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## Missional Forms of Life: An Exploration

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Missional (Re)Formation

### Intro

So, we have explored the breadth of the Christian gospel and the mission of God. We have also seen how mission and formation are inextricably linked. And in that process we also discovered just how important wisdom is to missional formation. Near the end of the last talk I presented a few suggestions regarding congregational formation into specifically missional life: rediscovering our identity, learning missional skills, fostering a vibrant Christian life, nurturing missional relationships, and forming a missional culture.

Now, as I mentioned, before, I want to develop one more suggestion regarding mission and formation. Remember, I said last night at the very beginning that my desire was to help you discover new forms-of-life possibilities for participating in the mission of God. We are now ready to take that step. I also mentioned last night that I think I have the best to offer when I draw from my studies, my experience and my network. We have not talked much about my network yet. We are now ready to take that step. I am friends with a number of individuals and groups who are experimenting with new missional forms of life. That is part of my excitement for this talk: God is raising up really interesting new expressions. At least I find them interesting. In fact, many people are finding these ideas attractive and I want to give you a chance to see and catch the vision should the Spirit nudge. That is where we are going with this talk.

But I also want to warn you, this talk covers perhaps the most unfamiliar material I have introduced so far – well perhaps except my little philosophy lecture – So just about the time you are settling into your late morning nap, I am urging you to pay your closest attention. But also I warn you so that you can write down any questions you may have so we can talk about it during the Q and A time. OK?

### **What are Forms of Life?**

I want to introduce you to this notion of “forms of life.” Seventy or eighty years ago most people in America lived with two-parent families, working a single full-time occupation, often in the same general vicinity. Whether you lived in the city or the country, this was the dominant form of “modern” life – securing a family, a job, and a location.

But it wasn't the only form of life people lived. Some chose to join the military. They lived in barracks on a common base. They were deployed wherever their commander saw fit. Their income, their family life and more were all subject to the expectations which their own form of life as soldiers placed upon them. Some people were migrant farm workers, living in towns or cities part of the year and then traveling the harvests through the rest of the year sleeping in labor camps and sharing life together as a community of workers. There were also some who chose what they considered to be a *religious* form of life: Amish families, owning all things together as rural farming communities; celibate nuns taking vows of poverty and praying in convents; or missionaries who simply left the country to share Christ in the context of forms of life that were often very unfamiliar. Every once in a while you could find someone who pushed the boundaries of these normal forms of life: they were called beatniks back then. But they were rare.

Well, there is one other group of folks I want to mention. In 1957 three people bought a house together on a street in Evanston, Illinois called Reba Place. The driving vision for the early members of the group was to live out a life of Christian discipleship as they observed it in the Gospels and the book

of Acts. They believed the words of the earthly Jesus were meant to guide the community of his disciples in every area of life-not only then, but now. In time they developed a day-care center to serve the neighborhood. Members put the income from their various jobs together into a common purse which paid for common housing and other needs. The remainder was used to support one or another member who could not afford to pay for housing, or to develop other ministries. Reba Place Fellowship is still around and I visit them regularly. Not Amish, not nuns, not missionaries. But their choice of their form of life has made Reba Place Fellowship a light in Evanston, Illinois, and now in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, where a second community has been established. Beatniks for Jesus perhaps?

So what is a form of life? In every culture and in every period of history, society is set up with a finite collection of ways of living that most everybody understands. Human beings live within generally expected *ensembles* of practices, sentiments, relationships, values that are held somewhat in common and provide a sense of identity for those who share them. I was a migrant farm worker myself for two summers and so I learned something of the how to store your possessions under a bunk bed in barracks with a group of strangers. I learned about the kinds of relationships that will help you get promoted to a desired position, or who might protect you when you need it. When you put the housing arrangements, the unique relationship structure, the work itself even the feeling of the end of the day's work that everybody shares – when all this is put together in a single whole (what I call an *ensemble* of factors) then we can begin to understand a “form of life.”

The term “life” speaks of something fluid and vibrant, ever changing becoming something. The term “form” speaks of something rigid and structured. That is the ironic tension about forms of life. Boundaries can provide a safe haven or an experimental region within which we thrive and grow and develop influence. But forms can also squash life into a mere shallow *con-form-ity*.

I did not invent this phrase. It has a history in philosophy and religion. We find the phrase in the writings of the ancient Roman orator Cicero (106-43 BCE), who considers the best *form of life* to be

one which mixed contemplative and active elements. The fourth-century *History of the Monks in Egypt* describes a set of robbers “changing their form of life.”<sup>1</sup> Peter of Celle, twelfth century abbot of Moûtier-la-Celle describes what it is like to join the life of religion: “Entering into the monastery, he gives skin for skin, and all that he has, his soul, as he puts off the old man and takes up the new, entering into a new form of life.”<sup>2</sup> Twentieth-century Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, uses this phrase to imagine the shared ways of living that give rise to particular uses of language. He says, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has linked both philosophic and religious notions of a form-of-life together in his works.<sup>4</sup> As I use this phrase it has relationship to Charles Taylor’s idea of *social imaginaries*, Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* and Kees Waaijmann’s discussion of the “forms” of spirituality. But we do not need to get into all that here.

