

On Training Teachers and Leaders

Field notes from an initial exploration



Religion does need new leaders, spiritual men and women who will dare to depend solely on Jesus and his incomparable teachings.

The Urantia Book 195:9.4 (2082.9)

Angie Thurston and Aprilhelen

As second-generation Urantia Book students, we are eager for our community to keep pace with the potentials the revelation reveals. One of these is in the area of training teachers and leaders to support spiritual development. Growing up, we knew of no such training programs in which we could participate, despite the fact that we are both inclined toward spiritual ministry. We intend to be part of changing this.

Indeed, as of this writing, a few related efforts are beginning to emerge, such as the Urantia Book Teacher Education Program at Urantia University Institute (UUI). For our part, we have been teaching the Progress Project course at UUI for three years now, which is dedicated to fostering spiritual growth in community. In 2022, we ran our first Progress Project Service Corps training, which explicitly focused on preparing graduates of the Progress Project course to serve students in future courses. As such, it was a small pilot in training teachers and leaders for a spiritual community context.

Our guiding questions for the pilot were as follows, each of which we will elaborate in this report:

How might we train Jesusonian leaders?

How might we foster a spirit-led culture? What might be the role of teachers and leaders?

How might we create effective, sustainable, and scalable models for training teachers and leaders?

We decided to study and report on our experience in hopes that it might serve others who are similarly motivated. We hope that this brief report will resource a broader conversation about how to do this kind of work well, knowing that the need is great and the potentials are profound!

What we did

Back in 2017, Angie and two other young Urantia Book readers, Liz Craig and Mae Thompson, began an undertaking we called the Progress Project. The three of us wanted to cultivate personal spiritual growth and were eager for companionship and accountability along the way. So we met online bi-weekly to commune with God, check in about our spiritual lives, and set spiritual goals for the weeks ahead.

Before long, our experience had proven so fruitful that we wanted to share it. Soon a second “Triad” of Aprilhelen, Geoff Theiss, and Missy Gold was born. After the experience proved fruitful yet again, all six of the original participants went in search of a platform to share further. Urantia University Institute (UUI) accepted our request to develop a course for their online campus. In fall 2020, in collaboration with the UUI team, we launched the first Progress Project course with Angie and Aprilhelen as Instructors. This was quite successful and in spring 2021 we ran the course again.

The intention for the course was to give participants an experience of meeting in Triads for a season, in hopes that they would want to continue and become part of the larger Progress Project community going forward. Key to the success of this plan, we believed, was the role of someone to support the Triads: onboarding them, resourcing them, praying for them, and being there for them if challenges arose. In the first course we called this the “Shepherd” role, and it was filled by Mae, Liz, Angie, and Aprilhelen – in other words, people intimately familiar with the Progress Project Triad experience.



In the second course, we invited graduates from the first course to become Shepherds for the new students. Nine people stepped forward, and we were thrilled! We gave them a 90-minute onboarding and a folder of written resources, offered optional monthly sessions for spiritual support, and we were off! And this was where our great learning began.

It turns out that it takes more than a Zoom onboarding to prepare a new crop of leaders for a role – even a wonderful and spirit-motivated group like this one! We had a series of challenges arise in that second course that helped us realize the need for a proper training program.

We ran an inaugural training program in spring 2022, in preparation for the next Progress Project course that fall. We called it the Progress Project Service Corps Training. Here is a broad outline of our curriculum.

Progress Project Service Corps Training Curriculum

Week 1: Introducing spiritual values in leadership

Being intentional about cultivating divine values in your service to others

Week 2: Your spiritual support system as a Server

Identifying the people, places, and practices that support you spiritually so that you can support others

Week 3: Holding sacred space for the spiritual growth of others

Holding your Triad with Jesusonian love and cultivating the sanctity of trust

Week 4: Communicating in service of progress

Bringing spiritual values into your communication and listening, as well as your discernment about when and how to share

Week 5: Navigating interpersonal challenges as a Server

Applying Jesusonian principles to navigate interpersonal challenges in your leadership and in support of your Triad

Week 6: Spiritual values in action

Presenting action plans of your spiritual goals for the coming season

Over the course of the six weeks, students did weekly written reflections on each topic area, in which they explored:

Reflection Questions

Current strengths

How am I already equipped in this area?

