Facets of prayer in a pastorate

Roy Hange

My earliest images of prayer are associated with life, death, and silent subservience. Our family said prayers before life-sustaining meals, and each day ended with the bedtime prayer that concludes, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." During prayer in corporate worship we sat in bowed stillness, listening as the leader spoke.

I have now come to see prayer, public and private, as spiritual food. Praying is a life-giving process through which the Lord does not take our souls but remakes them. In this transformation of heart and spirit, we find new ways to stand before the Holy One as co-creators and as brothers and sisters of Christ. If the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation prays with us, we should be able to expect new creation in various forms as a result of our prayer.

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Prayer has become for me, then, more about joining the mystery than about getting the right words or possessing the right receptivity. I experience prayer as a spiritual and emotional energy flowing in ritual transformation of what is around us and within us, moving all toward what it could yet be. True prayer functions to recast broken images of God, self, and others, as we express our longings: "Holy be your name"; "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Praying transforms broken social and political institutions: "Your kingdom come." Seen in this light, prayer has taken on many new facets in my pastoral and personal roles.

Facets of corporate prayer

Our congregation has incorporated various ritual prayers into our regular Sunday worship order.

We all say the Lord's Prayer at the end of the pastoral prayer. A great and unexpected blessing is the pleasure of hearing the children's voices praying with vigor at these moments.

When the offering is brought forward, we all sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" (OLD HUNDREDTH) as a prayer that frames our giving within a greater good.

When people leave our church or are sent in mission or service, they are invited to stand at the front of the church, hear a word of affirmation or sending from the pastors, share about what is next, and receive a sung blessing, "The Lord lift you up,"[1] from the congregation. We have found that this sung prayer has ritual power in the way it invites those leaving to move—with blessing foremost—from the past through the present into the unknown future. The prayer honors the relationship between those sent and those sending, enables us to say farewell, and places our fears of the new in a context of grace and benediction.

Each quarter, our sung service of communion becomes one long prayer of thanksgiving. This service includes opportunity for anointing, prayer for individual needs, and a time to remember those who have died and are no longer with us in the flesh. For many people, obstacles to moving to deeper faith include unresolved grief and current trauma related to emotional, physical, or spiritual disease. The two movements—remembering loved ones who have died and anointing those in need—make grace and peace specifically available to those who are grieving and suffering. And when these gestures take place in congregational worship, a form of communion happens: we vicariously grieve with those who are grieving and are healed with those who are being anointed. This process has potential to expand our capacity to be spiritually alive, because we are all cut to the heart. These two movements also open us to the deeper passion of Jesus' own journey as we then celebrate communion.

I structure our prayer to flow in three movements: from the past in the power of remembering, to the present as a time of transformation of self or relationship, to the future as our imagination and vision are joined with the way of Christ.

The grieving and healing we experience in this communion worship are a foretaste of the new heaven and new earth envisioned in Revelation 21:1-4, in which God is with God's people,

and death and mourning and crying and pain are no more. We read this promise as part of the service of anointing, during which those who remain in their seats identify and feel a profound resonance with those who come forward to be anointed for healing.

These and other forms of prayer in congregational worship (including invocations, prayers of confession, and pastoral prayers) function as encounters with the holy and the other within, beside, and beyond. The glimmering facet of corporate prayer is its capacity to refocus and re-form the spiritual and moral vision of a group in a way that transforms relationships. I repeatedly structure our prayer to flow in these three basic movements: from the past in the power of remembering, to the present as a time of transformation of self or relationship, to the future as our imagination and vision are joined with the way of Christ. Through our praying we then begin to see what could yet be, in our lives and in situations we confront.

Facets of personal prayer

My own journey with prayer has taken me down many paths. I have done contemplative or listening prayer, intercessory prayer, and phrasal prayer. In the last number of years I have moved from silently repeating the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") to repeating the Sanctus:

> *Holy, holy, holy Lord,*
> *God of power and might,*
> *heaven and earth are full of your glory.*
> *Hosanna in the highest.*
> *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*
> *Hosanna in the highest.*

I say the Sanctus through six breaths, and with the seventh breath, I rest. During the phrase "heaven and earth are full of your glory," I look around me for new aspects of that glory in creation, in others, and in myself. The focus of this prayer is on glory, not on sin. This prayer suits my temperament, and especially addresses my need to be less pessimistic and more hopeful.

Many people have given up on praying because the dominant form of prayer they were taught does not fit their temperament. I

have found *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types*, by Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey, helpful to me and to others with whom I have walked.[2] Some spiritually hungry Christians turn toward eastern religions that offer other forms of prayer, without realizing that Christian tradition offers many ways to pray that Protestantism in the West and Mennonites in particular have not focused on.

Prayer for social change, prayer for individual healing

Two additional dimensions of prayer in my pastorate have developed in response to two books on prayer. In *Claiming All Things: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change*, George McClain looks beyond the domestication of prayer toward socially transformative prayer.[3] In *Consenting to Grace: An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care*, Tilda Norberg explores facets of healing prayer that are informed by the disciplines of psychology and therapy, yet move beyond these areas to work at emotional and spiritual transformation rooted in prayer.[4] In a small group setting, a ritual Norberg developed has been especially meaningful for half a dozen people in our congregation; some have described this prayer for individual healing as life changing. The prayer ritual names the lies that have been part of a person's formation and ritually replaces those lies with new truths spoken to the person by the circle of those gathered to pray. Our experience of these rituals has been a further manifestation of the power of prayer to bring personal and corporate transformation.

Notes

[1] "The Lord lift you up" is no. 73 in *Sing the Journey* (Scottdale, PA: Faith & Life Resources, 2005).
[2] Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey, *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (Charlottesville, VA: Open Door, 1984).
[3] George D. McClain, *Claiming All Things: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).
[4] Tilda Norberg, *Consenting to Grace: An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care* (Staten Island, NY: Penn House Press, 2005).

About the author

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