together the contributions of theologians, directors, psychologists and other professionals is to facilitate a more informed and effective response to midlife individuals in spiritual direction.”⁴ Research into the contemporary issue of midlife transformation, with particular focus on midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong, was even more limited. Hence, I became aware of the need of a more exploratory study to provide more knowledge about the subject matter.

Adopting an autoethnographic approach, the personal transformation of my own midlife experience kicked off the journey of this present searching. For this approach, personal transformation is essential to one’s personal, professional, social, and emotional development, working together to shape the whole person. This evolution involves self-awareness, reflection, and action. For personal transformation to occur, a fundamental dissatisfaction with life must exist. As a result of my personal transformation journey, the deliberate process of self-exploration led to a continual process of reflection and self-renewal.⁵ This reflective journey formed the development of knowledge of conceptual tools for a spiritual practice model to facilitate the transformation of midlife Christian professionals.

³ Raymond Studzinski, *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

⁵ Terri A. McCaskill, *Exploring personal transformation through autoethnography* (Pepperdine University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008), p. 124.

As Ignatius described, an affective experience is the ingredient for discernment and it is the beginning of a journey of experiencing, understanding and discernment.⁶ Through the reflection of my personal journey of growth through study, struggles in success and the influence of Christian faith and Chinese family values, I have developed into a passionate lifelong learner and seeker of truth in life. These dynamic experiences together with strong emotions, expressed and supported by my daily meditation, generated a series of first hand and real life experience transforming into understanding and then knowledge. With this knowledge, I formulated concepts for the design of my pilot model for the midlife spiritual transformation research.

2. Footsteps in the Experience of Midlife Journey in Search for New Meaning in the Second Half of Life

2.1 Personal Journey of Affective Experience

2.1.1 Growth through Study

In my thirty years' professional work life with my career, education and spiritual journey always merged together, I have identified myself as a practitioner scholar, a spiritual seeker and an ever-learning humanistic human resources professional. With my continuous ever-learning attitude and proactive thinking, I have integrated vocation, study and faith through integrated multi-disciplinary studies in social work counseling, business, psychology and Christian studies. The integrated studies have helped shape my

⁶ Xavier House, Society of Jesus, Hong Kong. See <http://xavier.ignatia.net>.

way of looking at the world especially with all its contradictions and conflicts of interest and desires, myself and others. They have expanded my world and horizon of seeing, listening and thinking. I went from social work undergraduate training to Executive MBA and from Doctorate of Business Administration studying social capital to the theology studies and spirituality in divinity school.

Looking back at this practitioner-scholar path of growth, the foundation of my search for midlife and vocational transformation has been laid down through my studying journey especially my interest in workplace ministry and vocational counseling. The search for knowledge and the continuous questions for vocational calls in all these years have paved the way for transforming me from “head to heart.” About ten years ago, I was invited to share my experience of “growth through study” in an ecumenical retreat. My growth has been a spiritual growth. My studies have gone beyond just academic related materials. Life is an open book and my growth through study has been based on an integration of knowledge and practice. In recalling this journey of intellectual and spiritual growth, it has basically been a holistic life path of accumulating knowledge and reflecting on experience through knowledge and vice-versa.

However, one of the main highlights in this journey still remains firmly challenging in my life. The clear value conflict between Christian and secular has always been burning inside me. My continuous search for integrating faith and work had led me to the Master of Christian Studies (MACS) at the Chinese University Divinity School. MACS has provided me an important dimension on how I could apply my

pastoral counseling knowledge in human resources practices while keeping spirituality in my personal life. The enlightenment through these studies has inspired me to try to live in the secular world but try to adhere to spiritual values of Christianity. After MACS, the study in Professional Doctorate of Practical Theology became clearer as a kind of calling which integrated theological reflection with real life practical implications. It has also been my exploratory and experiential journey in vocation transformation as a midlife Christian professional.

2.1.2 Struggling in Success at Midlife

As a successful Christian Human Resources Director working for investment banks for over twenty years, the conflict between my Christian and secular values had continued to accumulate. An inner emptiness and yearning for my true self, using Thomas Merton's term, could not be fulfilled by the external success and material world. The only comforting and calming moments had been the silent prayer and stillness at the church near my work place. On many occasions, vigorous emotions were stirred up and came out naturally with tears, as I reflected upon my struggles and anguish. This experience of sacred union with God gradually nurtured my discipline of silent meditation and the desire to search for an interior spiritual journey. The common phenomenon of successful midlife Christian professionals seeking for a deeper meaning to life echoed my experience. The identification of this midlife struggle experienced by busy Christian professionals in Hong Kong prompted me to ask about midlife transformation and how to find new meanings in the next phase of life in this contemporary world.

Looking back to this journey, the desire was to move more and more inward, to attain a kind of interior spiritual experience searching for connection to the sacred. This provided the context in which I designed my research in midlife and spiritual practice through practical theology.

2.1.3 Influence of Christian Faith and Chinese Family Value

In addition to my professional working experience, the merging of family values with Christian faith and Chinese traditions formed a broader foundation for the shaping of my identity to be a passionate and lifelong learner. As a born baptized Catholic nurtured by Sunday school and Masses in childhood, spiritual seeds had long been planted in my heart. This godly gift has given me a continuous desire and passion to seek truth and life. Catholicism played a key part in my childhood as I grew up in a Catholic family and school. The roots of Catholic faith has played a critical role in my spiritual and contemplative journey at a later stage. Family and religious activities as a way of living and praying has been my daily routine. The virtues of love, hope and faith have been deeply embedded in my life since childhood.