The point for me here is that we all seem to organize our lives in somewhat recognizable patterns. To illustrate let me ask you a few questions:

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1 *Historia Monachorum VI, (emendationis vitae formam modumque).*

2 WMM, 320. Note Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, 95-96, “It is strange that the expression’s penetration into the monastic literature is relatively late. It does not appear in the *Rule of the Fathers*, the *Rule of the Master* (where the term *forma* by itself is // found many times in the sense of example), or the Benedictine rule. When spiritual movements forcefully took up the syntagma starting from the eleventh century, the accent fell in equal measure on the two terms that composed it, to mean a perfect coincidence of life and form, example and follower. But it is only with the Franciscans that the syntagma *forma vitae* assumes the character of a genuine technical term of monastic literature, and life as such become the question that is in every sense decisive.”

3 Wittgenstein, *PI* #19. See also #23, “Here the term “language-*game* is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life,” #241 on agreement in forms of life, and pp. 174, 226. For other important uses of the term see Francis of Assisi, *Testament 14 FA:ED* 1.125, “The Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern/form of the Holy Gospel [secundum formam sancti Evangelii]”; and Clare of Assisi – *Form of Life of Clare of Assisi, CA:ED*, 108 “We confirm by our Apostolic authority the form of life that Blessed Francis gave you and which you have freely accepted.” (note language of all the Clare “rules” in Part II “Toward the Form of Life” = form), cf. p. 118, “he wrote a form of life (formam vivendi) for us as follows.”

4 See especially his *The Highest Poverty*.

# Forms of Life:

- **Family or dwelling community**
- **Career - life activities, skills**
- **Life Rhythm - sleep, activities, people**
- **Relationship circles**
- **Authority - who, why**
- **Estate - housing, possessions**
- **Eating - how much, how often, what kind**
- **Travel - how, how often**
- **Entertainment**

- Who is your *family* or who do you consider to be your immediate *dwelling community*?
- What is your *career*? What would you consider to be your primary life-activities, your greatest skills, the things you do that are most interesting to you?
- What is your *life-rhythm* like? When do you sleep, wake, meet with people, do things?

- How would you describe your *relationship circle*? Your “peeps”? Who is most important to you and why?
- Do you have anybody who you would say has some *authority* over you in some way? Who are your authorities and why do they have that role?
- How would you describe your *estate*? What do you own? How are you housed and what possessions are kept either in your home or elsewhere?
- What about *eating*? How often do you eat? What kind of food? How much?
- We could also talk about *travel*. How do you travel? How often? With whom and why?

Needless to say, I could go on and on with these questions, asking about clothing, entertainment and much more. These are enough, however, to give you a sense, as you thought about each of them, of the kinds of ways we generally choose life. But perhaps you also began to wonder what different forms of life *could* look like. Just what *could* whole-hearted devotion to whole-gospel living look like?

### **Contemporary Examples and Biblical Models**

Let me now give you a few examples of the hundreds of people I have met in the past few decades who are exploring with forms of life today. Jessica and Weston and their son Simeon own a home in Minneapolis, Minnesota in a neighborhood of amazing diversity and some pretty serious need. Weston is a carpenter and makes some of his income building things. But they also raise a little support through a non-profit so they can devote time to art therapy, God-discussions while doing woodwork with neighbors, and other creative ideas. They live near friends who share a common Christian vision and they pray with them regularly. The non-profit they work with asks that they make a serious efforts to blend contemplative, prophetic and missional currents of Christianity in their life and work. Both Weston and Jess meet with spiritual directors who provide support and accountability. Sometimes they struggle to see just where they fit in all of this but they are willing to play with it, and in the midst of their play, I think God is happy watching.

My second example is, perhaps a friend of yours, or at least a professor of mission at a sister college, Abilene Christian University. Kent Smith has been at Abilene since 1991. In 2004 he launched a Missional Residency which developed cohorts of students to explore missional life together. While the program saw a measure of success, Kent, after a number of years of watching things dreamed of a new form of life. Thus in 2009 he helped start what is now the Eden Community – a mix of ecovillage, cohousing, and intergenerational Christian community. They meet regularly for meals, for worship, and for conducting the business of the community. They work in various jobs on and off the common property.

My third example is Catherine. I had met her in California, but then Cheri and I met her again when we were in North East England. Catherine is a part of a group called the Northumbria community. Members of the Northumbria community do not share housing or income. Members of the Northumbria community are a geographically dispersed community that lives all over the world. What they share are common commitments to Availability and Vulnerability and to the practices that accompany those commitments. Catherine makes herself available and vulnerable to God through regular times of prayer (ever heard of *Celtic Daily Prayer*? The Northumbria folk are the ones who wrote that). She and her husband make themselves available to others through hospitality (we were their guests once). Community members make themselves vulnerable to others through regularly responding to some “accountability type” questions with a small group of people usually online.

