Spiritual Formation in Theological Education: Insights from Longitudinal Research

David C. Wang, ThM, PhD
Penner Chair for the Formation of Emotionally Healthy Leaders
Fuller Theological Seminary

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

- 2 Corinthians 3:18

What is the impact of theological education (as a whole) on the spiritual, character, and virtue development of students who will one day be leading churches, denominations, and ministries around the world?

As theological education continues to evolve globally, two pressing issues remain inadequately addressed: 1) **how can different contexts of theological education** (formal and non-formal) **contribute to the growth and maturity of virtue, character, and spirituality that authentic religious leadership requires**, and 2) **how can this growth be robustly assessed**?

How can this spiritual growth be robustly assessed?

a) Within your context (e.g., culture, geographic location, formal and/or non-formal theological education, etc..), how do you conceptually define or understand spiritual maturity to be?

b) Within your context, how is spiritual maturity embodied in real life? What stories do people share about those who are spiritually mature?

c) Within your context, how do you tell the difference between one who is authentically spiritually mature and one who is trying hard to look the part?

d) Within your context of (formal or non-formal) theological education, how does your institution assess the spiritual growth of their students?

Empirical Research on Spiritual Formation in formal theological contexts

Acknowledgements

John Templeton Foundation, Templeton Religious Trust

- The spiritual, character, and virtue formation of seminarians (ID: 59898)
- Creating and pilot testing a seminarian character/virtue and spiritual development program assessment instrument (ID: 61034)
- The assessment of character and spiritual formation: An empirical, longitudinal, and ecumenical project with seminary students and faculty (ID: 61515)
- Forming religious education and leadership towards a global, ecumenical, multicultural, and decentered vision of spiritual maturity and flourishing (2023-2024)

Challenges to Spiritual Formation Assessment

Psychometric challenges to the assessment of spiritual formation

- Self-report
- Social desirability bias
- Ceiling effects
  - Empirical precursors of spiritual development (ICC, DoS, Quest)
- "Illusory spiritual health" (Hall & Edwards)
- Linear/Curvilinear trends
- Can we reliably measure spiritual dynamics and track changes in these dynamics over time?

Challenges to Spiritual Formation Assessment

Few empirical longitudinal studies on spiritual/character formation among seminary populations

- Reinert (2005) – only empirical longitudinal study of Catholic seminarians
  - No significant changes in student spirituality over time in any of the spirituality variables in their study
  - "at the start of the study, the seminarians were already a highly religious group and no measurable change occurred over time, or if there were subtle changes, the scales were not sensitive enough to measure them."
  - Measured change over the course of a single school year

Challenges to Spiritual Formation Assessment

Few empirical longitudinal studies on spiritual/character formation among seminary population

Hall, Edwards, and Wang (2016) – undergraduate students enrolled in religiously-affiliated (CCCU) universities

- Followed one cohort of students from freshman year across 8 timepoints spanning 4 years
- Consistent linear downward trend: private spiritual practices, spiritual community, overall spiritual well-being.
- Consistent linear upward trend: disappointment with God, spiritual instability, spiritual questing.