My mother became a widow when she was in her forties and when I was four. As a widow, she had to raise six children with her strong faith and family values. She has had tremendous influence on how I view life. The Chinese traditional values of family, filial piety and harmonious relationship has nurtured my intergenerational faithfulness. During the six years of my doctoral research, I took care

of my ninety-year old mother and she was my strong companion. Her ageing process under my direct care and love gave me a sense of deep gratification and many blessings alongside the midlife research.

All these dynamic and complex emotions inside me influenced me deeply in my midlife search and study. These stirring of feelings were channeled through the daily examination of consciousness in meditation. The rich inner emotions and intimate family relationship have generated the dynamic experience integrating with my midlife search. It explains why, in my research, Ignatian spirituality was adopted with its core theme of finding God in all things especially in our personal stories and experiences. This also explains what affective experience and knowledge advocated by the Ignatian tradition shaped my search for spirituality. In the last ten years, I have fully embraced this spiritual practice through the retreats in Xavier House of Hong Kong and my daily meditation continuing this journey of searching for discernment.

2.2 Reflection of the Experience of Halftime Journey

2.2.1 Inspiration from the Concept of Halftime

After having briefly described the context in which I searched for an interior spirituality, I started this journey with the contact with *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*.⁷ I was amazed by Buford's vision of merging our talents and passion so as to channel them to transform the "success" of the first half of life to one of "significance" in the second half. Buford established a Halftime

⁷ Bob Buford, *Half Time: Moving from Success to Significance* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1994).

ministry as a faith-based service organization to help midlife Christians to transform by combining their strength and mission to serve in the right context.

“Halftime is a pause in midlife to reflect on what we have accomplished, who we have become, and what will matter in the end. It is also a point to redirect our time and resources for the second half.”⁸ In his view, it is a critical moment of awakening and taking stock of the past honestly, asking questions about faith, and planning for the next phase of life. After having participated in a three-day Halftime Summit in Singapore, which provided a comprehensive life management tools and perspectives for midlife Christians to review their life, I helped the founding of Halftime ministry in Hong Kong with a group of Christian mid-life professionals. The popularity of this ministry also supported the idea that midlife Christian professionals do need this kind of spiritual transformation. The model provided systematic tools when evaluating life goals, such as the Gallup strength-finder tool for identifying one’s strengths, and the 3Cs model for explaining the importance of one’s core beliefs, capacities and context. These tools embedded management concepts such as evaluating strength and planning for action, since Buford was influenced by Peter Drucker, the guru of modern management studies.

2.2.2 Reflection on “Doing” versus “Being”

During the initial one to two years of experiencing the Halftime model, I recognized that it could be an effective tool and provide a

8 Singapore Halftime Summit, “Your Journey from Success to Significance— Igniting a Life of Impact and Adventure,” October, 2012.

systematic way to explore gift and passion for midlife Christians. However, when after a period of deeper reflection, I noticed that many of the stories shared focused primarily on what successful midlife Christians do. While Halftime ministry was formed by successful American businessmen focusing on meaningful work and service at their second half of life, my primary concern was whether this “doing” mode with the “head” that we adopted in the first half of life should be continued. Where is the “being” and relationship with God? How may we pause and go internally on the “heart” journey? What is the spiritual and theological foundation behind Halftime ministry? It seemed that the focus of Halftime ministry was mainly on successful people continuing primarily to working “externally” even though they might be choosing a different category of actions, focusing more on social and voluntary services. How about our own spirituality? Lastly, what kind of cross-cultural implications might be found in this American model of management-inspired model of spiritual development?

My primary question was how to balance “Doing” and “Being.” In the first half of the professional life of midlife Christians, it is common practice that they use their heads and brains in their work to achieve high performance and success. But this might not be able to satisfy their interior spiritual needs. The restless heart is not connected with the ultimate meaning of life. To me, in this journey of interior searching, one needs silent space and time to listen and be attentive to our inner movement so as to connect to the higher power. “Being” with God requires attentiveness to one’s inner spiritual movement.

Through a constructive critique of the Halftime model, I found a spiritual gap between external doing and internal being which created the need to search for deeper spiritual transformation. Consequently, I began to realize that I needed to move on to another category of theological knowledge and spiritual practice.

With this direction, I kept searching and found the inspiration when I encountered Ignatian spirituality. With this, my spiritual exploration continued with my experience in Ignatian spirituality and my academic pursuit of studying practical theology.

2.3 Walking and Changing the Footsteps through Spiritual Practice

2.3.1 Moving from Apophatic Contemplation to Cataphatic Meditation

After having taken a few steps in my Halftime ministry journey, I realized that there was more for me to search for. At this point, I began another stage of my journey in Christian practices of contemplation and meditation. In exploring the rich Catholic tradition of the fourth century Desert Fathers, I joined the World Community of Christian Meditation (WCCM) and practiced apophatic contemplative practice. This contemplation tradition advocated by John Main under the Benedictine tradition focused on reciting the mantra of Maranatha without any images in mind. I followed this practice this for two to three years. However, I did not experience what my deep desire was yearning for. The emptying of self, mind and images could not allow me to connect with my deep experiences and calm the mind and heart,

not to mention touching on insights to my journey in the second half of life.