The last example I want to mention is my wife Cheri and myself. You have already heard much of our story last night. But I want to emphasize one point here. When we were in college, we never really sensed any calling to a *career*. We were, however, led to make a decisions all along about our *form of life*: living at the poverty level, establishing times of prayer and life-rhythms, how we travel and eat, accountable relationships, the way we raised our children, and so on. These were the aspects of our life that we seemed to get the most solid guidance about as we sought to follow the Lord’s leading

in our lives. If you want to know more about life with the Howards, feel free to ask me in the Q and A time.

What I am saying is that even though in every culture and in every period of history, society is set up with a finite collection of ways of living that most everybody understands, I also think it is the case that in probably every society, there are also individuals and groups who don't quite fit. And the important thing for us here in this Missional (Re)Formation conference to see is that sometimes, people *choose* not to fit, and we make that choice because we find it most appropriate in order to follow God's call into missional life. We see new possibilities to the question, "What forms of life together help us participate in the mission of God here and now?"

Think of the Nazarites, described especially in Numbers 6 but mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. I wonder if there weren't twenty-somethings during the time of Moses who dreamed of growing their hair out and making a radical Nazirite consecration. Yes, there were some unique commitments associated with being a Nazarite: commitments that had to do with eating, appearance, and activities. But clearly this was some kind of special consecration to the Lord's service. I bet it was attractive to some and a unique expression of Israelite religion.

[point to the earlier chart through all of this]

Think of the seventy-two which Jesus sent out as messengers. He clearly gives them instructions, not simply regarding their message, but also regarding their form of life: without income, living as guests, restrictions on possessions, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God. And what is interesting to me, is that it appears that the mission teams of the early church (like Paul and his followers) appeared to have followed something like these very instructions, although they also worked with their hands when needed.

Think of the earliest church as described in Acts 2 through 4. Biblical scholars agree that the description of the unsparring sharing and mutually supportive life of the early Christian community was both unusual in its context and described as evidence of the work of God's Spirit and a sample of what

the possibilities of missional forms of life might look like. We read about their housing, their use of money, their eating and life-rhythms. We also discover something about new relationship circles. The early church grew both in numbers and in enthusiastic satisfaction as the Holy Spirit fell and they witnessed this unsparing sharing of the first Jerusalem Christians.

Finally, think of the widows described in 1 Timothy 4. Clearly this passage exists in our Scriptures simply because there were enough people wanting to be on the list of widows—people who devoted themselves to prayer and the service of God—that they needed to draft a set of policies to communicate how this form of life worked. We hear about their use of time and about their key activities.

I mention widows and Nazarites and such because these very Biblical examples became models for many, many different intentionally Christian forms of life through history. A number of these creative Christian experiments emerged in significant tension with the other forms of life surrounding them—in the world, but not of the world—perhaps the Christian beatniks of their own day. Followers of Clare and Francis of Assisi, the Moravian community in Germany, the Serampore Brotherhood in India: God’s Spirit inviting sincere Christians to explore how to be Christians, to live “all things new” by means of their own chosen form of life. Ask me more about these during the Q and A time, OK?

### **Missional Forms of Life**

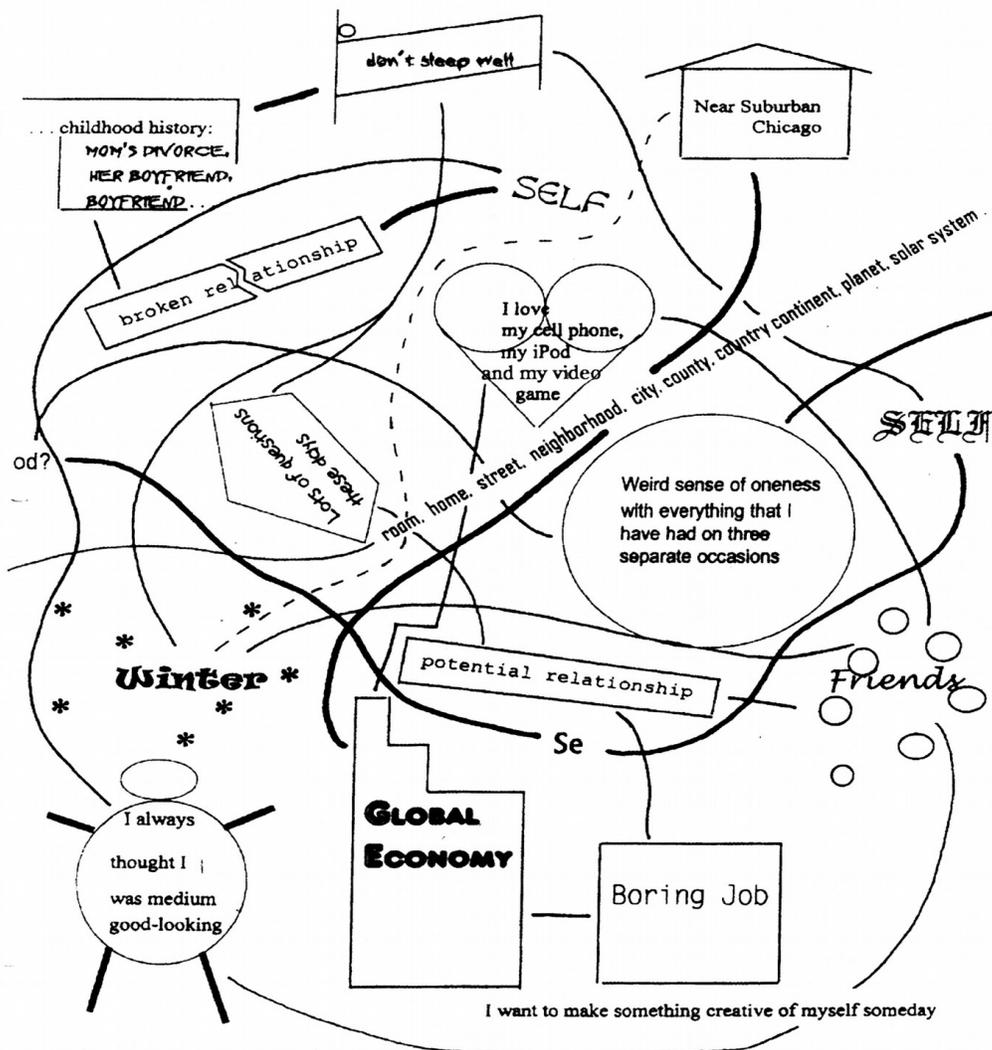
So now that we know something of what a form of life is, and we can see a little bit about how God’s people in Scripture, history, and contemporary society experiment with forms of life, let us take the next step of exploring just what makes intentional choices regarding how we dwell, eat, use money, develop a life rhythm, dress, and so on significant *missionally*? To put it another way, why am I so interested in talking about forms of life as a way of promoting missional re-formation?