Areas of growth

How do I aspire to grow in this area?

Plan of action

What steps can I take between now and fall 2022, to make progress in this area?

We asked that the weekly plan of action take the form of S.M.A.R.T. goals.

S.M.A.R.T. Goals:

Specific:

Does this goal make sense? Is it clear?

Measurable:

Can you track your progress?

Achievable:

Is this goal challenging but not impossible?

Relevant:

Is the goal aligned with your service objectives?

Time bound:

By what point will you attain this goal?

By the end of the training, students had developed a comprehensive action plan that incorporated elements from each topic area we had explored. This action plan was meant to carry them through the summer, as they continued to pursue their spiritual leadership goals in preparation to potentially become Servers for the Progress Project course in the fall.¹



¹ Based on feedback from participants, we changed the name “Shepherd” to “Server” between the second and third time we offered the Progress Project course.



How it went



A total of 10 people completed the training in spring 2022. We started with 14 and a few determined it was not the right season or it was not what they expected. Of those who finished the training, two continued on to become Servers for the Progress Project course we ran in the fall. There are at least two possible explanations for this relatively small conversion rate.

First, the training developed a reputation as “the intense one” – meaning, many students found the course to be very rigorous and, in some cases, off-putting for that reason. There was also a fairly lengthy application to become a Server after completing the training, which some found to be too much. In the words of Kurt Cira, who did end up becoming a Server:

I think that the approach taken in the training worked for me, but was obviously not as effective with many of the other people who took the course. I think that this may be due to the time demands that the exercises placed on the PPSC students, as well as the extensive questions asked as part of the actual application. I think it scared off many potential servers who thought that the demands on their time and commitment would be very high, higher in my estimation than they actually turned out to be. This is the area that I would consider modifying in the future. As I have said in the past, I felt as if I was being tested for the Service Army instead of a voluntary group of people working to share and help others discover the valuable experience that I gained through the course.

This is an area of great interest to us, and one that we hope to explore more. We did make the training rigorous on purpose, out of the desire for meaningful transformation to occur. It is our vision for the Service Corps to emanate qualities of Spirit in such a way as to attract all participants in the Progress Project to want to grow spiritually like they have. Of course, we know that such change does not occur in six weeks, but our hope was that the training would set in motion a movement toward God that would play out over the subsequent months and years. Likewise, the application was intended to confirm a candidate’s readiness for the role, and so we thought thoroughness was important. We are curious about which of these convictions to maintain and which to release or adjust, and how.

While the demands of the Server role (real or perceived) may have been one deterring factor, there was at least one other at play. About a third of the students decided not to become Progress Project Servers but claimed that the PPSC training helped them to discern where and how they were called to serve next. In the words of Nancy Votrain:

I benefited from being with a supportive group of people as we focused our attention on serving others...The [course] helped me clarify what I value most, and where I could best focus my time and energy."



And Ryll Mathews:

This training helped me to hone in on the conscious essentials of my spiritual growth. It helped me to look at my life as a whole and coordinate ways of being/doing in all facets that are in service of this growth.

Both of these participants are now serving in meaningful ways outside of the Progress Project context.

For Kurt Cira and Steve Frith, the two who did become Service Corps members for fall 2022, we were curious about the impact of the training. Here are their words:

What did you learn about Jesusonian leadership in the PPSC training that you used as a Server in the PP course?

Steve:

*The key lesson drawn from my practice of Jesusonian leadership in the PPSC is the importance of **compassionate active listening**. Active listening is far more difficult than it sounds as it requires you to **suspend judgment and to overcome the urge to step in with the “answers”**. My role as a Jesusonian leader is to lovingly guide my brothers and sisters through **open, non-leading questions** and very often just give them the gift of companionable silence as they move toward their goal.*

Kurt:

*What served me best was the **meditation on the values and qualities** that Jesus displayed in his work. I made this a part of my daily spiritual practice last May and continue this exercise daily almost a year later. I think that **practicing my spiritual path, initially encouraged in the PP, is essential to serving effectively as a Server**. It ties me to a resource that is infinitely capable of inspiring and guiding me in all areas of my life, especially in all areas of loving service. This is an area that I am sure God wants me to grow in so help always is forthcoming.*

What did you learn about the role of Servers in fostering a spirit-led culture in the Progress Project? How successful do you feel we were at this and why?