I discovered that my inner emotions and feelings were so rich and dynamic that I would need to switch to the cataphatic tradition of Ignatian spirituality, which was more suitable for expressing my experience and stirring of feelings as well as generating my connectedness with self, others and God. The cataphatic method of Ignatian spirituality uses reason, will, imagination, feelings and senses to provoke the above kinds of experiences and then to channel these experiences toward specific goals. I began to go through formal study programs of Ignatian spirituality, continuous participation in thematic group retreats and individual retreats on different occasions.

During these practices, I witnessed not only my personal spiritual transformation, but also that of other participants, Catholic and Protestant alike. Many of them were of middle age. This further confirmed my belief that the search for spiritual meaning in the second half of life is an important topic for Christians in Hong Kong, both Protestants and Catholics. During this process, a small number of us joined together to form our own groups for regular meditation practice and sharing.

During my personal struggle, I had felt a glimpse of hope and joy when I meditated. I could find internal rest when I was still. The contemplation and examination of consciousness in the morning and evening nurtured my stillness and calmness through that sacred space with God in silence. Through spiritual discipline, I could gain some insights of communion myself with God. From this gradual awakening

journey, I could grasp certain inspiration and come to terms with the world more directly. Gradually, I became a contemplating business professional and a practitioner scholar searching for knowledge and truth in the world.

During the daily examen, I realized my inner struggles and restlessness in my context was a response and sign of God for me to yearn for something bigger than myself. It was also an important symbol for me to look for answer for many other midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong. The search for inner peace and true identity about vocation and life creates an important question about midlife question. I gradually grasped a deeper understanding of the frustrations happening among the midlife friends. The experience of Ignatius spirituality helped me deepen the level of my silent prayer and discernment of God in quiet moments. It was not an easy journey but it definitely provided me an important direction to explore spiritual transformation as a midlife Christian professional in Hong Kong.

2.3.2 Encounter of Buddhist Mindfulness

Because of my enthusiasm and passion for deeper spiritual growth, I also attended classes for professionals organized by the Inspired Spiritual Education (ISE) Programme, which is primarily for secondary school teachers specializing in spiritual education. One of the unique features of the programme is an integrated and interfaith approach of meditation by adopting Christian meditation and mindfulness from the Zen Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh.

According to Thich's teaching, through deep breathing, one is connecting with one's heart; one feels at ease and at peace in

connecting one's feelings, mind and body in stillness and silence.⁹ Mindfulness of one's bodily position is not enough. One must be conscious of each breath, each movement, every thought and feeling, everything that has any relation to ourselves.¹⁰ As Thich believes, "breathing is a means of awakening and maintaining full attention in order to look carefully, long and deeply, see the nature of all things, and arrive at liberation."¹¹ I experienced silence and solitude from this mindful breathing practice which I later applied to the model I explored for midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong.

2.4 Needs of a Spiritual Tool for Midlife Christian professionals in HK

At the beginning of my practical theological doctoral research, I was searching for an option and direction to answer the question I posed above. For a while, I looked at integrating my past human resources knowledge and experience to develop a spiritual "coach" model. In fact, I was attracted to Tim Muldoon's *The Ignatian Workout: Daily Spiritual Exercises for a Healthy Faith*.¹² Muldoon proposes to practice Ignatian spirituality following the athletic model of training and coaching. However, I did not continue to pursue this direction because I believed that it might not be suitable for the busy

9 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Essential writings* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2008), p. 24.

10 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracles of Mindfulness* (New York: Beacon Press Ltd., 1987), p. 7.

11 Plum Village, *Discourse in Full Awareness of Breathing*, <https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/breathing/> [accessed 5 September, 2016].

12 Tim Muldoon, *The Ignatian Workout: Daily Spiritual Exercises for a Healthy Faith* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004).

lifestyle of professionals. The structure proposed could be too rigid and these busy practitioners needed the flexibility and space for adaptation and adjustments.

Making good use of these experiences, I began to emphasize on finding a simpler and more flexible tool of spiritual practice more appropriate for these professionals. The model should be Christian-based, simple and with a focus on interiority and considered different aspects. Firstly, even in the international and intercultural environment of Hong Kong, “face” in the socio-psychological sense is important in Chinese culture and still is in this modern city. It is not easy for successful executives to talk about their midlife issues. Secondly, a vigorous and effective spiritual practice tradition like the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is known mainly or only in the Catholic community, even though more and more Protestants are beginning to notice its existence and value. The ISE programme is an attempt to promote spiritual practice, but its primary target is secondary school teachers and students. It is therefore important to explore ways of extracting valuable elements from Ignatian spiritual tradition and make them available for midlife Christian professionals. Thirdly, although spiritual directors and pastoral counselors from both Catholic and Protestant communities are already available, the demand for their service is still great. In the meantime, Hong Kong society is ageing. According to a research report from the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement in 2014, the number of congregants who are below forty-five years old is shrinking, whereas the number of congregants who are older than forty-five years is growing. Like their counterparts in most western countries, the churches in Hong Kong are ageing. As

more and more people are reaching middle age, the spiritual search of midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong is inevitably increasing.