We have already talked about this a little bit in the previous talk regarding the missional importance of a vibrant and attractive life. But I want to unpack things a bit more. I believe the time is

right for a re-formation of new experiments in forms of life for the sake of nurturing union with Christ and with the Gospel of Christ. Consequently knowing why we are doing this might help give us motivation to take the next step. And speaking of steps, I will unpack this idea of missional forms of life further in three steps:

First I need to show you how forms of life, and particularly intentionally chosen forms of life, function within human experience more generally. And of course, when I start talking about “Human Experience” you know what this means – more charts. Let’s start with this one, a portrait of what I call the Dynamic Interplay of Forces/Factors in the Formation of Life. As you can tell, this chart needs a bit of meditation, so I will just wait a couple of minutes while you muse.

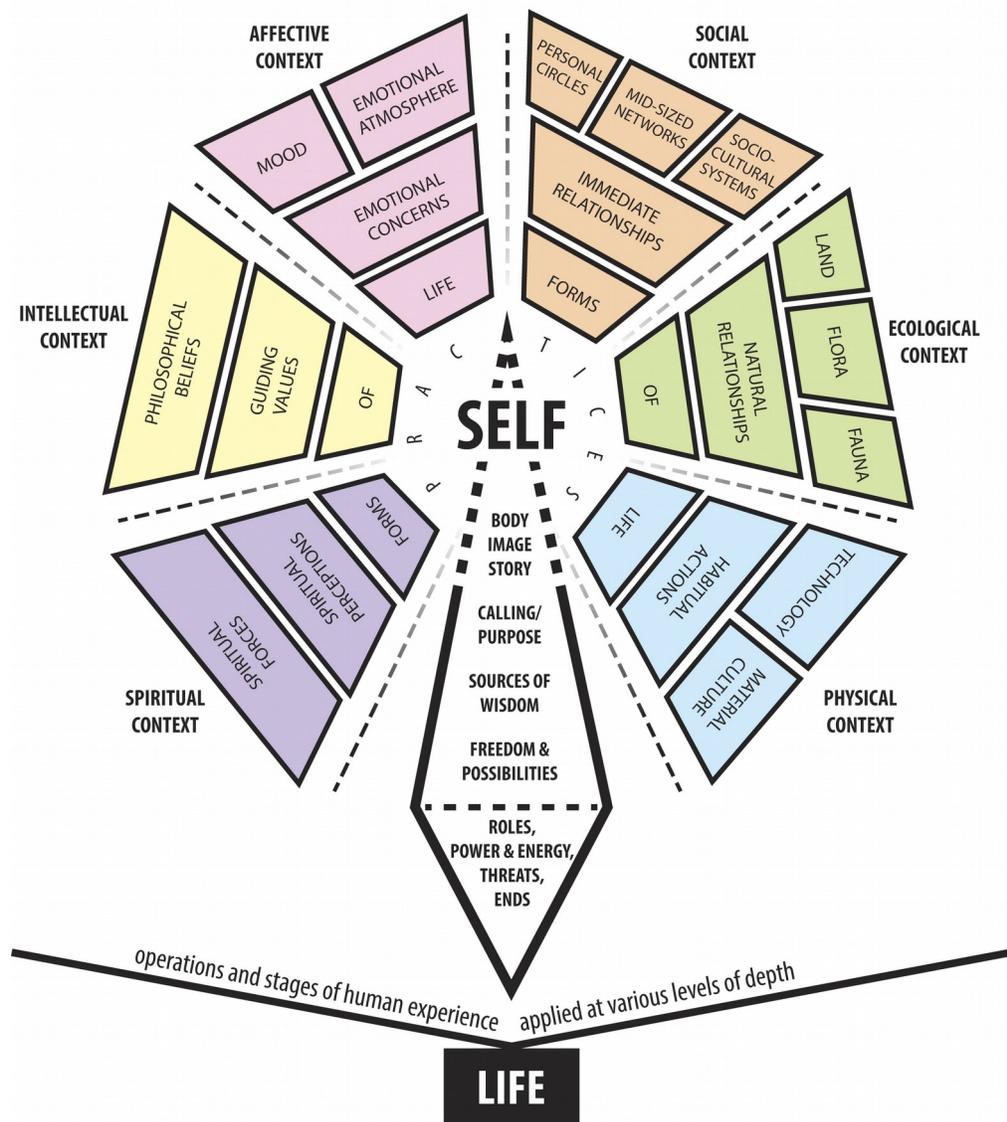
## SAMPLE OF DYNAMIC INTERACTION OF FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF LIFE