Project Activities

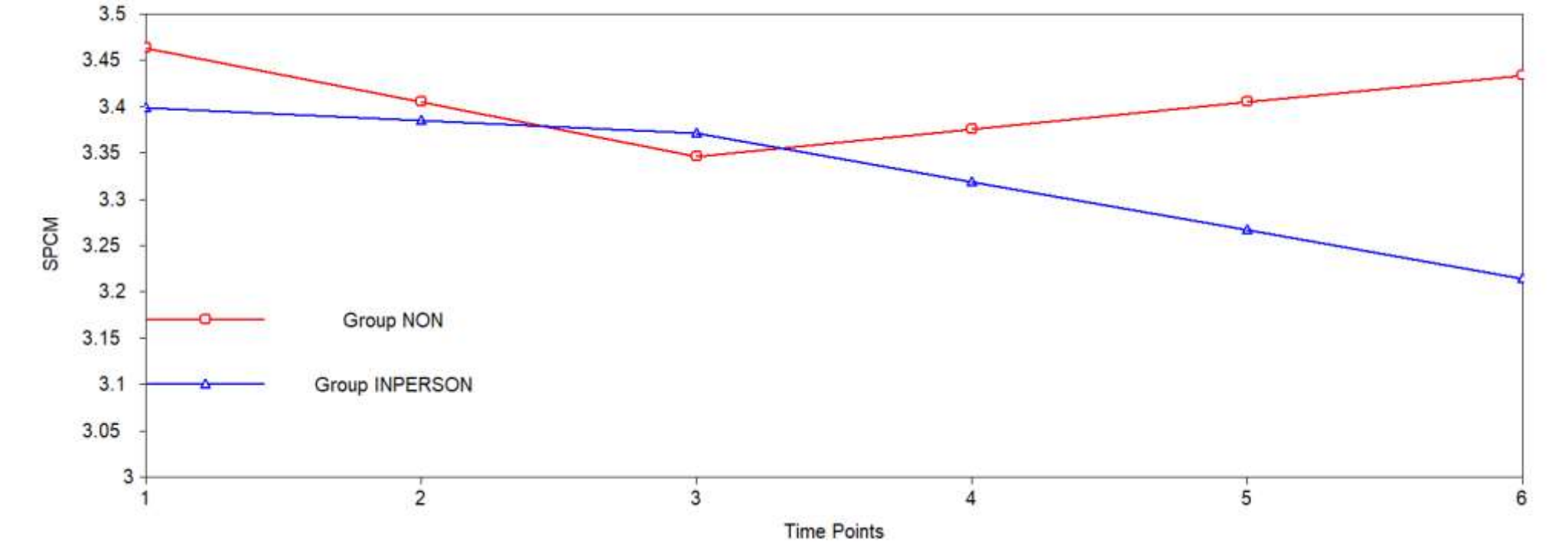
Collect Longitudinal dataset on character/spiritual development from a large and diverse cohort of seminary students

- Data collected from seminary students enrolled in 18 seminaries who initially enrolled in seminary on Fall 2019

  Ambrose Seminary, Aquinas Institute of Theology, Baylor University (Truett Seminary), Boston University, Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hood Theological Seminary, Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Mount Angel Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, St. Mary Seminary, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Virginia Theological Seminary, University of Notre Dame
- 6 timepoints of data spanning three years (Fall 2019 – Spring 2022)
- Pilot testing Spanish and Portuguese translations