3. From Personal Affective Experience to Conceptual and Affective Knowledge

3.1 The Adoption of Ignatian Spirituality

The affective experience and silent reflection of my personal journey as a midlife Christian professional facilitated the process for me to culminate, filter and develop new affective knowledge needed for the foundation of this research. This set of affective knowledge became the main conceptual tools for my rudimentary attempt of evolving a new and simple model of spiritual practice for spiritual transformation based on values and principles of Ignatian spirituality. My personality and temperament being nurtured by Christian faith and Chinese values had shaped me to become a passionate, affectionate and sensitive person with strong inner feelings to emotions. The cataphatic approach of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises facilitated the connectedness with my inner emotions and rich experiences. It directly addressed the spiritual movement of the heart, enabling me to move much closer to the affective side of the experience rather than just analyse the rational or intellectual aspect of the experience. The dialogue with the affectionate desire and needs inside the heart through the interior journey had turned my personal experience into knowledge creation through the adoption of Ignatian spirituality.

3.2 Relevance of Ignatius Spirituality to Midlife Christian Professionals

One of the characteristics of Ignatian spirituality is the discernment which addressed the midlife questions of who we are, who we are to be and what we are to do. After an intensive striving for success in the first half of their lives, midlife Christian professionals need a tool to interpret and make meaning of their life experience.

In particular, there are suitable features of Ignatian spirituality. Firstly, Ignatian spirituality believes that one can find God in all things and everyday life since spirituality is a lived experience with God speaking to the world in many ways. Ignatius spirituality focuses on our contemplation in action and finding God in all things. One needs to have a contemplative attitude and love in all things as God is love. Many midlife Christian professionals are seeking the way to find God in all things so that they can discern their experiences and find their direction and fulfillment of life.

Secondly, Ignatian spirituality emphasizes discernment. Timothy Gallagher explains in simple and straightforward language that for Ignatius, it is the identity of the spiritual realities or “those affective stirrings in the heart—joy, sadness, hope, fear, peace, anxiety, and similar feelings—with their related thoughts, that influence of our life of faith and our progress toward God.”¹³ It relates closely with the relevant personal and deep experiences that professionals owned. *The*

13 Timothy Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), p. 3.

Spiritual Exercises establish “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” for understanding one’s interior movement. As Gallagher states, these rules are written out of the experiences of Ignatius and those he assisted. These rules are for both those actually carrying out spiritual retreats as well as for their practice in daily life.¹⁴ I believe this is a very important key in helping midlife Christian professionals work actively with Christ in the busyness of everyday.

Thirdly, Ignatian spiritual practice is fully grounded in the theology of a journey following God and walking with Him. Many professionals look for a deep relationship and strongly grounded connection with God which can lead them to the core meaning of life. Ignatius started his own journey of spiritual transformation in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There are abundant experiences that midlife Christian professionals may dig into. When Ignatius advocates that God is in all things, everyday becomes a day of pilgrimage. He has a clear destination: “I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me” as stated in his “Principle and Foundation” section in *The Spiritual Exercises*.¹⁵ This is the core principle which midlife Christians should use in examining a critical decision or incidents in life and discerning whether they are glorifying God.

Fourthly, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises takes up a holistic approach to discern God’s will by training up the believer to be aware of his or her physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual condition

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Tetlow, *Ignatius Loyola: spiritual exercises* (New York: Crossroad Publishing 1996).

while he or she is carrying out the daily exercise of examen. Busy midlife professionals can develop daily spiritual exercise and to connect with relevant feeling and experience through the examen. As stated in the “Introductory Observations”, Ignatius explains: “By the term ‘Spiritual Exercises’ is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities that will be mentioned later” (Nr. 1).

In summary, Ignatian Spirituality is practical and useful for building future models of spiritual practice because discernment is the way for us to bring our daily life closer to God and we find God in all things in daily life.

3.3 Supplementary Tool of Mindful Breathing

With Ignatian spirituality established as the main foundation of the research, I adopted mindful breathing from the Zen Buddhism as a supplementary tool. Both Ignatian spirituality and Buddhist mindfulness share a common theme of attentiveness and mindfulness of one’s experience with a daily spiritual exercise suitable for reflection of the events and experiences of one’s daily life.

At the same time, silence is a fundamental element for Ignatian practices. “*A Silent Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Ignatian Exercises*”¹⁶ is a set of guidelines written by Victor Codina. Jose

16 Victor Codina, *A Silent Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Ignatian Exercises* (Barcelona: Cristianisme I Justicia, 2016). <https://www.cristianismeijusticia.net/sites/default/files/pdf/gui6.pdf>.

Garcia de Castro Valdes mentions in the “*Silence God in a Wordy World. Silence in Ignatian Spirituality*”¹⁷ that one of the most well-known peculiarities of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is that complete and absolute silence is required during the time of the retreat. He also talks about where and how we should place “silence” in the life of an Ignatian spiritual experience. Mindful breathing is a suitable tool for entering into silence and solitude.

At the same time, interfaith practices in the ISE programme successfully brought together practices and wisdom from both the Catholic and Buddhist traditions, to help teachers and students develop spiritual habits of meditation in daily life. Different religious practices are common in Hong Kong. In Chinese families, worshipping ancestors is customary, and Buddhist or Daoist families all come from traditional Chinese family culture. Chinese cultural tradition has been fully integrated with Euro-American and Asian cultural values and practices. The interfaith and intercultural context was the fundamental background when I first considered looking into how midlife Christian professionals in the city experience spiritual transformation.

Adopting mindful breathing, I designed a model that would help participants become conscious of their bodies, feelings, reason and what is happening in the world. Following the teaching of Thich, the practice would help participants to be attentive, and attentiveness provides the opportunity to create insight and inspiration. When one

17 Jose Garcia de Castro Valdes, “Silent God in a Wordy World. Silence in Ignatian Spirituality,” *Theologica Xaveriana* 66 (2016).

has right beliefs and awareness, one could control all things and make choices. The practice of mindfulness would prepare participants to stay focused on their present state of mind for continuous spiritual practice, as adopted from Ignatian spirituality.