So, what did you notice? When I show this chart in my philosophy classrooms we have a lot of fun discussing the various features. But mostly what I think this chart does is to give you a feel of how life – and particularly, the *unexamined* life – works. We see lots of interaction, some of the connections stronger than others. We see relationships, economics, self-image, technology, spirituality and more. The characteristic elements of forms of life (housing, relationship circle, life-rhythm, and so on) are reflected in the chart, but it is a bit, well, vague and *unexamined*. Still, one grows and changes in the midst of all this. Life happens.

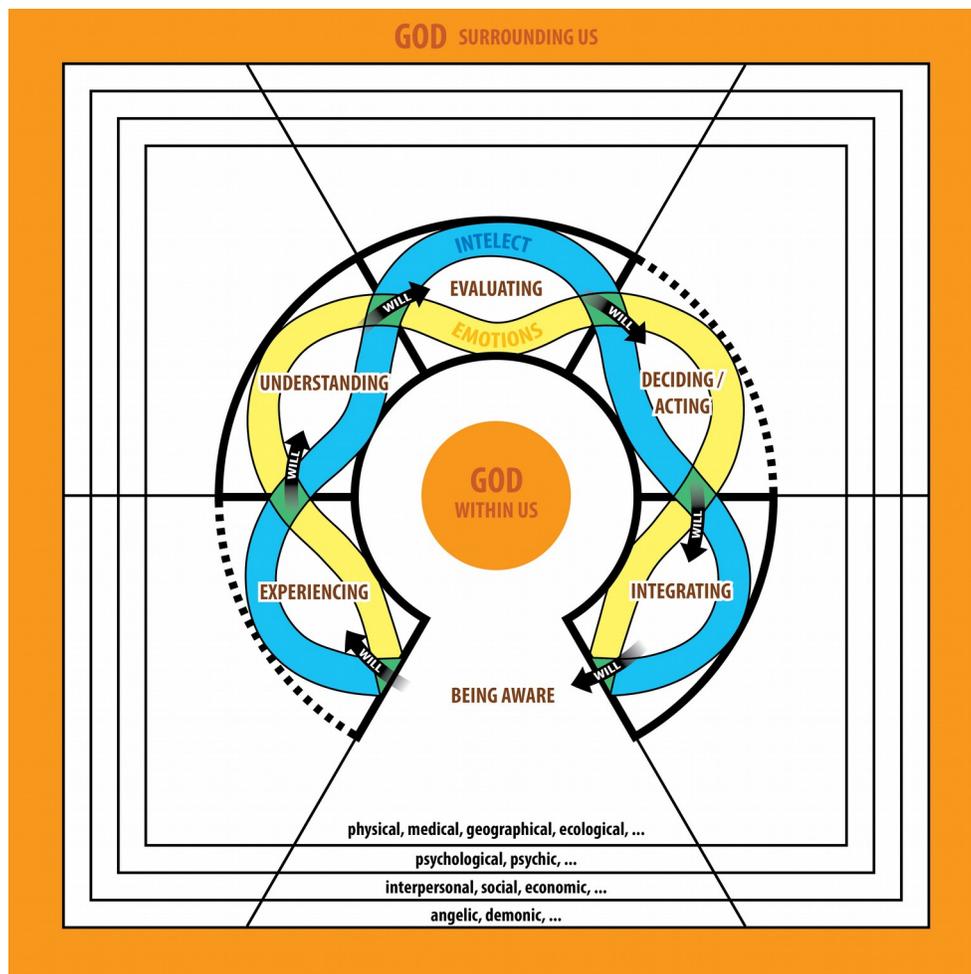
Now let's take a look at the same material, only now portrayed in a much more systematic manner. I'll give you some time, once again, to explore.

### MUTUALLY INTERPENETRATING FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF LIFE



What you see here is how the various contexts that surround us penetrate the SELF, giving it meaning; and then how we process all of that, expressing ourselves into the next moment of LIFE. In terms of our earlier chart of Human Experience you notice that there is a dotted line from the web of relationships into the stage of Experiencing, and another at Deciding/Acting. That is meant to show the moments at which our contexts tend to penetrate the self (at Experiencing) and likewise the moment at which we tend to penetrate, in turn, our own context (at Deciding/Acting).