Preliminary Findings: In-Person vs. Online

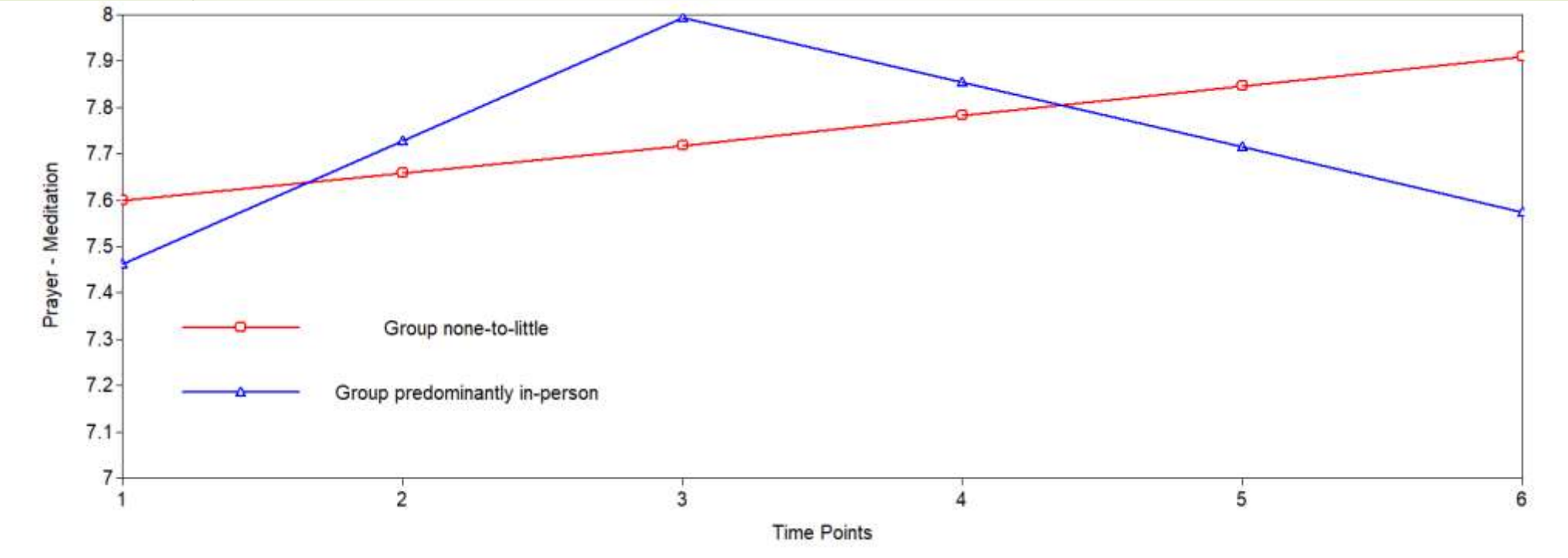
Spiritual Community



- In-person instruction group experienced a decline in spiritual community over the last 3 timepoints
- Online instruction group experienced no significant change in spiritual community over time.