4. From Conceptual Tools to the Design of Spiritual Practice Model

4.1 Deepening the Concept of Ignatian Spirituality

Basing on the experience and the subsequent reflection of my personal journey, I continued to transform the experience into knowledge, and as theological resources to design conceptual tools for the research. Since the nature of my affective experience is close to Ignatian spirituality, I adopted contemporary and relevant teaching of four Ignatian theologians as the foundation on which I constructed the preliminary model of spiritual practice for the research. The four theologians were Philip Sheldrake, with his concept of everyday life and active-practical spirituality, George Aschenbrenner's examen of consciousness, Gallagher's interpretation of discernment of spirits, and lastly, Bernard Lonergan's "Experience, Understand, Judgement, Decision" (EUSD) model. The spiritual practice model aimed at drawing the participants' attention to a deeper interior emotion through experience, awareness and discernment. By putting together insights from these theologians, the spiritual model designed would be applied to facilitate the participants of the research to go through a process of spiritual transformation.

4.2 Rationale and Relevance of the Conceptual Ideas of Four Ignatian Theologians: Lonergan, Sheldrake, Aschbrenner, Gallagher

4.2.1 Encounter with Lonergan

My first encounter with Lonergan through the Ignatian spirituality foundation program enlightened me greatly. The integration of knowledge and practice through my own meditation and reflection encouraged me to pursue Lonergan's theology further. One of the most important teachings and practices Lonergan introduces is the cognitional structure of Experience, Understanding, Judgement and Decision (hereafter EUJD), corresponding to the four levels of consciousness (empirical, intelligent, rational, and rational self-consciousness). During the foundation program, the history and concept of EUJD were introduced with examples and exercises. I was able to understand the operation of EUJD more deeply through personal meditation and small group sharing about our internal movement. After the workshop, my journaling and reflection deepened this understanding. Each participant shared how they experienced EUJD in different and unique ways. This dynamic experience laid the foundation for adopting Lonergan's EUJD in my work, both in terms of its conceptual framework and later the analysis of interior movement. Most of the retreatants at Xavier House had acquired the basic knowledge of EUJD through the Ignatian foundation program and other workshops in Hong Kong.

Lonergan's interpretation of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and his works on the topic include *Method in Theology*¹⁸ and *Insights: A*

18 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd,

Study of Human Understanding,¹⁹ along with several articles which provide various rich perspectives. In analysing a basic pattern of operations that is dynamic and transcendental, he identifies four levels of consciousness. These are, firstly, the empirical level of sensing, perceiving, imagining, feeling, speaking, and moving; secondly, the intellectual level of inquiring, understanding, expressing and analysing; thirdly, the rational level of reflecting, marshalling of evidence, passing judgment on the truth, falsity, certainty or probability of a statement; and fourthly, the level of responsibility, which concerns oneself, one's own operations, goals, evaluations and decisions to take action. These four levels of consciousness have become what Lonergan describes in his transcendental method as four types of operations, corresponding to the four levels of consciousness. In other words, "experience" corresponds to "empirical"; "understanding" corresponds to "intellectual"; "judging" corresponds to "rational"; and "deciding" corresponds to "responsibility."²⁰ Together these form the complete process of Experience, Understanding, Judging and Decision.

4.2.2 Sheldrake's Concept of Appropriation and Active-practical Spirituality

When it comes to issues in contemporary interpretation of

1971). 黃錦文，〈郎尼根神學方法的八項功能專務評析〉，《哲學與文化》536期（2018年），頁1-20。

¹⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Exeter: A. Wheaton, 1983). 關永中，〈郎尼根的認知理論：〈洞察〉卷一釋義〉（台北：輔仁大學出版社，2011）。

²⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, pp. 6-19. David Tracy, "Method as foundation for theology: Bernard Lonergan's option", *The Journal of Religion* 50, no. 3 (1970), pp. 292-318. 關永中，〈洞察與歸化——與郎尼根懇談〉，《神思》66期（2005年），頁125-137。

texts and traditions, Sheldrake is concerned with the importance of appreciating what lies behind the surface of the texts we see and a wider understanding of what goes beyond their purely written forms.²¹ According to Sheldrake, what is behind the text is critical. He writes about the hidden text that is critical to interpretation. It is also important to have the flexibility to live out the experience in everyday life. Each practitioner therefore has a unique experience in adapting and living out the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The written text is not set in concrete, but needs to be performed. This is the basis for the justification of adaptation.²² I therefore adopted the concepts of flexibility and unique adaptation in order to design a daily life spiritual practice that met the needs and style of the participants, so that they might interpret their lived everyday experience in the dynamism that is Hong Kong. The imperative of adapting to the needs of retreatants is built into the text itself and is reinforced in its earliest practical interpretations.²³

Sheldrake defines spirituality precisely as follows: it is a spiritual concern that is holistic, that is, a fully-integrated approach to life.²⁴ He incorporates Ignatius's concept of finding God in all things and believing that God is active, personal, and above all, present to all people in daily mundane daily lives. A spiritual person is "simply someone within whom the spirit of God dwelt or who lived under the

21 Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010), p. 47.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

24 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, Second Edition (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 17-18.

influence of the Spirit of God.”²⁵ He believes we can find God through our ordinary life and experience. Among the four types of spirituality he categorizes, ascetic-monastic, mystical, active-practical and prophetic-critical, I adopted the active-practical spirituality, which he describes as “a process of continuous regular practice and active internal prayer. It promoted everyday life as the principal context for the spiritual path and quest for authenticity.”²⁶ When studying the issue of the spirituality of busy professionals in the marketplace, Sheldrake’s advocacy of active-practical everyday life spirituality is very relevant to midlife Christian professionals who require regular spiritual practice in their daily lives.

