

Creating a daily office for Mennonites

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In September 2003, twenty people gathered at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN) to explore the possibility of preparing a prayer book explicitly rooted in the Anabaptist tradition. It would, for example, place emphasis on

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Jesus' teachings, the Beatitudes, peace and justice concerns, and hymn singing. Conveners Nelson Kraybill and Arthur Paul Boers asked whether it might be possible to find a way of common prayer that honors classical daily office traditions while reinforcing important aspects of Anabaptist faith.

Enthusiasm for the project grew as participants related their experiences of praying with prayer books from a wide spectrum of Christian traditions. Despite the strengths and

beauties of these prayer books, something seemed to be missing in them. Through listening and discussion, participants in the consultation came to articulate some unfulfilled longings. They also spoke of members of their congregations and friends who are yearning for a more significant prayer life.

Why is interest in a prayer book so high?

The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer, by Arthur Paul Boers, has been warmly received among Mennonites.¹ The consultation took this interest to indicate openness and a sense of *kairos* for a prayer book project. C. Arnold Snyder's recent research and publications, notably his *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, feed an increasing interest in Anabaptist spirituality.² A number of students at AMBS are exploring a spirituality of disciplined daily corporate prayers. In many places across Canada and the US,

Mennonites are already praying a version of the daily office, using materials from many Christian traditions. These are a few reasons why the consultation was called and why it seemed timely to explore the possibility of preparing an Anabaptist prayer book.

The process of developing the prayer book

The consultation established some general directions for the project: Jesus' voice should lead our praying; the choice of Bible readings should allow prayer to flow through the scriptures that are particularly significant for our tradition; there should be a simple structure that can expand and be tailored to local needs; the initial work should use the NRSV.

A working group of four (Arthur Paul Boers, Gloria Jost, Eleanor Kreider, and John Rempel) began preparing a sample set of services, a two-week cycle of morning and evening prayers for ordinary time, suitable for use by individuals or groups. Testing by many people has led to revision of these initial materials. To this the editorial group (now composed of Arthur, Eleanor, John, as well as Mary Schertz and Barbara Nelson Gingerich) has now added two weeks' services, so there is now a four-week cycle of

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services for ordinary time. Mary's willingness to bring her New Testament expertise to the project is an especially welcome development, given that scripture scholars and liturgists do not often collaborate.

Does this prayer book express Mennonite spirituality?

From the responses that came from those who had used the draft prayer book, an interesting picture of Mennonite spirituality emerged. Daily Bible reading and prayer have characterized our tradition's spirituality. Our corre-

spondents tell of family prayers around the table, morning or evening, of kneeling for prayer in the living room with grandparents, of "quiet times" in college dorm rooms, of "prayer walking" in places of natural beauty, of prayer in small groups. For many, both young and old, Bible memorization has been important. Some correspondents tell of praying through Bible texts set to

music; others have developed intercessory prayer through close attention to social and political news. Praying is the heartbeat of Mennonite piety.

Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book is an expression of our Mennonite spirituality. It is a resource we offer for all Christians who are drawn to the deep expressions of our tradition: the focus on Jesus and the life of discipleship within the grace-filled community, a spiritual balance of inner life and outer activity, a passion for the justice and wholeness of the shalom of God, and the desire to be involved in God's own mission of healing and hope for all of creation.

What have we learned about Mennonites at prayer?

Test groups for the initial two-week set of services embraced a wide range of experience in praying, both individual and corporate. Half of the respondents had used a daily office for years; others came to these services with virtually no knowledge of the venerable traditions of Christian daily prayer. Understandably, we heard some frustrations from both ends of this spectrum: "Where is the daily collect?" "I would repeat nothing every day. My eyes glaze over." "More psalms, please." "Why such long intercessions?" "I miss a majesty of language."

A number of pastors welcomed this initiative as a way of teaching and modeling prayer in the congregation. The simply structured form of prayer "enables some to pray who have never been at ease with *ex tempore* prayer"; "it ensures a variety of concerns, thoughts, and reflections and keeps our prayers broad." "We are finding this helps connect our Sunday worship with daily prayers by various individuals and groups in the church."

An unexpected development has been the use of individual services for special meetings, conferences, staff sessions, even Sunday church services. Any service, downloaded from the AMBS website (in Microsoft Word or pdf format, at www.amsb.edu/prayerbook/index.php), provides a framework for worship in a wide variety of settings.

Some of the earliest responses were calls to adapt the services specifically for young people, for people with little formal education, or for people new to English. We did not have these groups in mind when we chose to use the NRSV. Because the services are

made up primarily of Bible words, it is reasonably easy to prepare different versions. In fact, people inspired by this project are already developing parallel Anabaptist prayer books in French and Lithuanian. What came clear was a recognition that it must be a priority to help people pray—our own children and youth, those who are new to faith, as well as maturing Christians.

How is this prayer book different from other prayer books?

Prayer books for the daily office are characteristically rich in scripture. Ours also uses psalms, biblical hymns, and benedictions.

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We devised a medium length service, with spaces to add prayers, songs, devotional readings, silence, or a sermon. We have not written or provided collects (short written prayers) or many canticles (biblical hymns). While our services have a distinctive shape, they always specify psalm, scripture, hymn, and prayers—as Christians have always done.

Two features give a unique color to this prayer book. First is the importance our services give to the voice of Jesus, whose words are strikingly prominent. The fifty-two services of the initial four-week cycle center

around the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the great commandment, the parables, and the miracles of Jesus. By incorporating this Jesus material into the heart of our prayers, we provide opportunity to internalize Jesus' teachings, concerns, warnings, comfort, and challenge. The early Anabaptists learned much scripture by heart, and we hope that through using these services, we may do the same.