Preliminary Findings: In-Person vs. Online

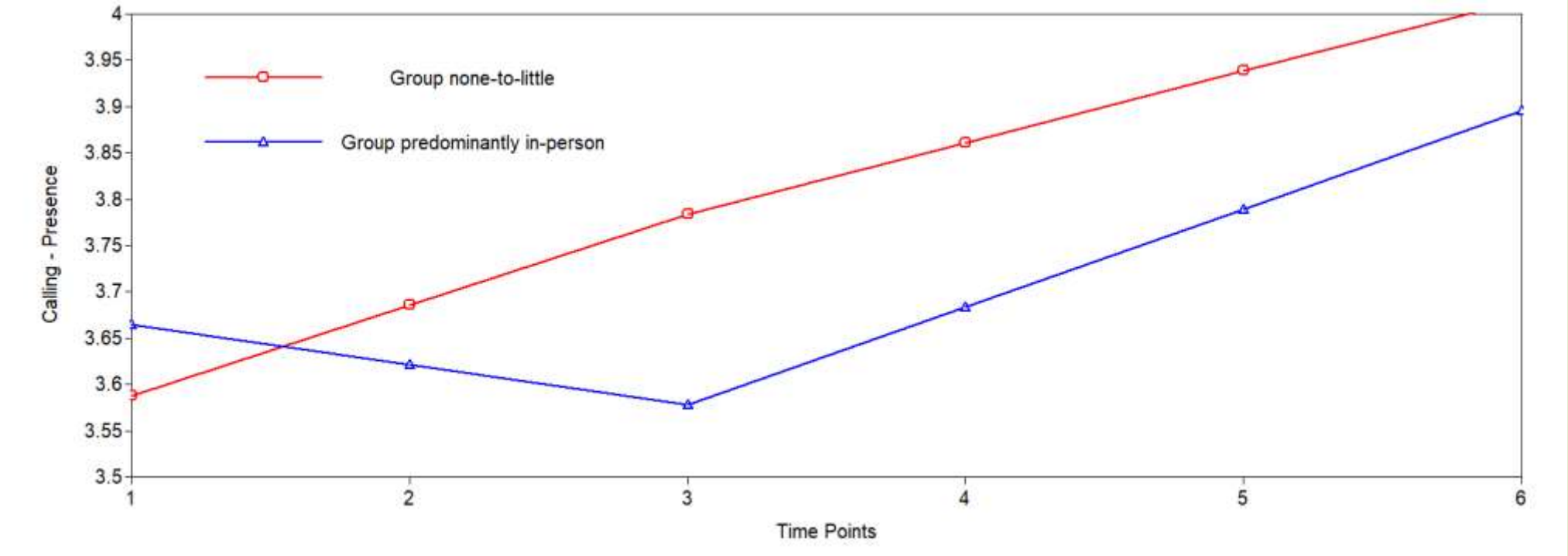
Practice of Meditative Prayer



- Overall sample: Increase in meditative prayer from T1-T3; decrease from T4-T6
- Decrease in T4-T6 sharper for in-person students

Preliminary Findings: In-Person vs. Online

Clarity of Vocational Calling



- Overall improvement over time
- Online group experienced significant gains in calling in T1-T3 compared to in-person group

Preliminary Findings: Pre-Post COVID-19

1. **Mental health near peak of COVID-19**

Depression (Fall 2020) – 51.1%; PHQ-9

- 29.9% (mild depression)
- 11.6% (moderate depression)
- 7.0% (moderately severe depression)
- 2.6% (severe depression)

Anxiety (Fall 2020) – 43.1% anxiety; GAD-7

- 26.7% (mild anxiety)
- 11.6% (moderate anxiety)
- 4.8% (severe anxiety)

PTSD (Fall 2020) – PC-PTSD-5

- 43.4% of total sample reported experiencing a traumatic, life-threatening event in their lifetime
- 33.7% of total sample endorsed sufficiently significant trauma symptoms to be considered for a potential diagnosis of PTSD

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

3. Which constructs at Fall 2019 predicted outcomes in Fall 2020? (statistically controlled for COVID impact and baseline depression levels @ FA2019)

Fa 2019 predictors of <u>lower</u> levels of depression in Fall 2020

- **Humility** (Appreciating other's strengths, teachability)
- **Forgiveness of others**
- **Church attendance/participation**

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

3. Which constructs at Fall 2019 predicted outcomes in Fall 2020?

Predictors of <u>higher</u> levels of depression in Fall 2020? (after statistically controlling for COVID impact and baseline depression @ Fall 2019)

- **Experiential avoidance**
- **Shame**
- **Spiritual struggles**
- **Social Disconnectedness**

Preliminary Findings Pre-Post COVID-19

What in FA 2019 predicted higher levels of clarity in one's calling/vocation in FA 2020?

- Gratitude, Joy
- Social Justice Commitment
- Scripture engagement, contemplative and colloquial prayer (but not liturgical and petitionary prayer)
- Emotional regulation

What in FA 2019 predicted lower levels of clarity in one's calling/vocation in FA 2020?

- Experiential Avoidance
- Shame
- Anxiety
- Social disconnectedness

Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Hill (2021), Journal of Positive Psychology

Using latent profile analysis (LPA), we examined patterns of responses across 17 constructs, including:

- Intrinsic religiosity, perceived closeness to God, God monitoring, religious exploration, attachment to God, joy, gratitude, life purpose, differentiation of self, social justice commitment, spiritual struggles, scrupulosity, shame, anxiety, ideological commitment, spiritual impression management/social desirability

We were interested in exploring to what extent subgroups of our seminary sample 'clustered together' in the way they endorsed or embodied all of these constructs.

Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Hill (2021), Journal of Positive Psychology

Based on their response patterns, we found that participants in our study tended to gravitate towards one of five discernable profiles:

1. "Everything is great" Profile (45% of sample):

- Highest scores for intrinsic religiosity, high perceived closeness to God, gratitude, joy; very low scores for anxious and avoidant attachment to God, shame, anxiety, spiritual struggles. **Highest scores in impression management.**

2. "Moderately anxious" Profile (41.8% of sample):

- Moderate scores for anxiety, spiritual struggles, shame, sense of life purpose, joy, religious exploration, perceived closeness to God, intrinsic religiousness. **Very high scores in anxious God attachment (preoccupation about whether God loves them, will tend to believe they need to perpetually earn God's love)**

Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Hill (2021), Journal of Positive Psychology

Some potential key take-aways concerning the initial state of entering first-term seminary students:

- Almost half (45% of sample) seem (on the outside) to be doing very well, but **may not be completely honest with themselves** and others (i.e., **hiding**/doing their best to present well to themselves or to others).
- Almost half (41% of sample) seem to present well and function moderately well but may be **hiding internal/implicit fears that God may not love them**, will be anxious if they can't immediately see or sense God working in their lives, are preoccupied in working hard to maintain their relationship with God.
- A smaller portion of seminary students are openly struggling (5.6%) or aloof (2.3%).

Jankowski, Sandage, Wang, & Hill (2021), Journal of Positive Psychology

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Discussion Question: Have you seen these profiles among the students you have worked with? How do you form an individual who is hiding and/or not completely honest?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Question we asked to our team:

“What observable qualities or indicators point to the reality that formation has occurred in your students? (e.g., virtues, practices, behaviors)”

“What are observable markers of spiritual maturity?”

Markers of Spiritual Maturity

- **Calling/Vocation** (vocational clarity, vocational agility, vocational struggle/crisis, community affirmation of calling)
- Character (fruit of the spirit, humility – awareness of limitations, empathy, **honesty as meta-virtue – inclusive of honesty re: sinfulness, emotional honesty**, growth post-suffering)
- **Connection to World/Other** – social justice, redemptive action, intercultural competence, cultural humility
- **Knowledge** (of God, of self, of process of transformation), being formed by knowledge, integration of knowledge in one's narrative
- **Relationality** (with God, family, differentiation of self)
- **Holistic Health** (shalom, emotional health, sleep, eating, relational health)
- **Sacraments, Rule of life** (spiritual practices, practices of faith)
- **Community** (mentors, reflection-in-community, commitment to local congregation)
- **Conviction** (to doctrine, are they able to defend them in the face of challenge?, obedience, behavioral indicators, handling Scripture well)
- **Questing, seeking (religious exploration)**
- **Quality of Experience of God** (consolation, desolation, daily spiritual experiences scale, spiritual struggles, grieving alongside God)

How does one discern the spiritually mature from the spiritually immature?

Spiritual Directors and Human Formation Advisors (Mount Angel Seminary and Abbey)

- **Freedom –** acting and choosing the course and direction of life in freedom (not reluctantly or out of pure duty/obligation)
- **People of communion**—with deep relational capacities not only with God but also with one's neighbor
- **Affective maturity**-–aware of internal emotional states and equipped to cope with these internal states
- **Interculturally competent**—particularly as it relates to one's treatment of the poor
- **Well-integrated person**—regardless of context; vs. a compartmentalized spiritual life ("I know doctrinally that God loves me, but I don't feel that way")
- **Gift of compunction**—returning to the Lord faster after they have sinned, not sinking into despair or shame, not shocked or surprised at their capacity to think and act in ways they wish were not true; self-acceptance
- **Wielding power**—will to power, will to dominate and manipulate others; clericalism (wanting recognition, entitlement, privileges)
- **Dangers of wanting to choose one's own cross**—Christians are not free to do that. Instead, we are to take up the cross that we have been given to bear in obedience.

Small Group Table Discussions

What observable qualities or indicators point to the reality that formation has occurred in the people you work with? (e.g., virtues, practices, behaviors)?

… as one working in formal/non-formal/hybrid TE?

… as one working in your geographic/cultural context?