Steve:

*I took away two key lessons about fostering a spirit-led culture in the Progress Project. The first is the importance of **complete honesty and authenticity** in your own spiritual practice. You have to **“walk the walk”**, be honest with yourself and when you fail, as we all will at one time or another, own up to it and get back up on your feet.*

The discussions about spiritual goal development and the rigorous process used in goal development was brilliant. I personally found it life changing, particularly the emphasis on measurable actions and the development of “spiritual infrastructure” such as toolkits and support networks.

Kurt:

*What is needed most in serving is to **walk the walk of service**, to actually practice what we are trying to instill in the participants. This leads to an understanding of the goals we are trying to instill, and this was done very well.*

After taking the PPSC training and being a Server for the PP course, what thoughts do you have about how to create effective, sustainable, and scalable models for training teachers and leaders?

Steve:

*Use the **spiritual goal development process** used in the Progress Project Servers Course. It is rigorous and well thought out and most importantly to achieve sustainability and scalability it is also repeatable.*

For the two of us, a key practice remains to seek and incorporate feedback. We are aware of doing all this for the first time. We have requested feedback at the midpoint and the end of every Progress Project course we have taught so far, and explained to the PPSC trainees that they were helping to shape a pilot experience. We are eager to continue honing these offerings in the hope that they will contribute to a culture of wise spiritual leadership in the Urantia community and beyond.





What we learned

How might we train Jesusonian leaders?

One of the primary reasons we created the PPSC training was because we discovered a need to cultivate what might be called “spiritual maturity”. In other words, it felt important for those in the Server and Instructor roles to model a *way of being* that would inspire and uplift the students. For this reason, the two of us as Instructors also embraced a student role, participating in the training and completing all of the assignments. We needed to master the subject matter as much as any of the other students!

But spiritual maturity can be a delicate topic, especially given that many people have experienced forms of so-called authority in religious and spiritual community contexts that are hypocritical or harmful. Our intention was to discover if there is a healthy form of servant leadership, modeled on the life and teachings of Jesus, that might be developed intentionally.

So what *is* Jesusonian leadership? We zeroed in on the **balanced expression of spiritual values** as its defining characteristic. We described them with these guiding points.²

Spiritual Values...

Are available to everyone

Are enacted in relationship

Lead to love

In other words, they are the qualities of Jesus’ character which can also become our own, from sincerity, compassion, generosity, and mercy, to cheerfulness, dependability, righteousness, and valor. Jesus expressed brotherly and fatherly love in his leadership, and our desire was for those in the Service Corps to increasingly show forth the fruits of the spirit in a way that was both accompanying and guiding. Jesus was a *friend* to all those he led. *The Urantia Book* says that even more so than what he taught, it was *how he was* with people that caused them to believe in him and fall in love with him. In training Servers, we learned that we were really training friends – people who would give of themselves out of genuine affection for those in their care.

² We first heard this breakdown from Urantia Book reader Tom Choquette.

Another area we learned a lot about was the difference between leading and serving, and the extent to which leadership can be taught. *The Urantia Book* says that wise leadership has never exceeded one percent of the population, suggesting a set of inborn qualities that only a few possess 81:6.42 (911.7). Yet we also know that we live in a vast universe entirely organized based on service, where every single one of us has a unique contribution to make to the evolving Supreme.³ We arrived at the conclusion that while some of us may have more inborn potential for executive leadership and public teaching, all of us *must* serve and teach in order to advance in our cosmic careers, so there must be room to provide training for wiser and more skillful service, teaching, and leadership within our spheres of influence. This starts by being the truthful, beautiful, and good leaders of our own service-directed lives.