### Model of Human Experience



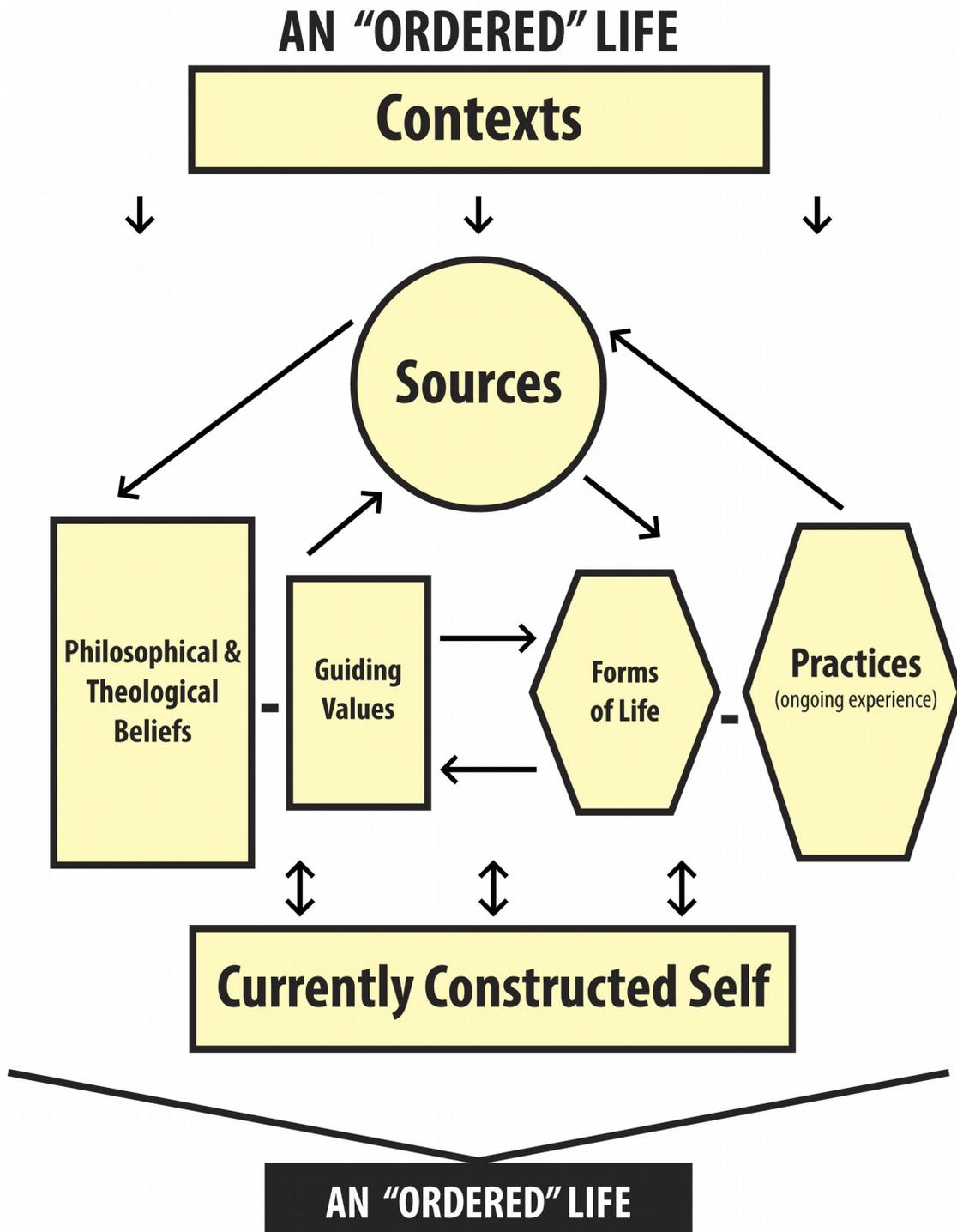
Thus, the point in the center of the “Interpenetrating” Chart where our contexts make impact on the SELF is at the stage of our Experiencing in the “Model of Human Experience” Chart. Then,

following the “Interpenetrating” diagram downward, we integrate lots of other factors (which I won’t get into here) and process that through the operations and stages of Human Experience (Experiencing, Understanding, Evaluating, Deciding). Then, at the moment of that transition of Deciding and Acting, we express ourselves in a LIFE which then penetrates the world. As you can tell, whereas the earlier (Human Experience) charts developed as my way of making sense of knowing, my new charts are more explorations of being.

What is most important for us to see here today is the role of *forms of life*. You notice in the “Interpenetrating” Chart how our access to social context, for example, is structured in layers presented farther or nearer to the SELF. The world is made up of a variety of social collections and interconnections. Governments, corporations, Facebook groups, I can go on and on. We have little connection with the vast majority of these, although through some kind of butterfly effect each of them really does have some influence, probably. More close to us – and shaping our lives more directly – are our immediate relationships, our friends, co-workers, family, and so on. But even these are mediated to us through the forms of life we are familiar with. A “family” relationship usually means something much different to a twenty-first century American than it might have to a nineteenth-century Chinese. Our forms of life – the finite ways of dwelling, eating, working, and so on that any society characteristically exhibits – function as the lenses through which we experience the world. And, as you can imagine, this is true not only for the way we experience our social context, but also nature, ideas, feelings and the rest.