4.2.3 Aschenbrenner’s Examen of Consciousness

The emphasis on feelings toward and relationship with God in Aschenbrenner’s examen of consciousness is particularly appropriate for this research into the exterior-to-interior journey of midlife Christians. In a fast-paced competitive life, midlife Christian professionals seldom have the luxury of sitting down quietly to face their own deeper feelings, or to understand the underlying meaning of those feelings from God’s perspective. Aschenbrenner notes that we discover ourselves and our real relationship with God at the level of our dearest and most lasting feelings.²⁷ This research aims to discover the interior movement of the heart. Aschenbrenner’s view of the examen as an affective process of consciousness, as spontaneity in our hearts when in touch with God, and as intimate relationship with

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ George Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” *Review for Religion* 31 (1972): 2.

God, provides a very direct element for the conceptual framework and design of the research.

Aschenbrenner's emphasizes feelings toward and relationship with God in the examen of consciousness rather than conscience. This is particularly appropriate for the research into the exterior-to-interior journey of midlife Christians. He proposes that it is in our own existential consciousness that as human beings we have to decide between being tempted or remaining close to "intimacy with God in the subtle dispositions of our consciousness."²⁸

4.2.4 Gallagher's Threefold Paradigm—Awareness, Understanding, Action

The spiritual pilgrimage in daily life may be called contemplation in action. When connecting with daily life, the participant is to be aware and understand the meaning of these experiences from God in their individual personal context. Gallagher redefines the Ignatian Examen prayer and discernment as awareness, understanding and taking action, and in so doing, moved away from an emphasis on sin. But this was not my focus either. I adopted this approach and asked the participants about their most stirring feelings in relation to the relevant personal and past experiences that they owned.

Gallagher's "Threefold Paradigm" illustrates discernment process by involving 1) a process of awareness, i.e., noticing what is happening in our inner spiritual experience, or what is spiritually stirring in our hearts and thoughts; 2) understanding, i.e., reflecting on

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

the stirrings we have noticed that lead us to recognizing God; and 3) taking action, which is accepting and living according to what we have recognized as being of God, and rejecting and removing from our lives what we have recognized as not of God.²⁹ Since the main direction of my research is to facilitate the search for interior experience of midlife Christian professionals, his concept of awareness, understanding and acting contributed to the design of the spiritual practice model.

The examen prayer, together with the discernment of spirits, could serve as key elements in establishing an appropriate framework, as could the spiritual practice model, so that participants might experience a spiritual journey of interiority. Gallagher's threefold paradigm is thus a relevant theoretical perspective for addressing the need for awareness, understanding and action. Gallagher's emphasis on interior movement through a dynamic shifting of awareness, understanding and action, further develop the levels of consciousness and the appreciation of spiritual experience by the participants in the research.

4.3 Structure and Framework of Spiritual Practice Model: Connecting to Self, Others and God

4.3.1 Structure of the Model

With the theoretical and conceptual elements, I designed a spiritual practice model which includes silence and solitude, active-practical and everyday life spiritual practice, and meditating about self, the past and God. Buddhist mindful breathing would be adopted

²⁹ Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, pp. 16-26.

as an open pathway to enter into silence. Following Aschenbrenner, Lonergan and Gallagher, the model aims to draw the attention of the participants to deeper interior movement through experience, awareness and discernment of their hearts and meditating about the self, on significant people and critical incidents from the past, and on God.

The eight-week spiritual practice model would be divided into four phases, each lasting for two weeks with themes of connecting to oneself, to others (for example, to critical incidents and people), and to God. The participants are to commit to silent daily meditation, mindful breathing and journal reflection. Four bi-weekly individual semi-structured interviews would be conducted; each lasting around one hour. All interviews are to be conducted in a convenient private place and time, and the questions would be open-ended rather than structured in order to allow the phenomena to emerge with the ideas and insight from the described experience, and reflection on critical incidents or people.

The target participants for the research ought to have the characteristics of being committed Christians worshipping at Protestant or Catholic churches; midlife Christian professionals over forty-five years old with professional achievements; unfulfilled life and yearning for deeper meaning at this specific midlife stage and interested in spirituality and willing to commit to the spiritual practice in the research.

Integrating the theological knowledge of the four theologians, I designed three pillars to construct the framework of the spiritual

practice model. They include connecting self, connecting others, and lastly, connecting God. Participants would be guided to daily and weekly spiritual practice. The purpose of this structure is to provide a simple practical tool for busy professionals to have a discipline practice. Connecting to self, others and God are not separated actions but an integrated and inter-twined relationship among self and others centering on God. Spiritual transformation is a process of discerning God's calling in a dynamic interaction with Him through connecting daily events, critical life incidents and significant people.

4.3.2 Rationale of the Structure

When midlife Christian professionals seek the meaning of life and transformation, what paradigm and value do they use to assess their change? How do they live out the transcendent meaning of life and the value of the gospel? Ignatian spirituality offers a perspective to look at the transcendent dimension. The spiritual practice provides the opportunity for human beings to connect and interact with God. This connectedness and intimate encountering with God allows the light of life to shine.