Lastly, we learned a few things about conducting such a training:

Spiritual values can be cultivated on purpose. It is completely possible to devote oneself to a quality such as *sincerity*, practice it, and actually become more sincere. It seems that only good can come of more support structures that help people to deepen their connection to God as the source of all divine values and nurture their expression of those values in service to others.

The Triad structure has unique value. From the pattern of the Trinity, we see the value of groups of three meeting consistently over time as a catalyst for Jesusonian leadership development. In this training, we used the Triad structure as a way to cultivate self-observation about spirit connection without, hopefully, dipping into unnecessary or unhealthy self-examination. *The Urantia Book* warns against harmful introspection and says that the religion of Jesus makes no provision for spiritual self-examination 140:8.27 (1583.1).⁴ Yet it also admonishes us to achieve better communication with the divine Monitor that dwells within the human mind through “the well-balanced and sane effort to advance the borders of self-consciousness” and make contact with the divine presence 196:3.34 (2097.2). While we can’t necessarily see our own growth in this arena, through ongoing, intimate relationships, we can bear witness to each other’s progress.

A direct link between theory and practice is crucial. We found it was important to have a specific forum in which to apply learnings from a leadership training. In our case, that was the Progress Project course. Even though some students ended up identifying other venues in which to apply what they had learned, it was useful to have the Progress Project as a reference point throughout the training. In this way, the learnings became experiential as soon as possible. We know that true growth happens in the realm of personal experience!

³ The Supreme is the dimension of God that is evolving in and through our experience.

⁴ In fact, one of the PPSC trainees dropped the course after the first week because they perceived the curriculum to include too much self-examination. The difference between positive intentionality and harmful introspection is one we continue to try to understand through experience.



How might we foster a spirit-led culture? What might be the role of teachers and leaders?

Our vision is to help foster a culture in the Urantia movement that idealizes the discovery and expression of spiritual values as a path to becoming the best versions of ourselves. We know that all of humanity is eventually headed in one direction: toward progress. It seems that leadership will be most effective when grounded in higher values that influence that trajectory. While we were initially focused on training teachers and leaders for spiritual community contexts, we have come to believe that these teachings are absolutely transferable to leadership in all other aspects of society. Our experience with the Progress Project Service Corps has affirmed that modeling – living values by example – is an important strategy in leadership. For it is the leaders who shape and personify the culture of communities.

Communion Leadership

The Progress Project lifts up the significance of nurturing the inner life of Spirit and intentionally sharing that inner life with others. Exchanging stories of personal spiritual practices is one of the tools that we recommend and have found to be useful for helping participants to explore their inner lives. But we also try to cultivate cosmic consciousness during the class time itself. In all of our courses, we always start class with an extended “communion time”, which we ask three of the students to lead every week.

Supporting students' communion leadership has become an important part of the Server and Instructor roles, and has been a key area of learning for us. Even the language that we use may need more time to develop, as the idea of "communion" is not necessarily universally understood, especially beyond the Urantia Book-student community.⁵ It seems that the baseline is actually taking the time to be in the inner life together, however it is used – be it resting, worshipful problem solving, mindful breathing, chanting, or other activities. We have determined, by student feedback, that the wide variety of spiritual practices they each witnessed from the others inspired their own creative adventure with spiritual agencies, enhancing their inner reality and outer-world expression of service.

Although we have come to believe that unique personal expression must be prioritized in training for leadership communion, we have found key elements that we see as universal. We witness that the conditions for worshipful communion, when two or more are gathered, are most favorable when they include:

On the part of the communion leader,
a personal desire to lead the communion time

A collective intention

A shared desire to touch the divine heart

Each individual feelingly experiencing God's presence, free of distractions As worship leaders, we seek what *The Urantia Book* calls that "supreme pleasure" that "attains the heights of the perfection of sublime self-expression and personal enjoyment" (27:7.3). Our dream is to live in a culture where worshipful communion is commonplace, and where teachers and leaders have a deep comfort with holding space for worship, each in their own way.