A second feature is a pattern of themes that informs the choices of scripture and the shaping of the prayers. We attempt to infuse the prayers with biblical passages that express these themes—the prayer book's "DNA"—keeping them concrete and connected with daily life. These themes are usually not overt but operate behind the scenes.

Briefly, the themes are: for Sunday, resurrection; for Monday, the era of the Holy Spirit and God's new creation; for Tuesday, incarnation and God's presence with us; for Wednesday, God

manifest in Jesus Christ, God's realm of justice, peace, and joy; for Thursday, discipleship and walking in Jesus' way; for Friday, the cross, transformation of suffering; for Saturday, God's realm, Christian solidarity and community within the body of Christ. The brief petition phrases reflect these themes.

These are themes that all Christians share, of course. But the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition since the sixteenth century has placed them in a special configuration and gives them special weight. For example, the Sunday theme of resurrection not only celebrates Jesus' rising but highlights the call to walk in the resurrection. The Tuesday theme calls us to see God in manifestations of glory and power but also in the lives of brother, sister, neighbor, and enemy.

Challenges in this work

Using or adapting classic forms of praying. Monastic communities in the Benedictine tradition, which pray seven times a day, have developed and maintained a pattern of devotions that includes psalms, scripture readings, hymns, and prayers. Most important has been the round of psalmody. Monastic praying is infused with psalms. Monks also attend daily Eucharistic services, where the Gospels are central. When free church Protestants appropriate monastic forms of prayer, we get a high dose of psalms with suggested Old Testament and Epistle readings, but—because we don't celebrate Eucharist daily—no set Gospel readings. At this point our prayer book's emphasis on Gospel readings and Jesus' voice comes into play. We incorporate a round of psalms and give space for other scripture readings, but our focus is on Jesus.

Many Mennonite churches currently use the Revised Common Lectionary at least part of the year. How will the readings in this prayer book connect with the Sunday readings? Which daily lectionary do we suggest to supplement the suggested readings? These are live issues we have not yet resolved.

Fixed forms and written prayers. Mennonites represent an approach to worship that is generally wary of set forms and composed prayers. In our tradition, leaders of worship face the challenge of finding fresh words, neither personal clichés nor writings plucked whole from others' notebooks; staying open to the Spirit

in the live moment of prayer; drawing deeply on scripture for prayer's breadth and content. We hope this prayer book will help worship leaders find a good balance between the formal and the spontaneous. We long for worship drenched in scripture and open to the Spirit's promptings.

Ecumenical accessibility. Mennonites sing their prayer—an insight vividly revealed in *Singing: A Mennonite Voice*, by Marlene Kropf and Ken Nafziger.³ For this reason, we are especially pleased to suggest hymn selections from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and *Sing the Journey*,⁴ keyed to the themes of the daily prayers. Does

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selecting hymns from these denominational sources make the prayer book seem exclusive of or inhospitable to non-Mennonites? These hymnals include materials from many Christian traditions throughout the ages and around the world. And many of the hymns we suggest may easily be found in other hymn books, so we trust the list will be useful to people of a variety of Christian traditions.

A distinctive Anabaptist coloration. We are concerned to develop daily prayers with a distinctive Anabaptist flavor. The predomi-

nance of Jesus' voice, the space for communal reflection on scripture, and the specific choices of Bible readings—all of these are evidence of our Anabaptist stance. For the early Anabaptists, the remembered Word was the heart of their spirituality. As Arnold Snyder has put it, "The central discipline of Anabaptist spiritual life—the discipline on which all others depended—was becoming thoroughly immersed in the words of Scripture, remembering them, internalizing them, pondering them, all with a view to living in obedience to God's will as expressed in Scripture."⁵

So the Anabaptists internalized the Word and lived by it. They were not all literate. Many, even those who could read, could not afford Bibles, which were bulky and expensive. Faced with persecution, they had to prepare for interrogation. In prison, where they often didn't have access to the Bible, they needed to comfort one another in distress by means of the remembered Word. The Anabaptists were committed to follow after Jesus, so they needed his story and teachings at the core of their consciousness.

Can we, who seek to worship God and follow Jesus today, have the words and narratives of Jesus at the core of our consciousness? Those of us who are compiling this prayer book hope that the biblical choices that we have made will lead not to vain repetition but to a scripturally repetitive form that is spiritually fruitful. Early responses from the first users are gratifying: “These phrases stick, and visit us through the day: ‘do this and you will live’; ‘. . . your neighbor as yourself’; ‘a servant is not greater than the master’; ‘Father, forgive.’”

We are laying plans for prayers through the festival seasons. We hope the first will be available on the AMBS web-site for testing beginning in Advent 2005. Eventually all the materials will be assembled and published in book form.

We recognize that a particular bond forms between individuals and groups who pray together in similar ways, at the same times, using similar resources of scripture and tradition. Prayer is not only what we do; it is God at work within and among us. God’s Spirit calls and bonds us, individually and corporately, as we learn to pray together. It is in this spirit that we offer this prayer book as a resource for the life and mission of the church. Our prayer is that this Anabaptist prayer book will equip many people to follow Jesus in the strenuous era in which God has called us to live.

Notes

¹ Arthur Paul Boers, *The Rhythm of God’s Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2003).

² C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

³ Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

⁴ *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992); *Sing the Journey* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Resources, 2005).

⁵ Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps*, 116.

About the author

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