So what this means, as we begin to consciously order our lives, is that we pay attention to the fact that forms of life function as mediators and models, both to us, and then from us to the world.

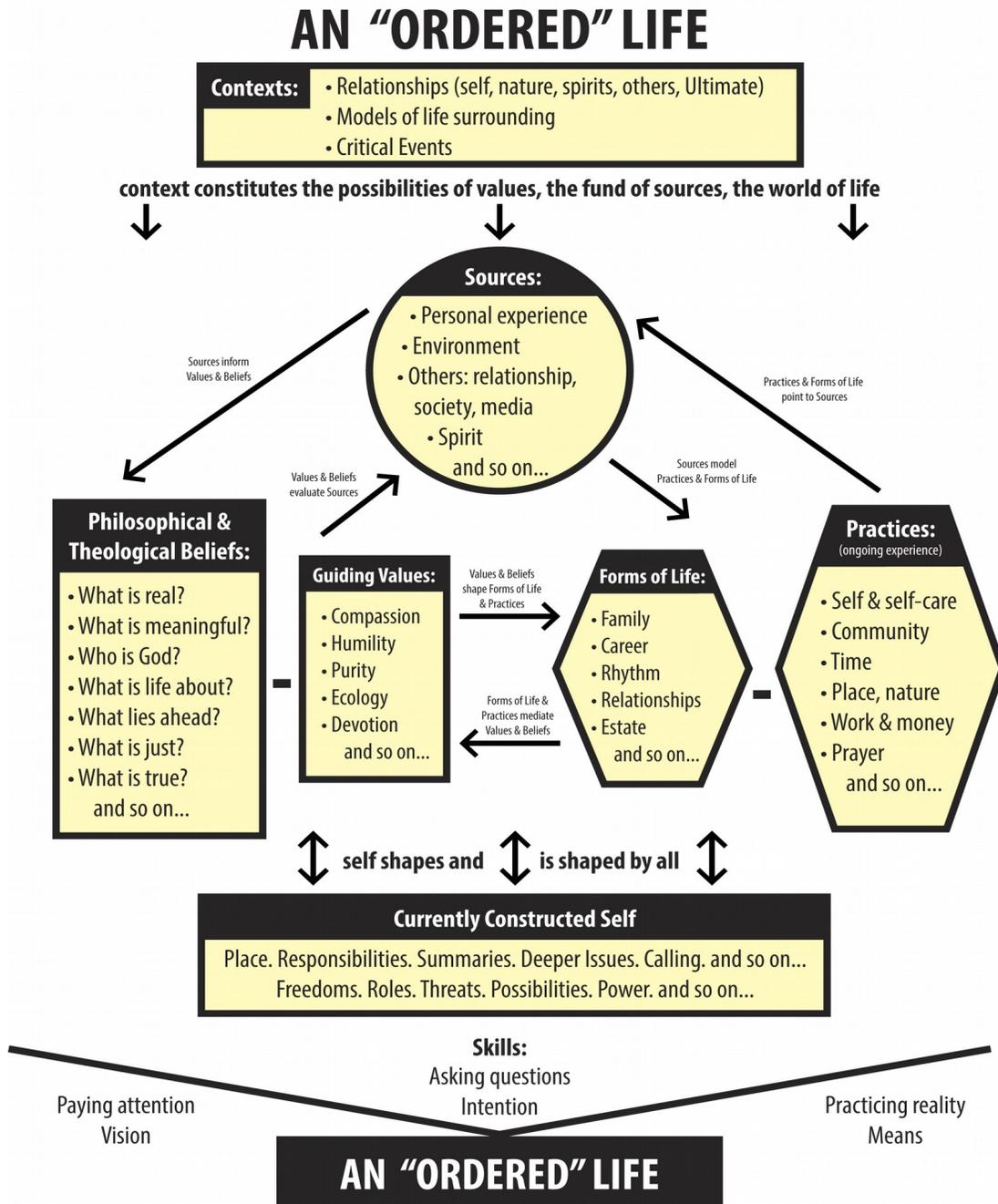
A consciously ordered (or as a philosopher, shall I say, an *examined*) life sees the big picture.



We are aware of our contexts, practices, and values. But we also recognize that we each have our own Sources of Wisdom. That life-forming experience, that trusted relationship, the Bible. Our Sources, from the time of our parents forward, serve to help us filter our contexts: what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Our Sources inform our Values and Beliefs. They also model both Practices and

Forms of Life. Think, for example of people who mentored you, or the figures in Christian history you have most admired. Often what we admire – and are drawn into through them – are not just particular ideas or practices, but the way they live. Sources model forms of life.

When we look at the big picture more closely we see that all the elements of life interpenetrate each other in particular ways. Just take a look at this chart for a minute and see what you notice.