Resolution Seeking

Our other biggest learning was about conflict resolution. Before the PPSC training, both Servers and we as Instructors were too easily drawn into the inevitable interpersonal challenges that can arise within Triads. Following from a spirit-oriented inner life, we desired to know how we might ground our interpersonal dynamics in Jesusonian values. And so we studied Jesus' own method of navigating conflict and adapted his teachings to create the following model of interpersonal resolution-seeking for the Progress Project:

⁵ Twelve-step programs have the inclusive strategy of giving permission to seek a "God of your own understanding" and using silence "to do with as you wish." This technique seems wise for reaching the interest of a wide audience.

Three-step process for interpersonal resolution-seeking

- If someone offends you, go to them and privately share your concern with a clear consciousness of expressing spiritual values. If you come to an understanding and recenter in love, then you have addressed the issue.
- But if they will not hear you, if they persist in the error, go again to them, inviting one or two mutual friends, so that you may have witnesses to confirm your testimonies and establish the fact that you have dealt justly and mercifully with your fellow.
- Now if they refuse to hear all of you, you may invite several others trusted by everyone, with whom to share the issue. If your fellow refuses to hear the wisdom of the group, then it will fall to the group to decide how to proceed.



By introducing and practicing the Jesusonian method (including role playing) in the PPSC training, we noticed a considerable progress-shift in ourselves and the other Servers during the fall 2022 Progress Project course. It feels to us like a very worthy challenge to learn how to do things differently in a world so used to gossip, side-taking, and score-keeping.

Alongside adopting this three-step process, Nancy Votrain, one of the students of the Service Corps training, drew upon elements of the Progress Project culture to create a set of conversation agreements for her service work in prison ministry. We have adapted and expanded her ideas here, with the intent to include something along these lines for the next PPSC training:

Conversation Agreements

- Respect the audience. Use language understood by most, asking for clarity. The value of love.
- Speak about principles, not personalities. The value of trust.
- Be integrous, authentic, and honest. The value of honesty.
- Stay on topic. The value of predictability.
- Take turns speaking. Make sure everyone is able to contribute. Raise your hand if you want to speak and wait for your turn. The value of inclusion.
- Share the airtime. Show restraint if you are more talkative and encourage quieter people to speak. The value of respect.
- Ask open and honest questions. Passing is always an option. The value of freedom.
- Express appreciation for each other. The values of acceptance and acknowledgment.
- Have only one conversation at a time. The value of listening.
- Use the three-step process of resolving interpersonal challenges. The value of peacemaking.
- Use non-disruptive ways to manage your own experience. The values of self-respect and self-control.

How might we create effective, sustainable, and scalable models for training teachers and leaders?

From the moment the first Triad (Angie, Mae, and Liz) invited the second Triad (Geoff, Missy, and Aprilhelen) to join in this experiment, there has been an extended mission for the Progress Project to become a legacy system, contributing to the soul growth of individuals, enhancing communities, and doing its small part to nudge our world toward what *The Urantia Book* refers to at the Era of Light and Life. As with any project with long-term goals of expansion, scalability is a central focus.

How might we develop the Progress Project to grow as a legacy system for socio-spiritual transformation? As you have read, with each course, this framework has been remodeled. Even before our partnership with UUI, we spent a year designing an onboarding process. Also mentioned above, we are advocates of receiving frequent feedback from Servers and students in order to improve the system. As the project is still in what is considered infancy, the model remains adaptable and experimental.

The idea of the onboarding process was the first step in creating the role of the Server. Although we see incremental progress in the project's scalability, we also understand that over time there will need to be Servers who move into the Instructor / Facilitator role. As more Servers step up from the groundwork of Triads, we hope that the Service Corps training will become more robust, accepting more members into the committed corps.



Parker Palmer's *Center for Courage and Renewal*, whose Circles of Trust resemble Progress Project Triads in some respects, is a model that we have looked to for inspiration. The rigor of training required of Courage and Renewal facilitators is designed in such a way to cull dedicated leaders and those who are inspired to create their own Circle of Trust retreats all over the world. As we experienced, many viewed the Service Corps training as extreme relative to what the Server role expected. We are seeking a balance here, as the participants are being trained for the Server role as well as for Spirit-led leadership wherever life takes them, with the intent to add value to the socio-spiritual transformation of humanity.