Ignatian spirituality provides the core foundation of this research through an integrated model of spiritual practice connecting with self, others and God. Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality for everyday life. It stresses that God is present in our world and active in one's lives. It is a pathway to deeper prayer and good decisions guided by keen discernment and an active life of service to others.³⁰

30 See <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com>.

Ignatian spirituality is rooted in the conviction that God is active, personal and, above all, present to everyone. One does not have to withdraw from the world into a quiet place in order to find God. God's footprints can be found everywhere—in one's work and relationships, in one's family and friends, in one's sorrows and joys.... It is closely connected to our mundane daily lives. Based on this essence, a research model of connectedness was designed through spiritual practice in connecting with self, critical people and incidents and God. This reflects the teaching of Ignatian spirituality—to “find God in all things.”

Through the process of deep prayer connecting with God, the participants of the study is to listen to the stirring of God's voice in their heart. It is a gift and grace from God.³¹ This spiritual practice marks a process of the inner heart interacting with God in which participants look at their past experience with others and the world. They are to follow the ultimate value of God to integrate their life and opened themselves to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to discern their calling for the second half of their life. Through the interaction with the others and the world, they would be able to discern God's will.

This is the core foundation in the design of the pilot of the spiritual practice to discern God's will through connecting self, significant others and critical incidents in our first half of life.³² The three pillars or themes (connecting to self, connecting to critical incidents and people and connecting to God) for the bi-weekly spiritual practice form

31 Xavier House HK, *Ignatian Spirituality* (Hong Kong: Xavier House, 2005), pp. 3-4.

32 Xavier house HK, *Ignatian Spirituality*, pp. 1-2.

the structure, and the practice as a whole is a simple and integrated dynamic process.

4.3.3 Framework of Model—Connectedness with Self

Connecting to self is the first pillar and theme aiming at focusing the participant's sensitivity to his or her interior movement touched by the Holy Spirit. With passionate imagination of personal dialogue with Jesus in the form of colloquy, the participants are to become closely connected with the spirituality of God. Through this continuous and vigorous process of deep prayer based on the first step of the Ignatian Examen, the participant are to develop a close connection with God through continuous prayer of gratitude, petition, review, forgiveness and renewal. In this process of self-examination of his or her daily experience, the participant would aspire to the grace of discernment through connectedness with his or her daily life experience in his or her own personal context. This emphasis on awareness recalls what Gallagher's redefining the Ignatian Examen prayer and discernment as being aware, understanding and taking action.

Silence is a critical core element of prayer to facilitate the connecting process. In silence, enlightenment and awakening would come. Issac of Nineveh talks about the joyful feeling of joyful with the whole body staying still in silence.³³ Ignatian Spiritual Exercises 20 states that, "the more the soul is solitude and seclusion, the more fit it renders itself to approach and be united with its Creator and Lord;

33 *Ibid.*

and the more closely it is united with Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from the infinite goodness of its God.”³⁴

4.3.4 Framework of Model—Connectedness with Others

The second pillar or theme of spiritual practice model in the research is connecting to others, which includes reflecting on critical incidents and significant people in the life of the participants. The design is based on the Ignatian Examen prayer in meditating on one’s personal life as a history of salvation, which include both positive and negative experiences. According to Ignatius’ principle and foundation, man is created to praise, revere and serve our Lord God, and by this means save his soul. Others things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him attain the end for which he is created. Man is to make use of them to help him attain his end.³⁵ It is this internal journey of going through one’s individual salvation history to review one’s relationship with God and connecting to one’s experience in critical life incidents and in relationship with significant people that the divine meanings and implications of the experience would emerge. Spiritual reflection on one’s life provides a spiritual interpretation of the Examen as “a way of prayer that opens our eyes to God’s daily self-revelation and increasingly clarifies for us our own responses to it.”³⁶ The Ignatian Examen prayer is therefore the fundamental tool through which self may be connected to God in the

34 Saint Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, ed. John F. Thornton (New York: Vintage, 2000), p. 11.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

36 Timothy Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), pp. 20-21.

process of reviewing one's salvation history. While one is looking at one's past, one is also connecting with the most stirring feeling and experience with critical incidents and significant others in one's life.

4.3.5 Framework of Model—Connectedness with God

The third pillar or theme of the spiritual practice model focuses on connectedness with God. This is the final step for the participants to move along the spiritual journey of get connected to self, then to others or the world, and then finally to the transcendent God. Passionate reflection of these experiences and occurrences would be facilitated by imaginative spiritual dialogue with Jesus in His own journey in life as recorded and described in the Gospels. The gospel of St. Mark is selected for spiritual practice in the research.

Following this approach of reflecting on his or her life experience in connection with Jesus, the participants would hopefully experience a kind of spiritual awareness of understanding or discernment. These would be moments when they have the opportunities to judge what should be done or what decision is to be made in his or her journey of life. They may experience the essence of Ignatian Examen with their eyes opening up to meet to God's grace in the interior movements of their inner self. Following the essence of Examen, the participants are to seek God's pardon and grace once again, and then resolve to amend for the future" (Nr. 243). They may discern God's will and their future life according to the ultimate higher value.