What I want to draw our attention at this point is the relationship between forms of life, practices, and beliefs and values. Forms of Life navigate between Practices and Values and/or Beliefs. What I mean is that a Form of Life gives meaning to Practices. But Forms of Life also make concrete what are otherwise abstract Values and Beliefs. A random act of kindness is one thing. A form of life within which one chooses to make a habit of doing acts of kindness communicates much more, even than one big act of kindness. Furthermore, we not only inherit forms of life as elements of what I call our currently constructed self, we also forge forms of life as we choose into the immediate future through consciously ordering our lives. It may just be that fasting from chocolate for the next few weeks, for you, not merely a temporary practice for lent, but is a choice to develop a new way of eating – retraining that need for your default comfort food. This is the creation of forms of life.

Thank you for following with me. Now that we have a sense of the place of Forms of Life within Human Experience, we can now take a closer look at consciously chosen forms of life as expressions of formation and mission. Let's use V-I-M again (of course now with relational-wisdom added) to explore forms of life as expressions of formation. With regard to *vision*, we see that consciously chosen forms of life articulate a clear vision vis-à-vis the world. Whether I am talking to a member of Eden Community's ecovillage, a carpenter-missionary such as Weston, or even a participant in Northumbria's dispersed community of availability and vulnerability, they all have a sense of somehow being "in the world but not of it." The very forms of life they have chosen distinguish their vision of what life is about from the people who surround them. Often these folks see themselves as part of a "counter-culture" or, what I think is more accurate, an "alternative culture." Beatniks for Jesus.

When it comes to *intention*, consciously chosen forms of life express real commitment to real values in the midst of a culture that avoids both values and commitment. It has long fascinated me that human civilization has so much problem with money, sex, and power, and that in the midst of this

twisted civilization nuns and monks have for centuries taken formal vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Radical commitments to address the problems of the world at the roots, expressed in the very ways we live our lives.

When it comes to *means* we find that many individuals and communities who choose forms of life make heavy use of the means of grace. Indeed, in my *Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* I call these kinds of groups formation greenhouses. Rhythms of worship and fellowship, common supportive values, accountable relationships in the context of ordinary life – I can go on and on. Each expression has its own distinct collection of common means, but the point is that they make use of them – it is part of their way of life.

Finally – wisdom and relationships. Once again I praise the diversity of these expressions which consciously choose forms of life. As I have tried to communicate throughout this conference, the gospel of God is big and no expression can do it all. Our own varied histories, personalities, contexts will mean that one form of life will work best for some, while another will work for another. But in both cases, the point is that we are choosing to link practices and values in conscious awareness of our faith in the midst of a watching world. Yet so often in today's society forms of life are not chosen. We live *unexamined lives* and our habits of spending, eating, entertainment and so on are simply assimilated from the society (and conditioned by the advertising) within which we dwell. For example, in my years of teaching philosophy in a community college setting, I saw so many students who went to college so they could “make a living” but never really consciously or intentionally evaluated the “kind of life” they wanted to live. The combination of well-considered habits, regular self-examination, and supportive relationships provide the kind of relational wisdom that makes these experiments in chosen forms of life an ideal environment for Christian spiritual formation.

I hope you are beginning to see now why I wanted to develop this idea of forms of life possibilities as a suggestion for missional formation. As a link between values and practices, forms of life communicate meaning more powerfully than we can ever imagine. It is often said that actions

Speak louder than words? Well I will go one step further: habits of actions speak louder than random actions. And a lifestyle speaks loudest of all. This is why we all admire Mother Theresa of Calcutta. There is a kind of aesthetic quality about a life well-lived. We display an alternative, a hope for something better, a new place in this world. Even if we do not actively pursue what might be thought of as traditional “missionary” activities, the very form of our lives, if consciously chosen in light of the Christian gospel, speaks Christ to a watching world.

What you need to know—and indeed, what you already know—is that we do not live in the forties or fifties any longer. To quote the Population Reference Bureau, “While in 1940 the overwhelming majority of households (90 percent) contained families—more persons who were related to each other—by 2010, this share had dropped to 66 percent.” The average person now changes jobs an average of 12 times during his or her career. Not to mention how globalization, computerization, and digital connection have transformed our experience of work, of community and thus have destabilized what have been our normal forms of life.

In this new context, I believe God is inviting us into new Christian forms of life. We are realizing that Christianity is not just a matter of what we believe, but also about who we become. We are seeing mission not as something we do “way over there” but as something we *are* in the midst of our neighborhoods right here. We are beginning to discover—in light of so many scandals—that our faith must involve real commitments to real values: particularly with relationship to money, sex, and power. And one more thing I think I see – I think there is among some at least a hunger to exchange the frantic pace of late-modernity for a measured rhythm of historic Christian devotion.

Let’s go back to those questions I asked you earlier, but now let’s think about how we might want to live, if we followed the Gospel and the Spirit: [review the first Form of Life chart]

- Who might be your *family* or your immediate *dwelling community*?
- What could be your *career*?

- How might your *life-rhythm* look like?
- Who would populate your *relationship circle*? and why?
- Would you have any *authorities* in your life?
- How would you describe your *estate*? Your properties and possessions?

Now, let's take a break and then you can ask lots of questions.