Because the Progress Project is a sacred space of personal and community development, it feels right to us that anyone in the Server role would have gone on a sincere and dedicated growth journey to get there. The intensity of self-observation and goal-setting at the foundation of the PPSC training is purposeful. But it is possible that over time, more layers could be introduced to accommodate greater scale – such as junior and senior Servers, for instance. It has also been rewarding to witness that some Triad members and graduates of the PPSC training, without choosing to become official Service Corps members with the Progress Project, have gone on to bring many elements of the project to their own personal lives, passion projects, and study groups.



Where we're going

It has been a fascinating experience to be creating something that we want in our own lives – something that helps us to stretch toward our personal spiritual and leadership goals – while simultaneously offering this very same system to others for their own growth. At times, the experience of “learning by doing” has had its challenges. But we ground every planning meeting with our thanks to God and our desire for God’s will to be done in this work. We pray that our joyful labor, and that of so many others who are similarly motivated, might continue to bear fruit.

A few questions we still have, as the experiment moves forward to yet another stage in search of bringing spirit-led community to greater scale, are as follows:

How might we appropriately modulate the intensity of leadership training so that it is fit for purpose?

With a spirit-led, non-accredited, volunteer organization, what are the essentials of training teachers and leaders and which elements can be more flexible?

What components of language and structure will be most appropriate to include as we look to extend the Progress Project into communities beyond the Urantia movement?

Our aspiration for the Progress Project is as a long-term asset, contributing to the human ascension process on Urantia. In the shorter term, we hope that our experiment will support others, such as Urantia University Institute’s Teacher Education Program (TEP), which also has the intention of creating a culture of service infused with Jesusonian teachers and leaders. Outside of the Urantia community, we hope that it might become a model that other communities, associated with religious institutions or not, find useful and wish to emulate in content, form, or both. But all of this depends upon wise leadership.

Whether it is through the Progress Project or other means, we hope that the community of Urantia Book students continues to produce new ideas and experiments in training teachers and leaders. We believe that little could be more important when it comes to uplifting spiritual life on our planet.

About the Authors

Angie Thurston

I was raised with the Urantia Book, and the part that always compelled me most was the idea of spiritual growth. I would read about "creating spirit goals" and "growing closer to God" and I wanted to know how to do it! I also knew that I couldn't – and didn't want to – do it alone.

My passion is developing new structures to support spiritual growth in community, such as the Progress Project with Aprilhelen. My most recent effort was a pilot for Harvard graduate students as part of the Spiritual Lives of Leaders initiative out of Harvard Business School. I am co-founder and principal of Sacred Design Lab, a nonprofit devoted to accelerating spiritual innovation. I am motivated by a deep desire to support those in rising generations who are disaffiliating from organized religion and yet still hungering for spirituality and belonging. I was a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School from 2016-21. Since then, I've gotten to work closely with dozens of leaders on revealing the power of spiritual values to reshape our inner landscapes and society.

My most consistent personal practice over the last decade has been to take time every day to go inward and spend time with Spirit. My latest questions are about spiritual values in child rearing, as my husband Vipin Thekk and I work on raising our son Orion.

Aprilhelen

As a second generation student of the Urantia Book, one of my passions has been the practice of integrating art of living techniques into a life of quality longevity and sharing them with others. By witnessing how the master teacher, Jesus, lived and studying methods that modern science reveals, I am devoted to exploring with individuals and communities how better to maintain healthy bodies, minds, and spirits with the intention to serve the planet with vitality.

Through the past twenty-seven years of teaching all ages, personalized, experimental, therapeutic strategies of sleep, food, and movement nutrition, meditation and breathwork, horticulture and animal husbandry, and relationship skills, I have been able to effectively expose these tools for others, so that we may all upgrade our singular addition of value to the progress of the whole.

My purposful life of loving service in the teams I collaborate with has produced what I consider to be legacy projects. Some of them are: UUI's School of Service, The Fellowship's Spiritual Growth Conversations, and my personal passion project, Art of Universal Language. I am currently training in the highest level of Yoga Therapy for certification, voiceover work and acting, as well as writing and illustration for publication.



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T O G E T H E R I N S P I R I T U A L G R O W T H