All the characteristic themes of Ignatian spirituality are grounded in the Spiritual Exercises. These include a sense of collaboration

with God's action in the world, spiritual discernment in decision making, generosity of response to God's invitation, fraternity and companionship in service, and a disposition to find God in all things. The three pillars or themes form a process of linking up self, others and God. This corresponded to the key concept that spiritual integration, as a prominent theme of the Spiritual Exercises, is the integration of contemplation and action, prayer and service, and emotions and reason.³⁷

As Ignatius put it, all the things in the world are presented to us "so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily." Ignatian spirituality places great emphasis on discerning God's presence in the everyday activities of ordinary life. It sees God as an active God, always at work, inviting us to an ever-deeper walk. An Ignatian spiritual life focuses on God at work now. It fosters an active attentiveness to God joined with a prompt responsiveness to God. God calls; we respond. This call-response rhythm of the inner life makes discernment and decision making especially important. This is the core life direction that midlife Christian professionals search for. Ignatius' rules for discernment and his astute approach to decision making are well-regarded for their psychological and spiritual wisdom.

People formed by Ignatian spirituality are often called "contemplatives in action." They are reflective people with a rich inner life who are deeply engaged in God's work in the world. They unite

³⁷ Loyola Press, "What are the Spiritual Exercises?" <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises/#sthash.4sOuJ1LA.dpuf> [accessed 1 September, 2015].

themselves with God by joining God's active labor to save and heal the world. It is an active spiritual attitude—a way for everyone to seek and find God in their workplaces, homes, families, and communities.³⁸

4.4 Characteristics of a Simple Practical Model

Through my people consultancy service offering life management in translating spirituality into work and life and interaction with midlife professionals, I recognized two key elements in designing an appropriate model for them. First, the concept of spirituality has to be presented in simple and easy-to-understand language, if possible daily business language. Second, simplicity, flexibility and practicality are critical characteristics of the model, to cater for busy midlife Christian professionals to practice them daily.

The conceptual design and structure of the model reveal certain characteristics which correspond closely to the local context of the participants.

Firstly, the model is based on the Christian meditative tradition, especially the features of Ignatian spirituality. In order to relate to the local Hong Kong context, the practice of Buddhist mindfulness is recommended. With five Protestants and one Catholic, the language used is Christian, but without any ecclesial leanings.

Secondly, the model is designed to be simple and direct, so that it could easily be applied on a daily and regular basis, allowing

38 *Ibid.*

the busy multi-tasking midlife participants to develop different patterns according to their lifestyles. In terms of time and space, they could practice it according to those lifestyles. The model therefore should have room for flexibility and dynamism, given the various backgrounds and situations of the participants.

Thirdly, the main direction for this practice is for participants to follow an interior spiritual journey, instead of having to pay attention to external actions or steps that need to be taken during the process. To put it more directly, the requirements of the practice are simple and do not demand attention to rituals or formalities. To use a professional trainer's term, the practice is user-friendly. Participants should focus mostly on the stirring of their internal feelings and experience.

5. Reflection on the Pilgrimage Journey

In the process of conceiving and executing this research, I found my own calling in relation to the advocacy and support for those who were struggling with midlife or a life direction generally, especially in this secular world. The practical doctorate was a kind of pilgrimage for me, not only in creating new knowledge and making changes in my professional practice, but also as a spiritual journey walking intimately with God.

As I designed the model to go through the journey, at the same time, I walked through this journey accompanying the midlife research participants, like the walk to Emmaus. Through the continuous process of analysing the experience of the participants and interpreting

their life stories, I went deeper and deeper into their experience. Therefore, it was not just an intellectual analysis. I was connecting, reconnecting, and reflecting on their experience, enriching my spiritual confidence and this is the way to link up with God intimately. My faith grew stronger and I received confirmation that this is the way for professionals to practice spirituality.

Over the last six years of this practical theological doctoral research, I have been practicing, reflecting, growing, forming, transforming and practicing again, as well as developing the theses that started from my midlife search for a direction. These tasks included: exploring an inner journey through experiencing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises myself; designing my spiritual practice model; applying important concepts and theological elements into the model; conducting the research; going through in-depth interviews; and leading midlife professionals into an inner journey and transformation.

6. A Closing Note: From Affective Experience to Affective Knowledge as a Process of Spiritual Transformation

This paper has adopted an autoethnographic approach and demonstrated how a rich and affective experience of myself as a midlife Christian professional led to an affective knowledge of concepts and tools to design a spiritual practice model through a reflective journey.

The research started as part of my midlife experience of awakening and searching. Through experiencing and reflecting on a personal search that journeyed from the external to the interior, conceptual

tools were established through Halftime, Ignatian spirituality and Buddhist mindfulness. The conceptual tools then helped develop the design of a spiritual practice model to facilitate and support the interior journey of midlife Christian professionals. The important contribution of this paper is that it demonstrates how the reflection and affective experience of a personal journey lead to a rich affective knowledge in the research of practical theology.

At the same time, the conceptual tools provide a rich theological foundation for the design of the spiritual practice model. The overall research is therefore closely linked: it moves from personal midlife struggles to a research issue, and it turns from the experience and enlightenment into conceptual tools to the overall research design, in order to enable midlife Christian professionals to experience their interior journey and listen to their own voices and find God in life.

At the beginning of the journey, I was struggling with my own midlife transition, leaving a full-time successful senior executive role to pursue a new journey integrating my first half of life experience, and practicing and reflecting through theological enlightenment. The research in practical theology has now opened the door to the next phase of my life, to gather the fruits of the research and the experience of creating this evolving model. It has opened my eyes to the demand of midlife Christian professionals in Hong Kong for spiritual fulfilment.