

Does intercessory prayer still matter?

Marlene Kropf

Midweek prayer meetings have all but disappeared from the landscape of spiritual practices among North American Mennonite churches. With the demise of prayer meetings, corporate intercessory prayer has migrated to Sunday morning worship, which has become the main, and sometimes only, time congregations pray together as a body. Yet prayer of any kind—praise, confession, lament, thanksgiving, petition, intercession—often occupies little space in Mennonite worship today.

For a variety of reasons, midweek prayer meetings slowed to a halt during the 1960s–1970s. Increasing assimilation into the dominant cul-

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ture, with its consumerism and hectic schedules, made church attendance beyond Sunday morning a lower priority than in previous generations. Emerging social activism made prayer seem less urgent, and the growing acceptance of a scientific worldview caused many to doubt the relevance of prayer. Furthermore, pastors were not being trained in the practices of prayer.

Such influences have no doubt contributed to an erosion of prayer, thereby weakening the spiritual life of congregations. When I mentioned to a middle-aged Mennonite university professor

that I was writing an article about intercessory prayer, he quickly responded, “Intercessory prayer embarrasses Mennonites. We don’t know what to make of it. We’d rather be working; we’d rather be building something than praying.”

A Sunday school class of people in their thirties told me, “We don’t pray in public. Ask us to do anything at all in worship—preach, sing, prepare worship visuals, lead the children’s time, anything at all—just don’t ask us to lead in prayer.”

Their experience is different from older generations for whom praying in public was an expected skill. Though congregants in the past rarely received formal instruction in the art of public prayer, they were expected to learn by osmosis, by listening to how others did it.

Discomfort with intercessory prayer

Lack of experience was likely not the primary issue for the young adults I taught. Their reluctance to pray in public had more to do with a basic unease with prayer, especially intercessory prayer, a discomfort that seems to be shared more broadly.

For example, prayer is not addressed in the current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Though Christian discipleship and spirituality are included as topics, there are no explicit references to intercessory prayer.¹ Nor does the word “prayer” appear anywhere in the six-page Summary Statement of the Confession of Faith located at the conclusion of the document.²

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this evidence. In *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit*, a book that mined the writings of early Anabaptists for their practice and theology of prayer, the authors found little information describing how Anabaptists prayed or taught others to pray. Being able to pray seems to have been taken for granted, implied in comments about readiness for baptism made by early Anabaptists who said that “candidates must be able to pray.”³ Often the martyrs, whose letters are found in *Martyrs Mirror*, include prayers for themselves, their families, and their communities of faith—prayers that reveal a deep confidence in God and trust in God’s good purposes. But of instruction in prayer or guidance for corporate worship, few clues have been left behind.

Lest we be too hard on the early Anabaptists, we might remember that Scripture itself offers little explicit guidance. The word “intercession(s)” appears only four times in the New Revised Standard Version, with two of

1 Oblique references can be found: 1 Timothy 2:1–2, with its admonition to pray for rulers, is cited for the section “The Church’s Relation to Government and Society”; a reference to praying for “righteousness and justice” occurs in the section “The Church in Mission.”

2 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 93–98.

3 Cited in Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1994), 11.

these referring to human action and two to divine action.⁴ The few times the verb “intercede” appears, it applies to human interactions, except in Romans 8 where the Holy Spirit’s work as intercessor is described. The Apostle Paul seems to take intercessory prayer for granted when he assures his readers, “I remember you always in my prayers” (Romans 1:9). He often expresses thanks for the prayers offered on his behalf (see 2 Corinthians 1:11; Philippians 1:19). But again, no guidance is found for its role in worship or spiritual formation.

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All of this is to say that intercessory prayer does not seem to have a particularly high profile among Mennonites.⁵ But if prayer, both public and private, is a significant expression of spiritual vitality, then a dearth of intercessory prayer practices might warrant further examination. If our churches are to recover more vigorous practices of prayer—whether praise, confession, petition, or intercession—we will need to address at

least three issues related to prayer: opportunity, freedom, and language/theology. Below I address each of these issues in turn, drawing from interviews with a group of currently active pastors in the United States and Canada, as well as from observations gathered in my former work as Denominational Minister of Worship and Spirituality with Mennonite Church USA.

Opportunity for prayer

Compared to churches with fixed forms of prayer in worship, Mennonites spend relatively little time praying in worship. A brief opening prayer, a

4 Of the latter, one is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and the other is the exalted Christ in Hebrews who “always lives to make intercession for us.” The four references are 1 Samuel 2:25; Isaiah 53:12; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Hebrews 7:25.

5 Another example of the scant mention of intercessory prayer in Mennonite documents is the 1995 vision statement adopted by the General Conference Mennonite Church and (Old) Mennonite Church, “Vision: Healing and Hope” (<http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/1995-vision>). Though the statement is a fine expression of our dream and God’s dream for the healing of the world, the practice of prayer gets one brief nod in passing, and nothing at all is said of the essential role of intercessory prayer in transforming us and our world.

prayer of intercession for congregational concerns, and a closing prayer or benediction are the most one can expect in public worship. In some churches, prayers of confession may sometimes be included.

Sunday morning intercessory prayer goes by different names: the congregational prayer, the pastoral prayer, sharing joys and concerns, or response. In larger congregations, pastors tend to keep track of the needs and concerns of the congregation throughout the week and then weave them into the pastoral prayer, along with other local and global concerns. “It’s a profound act of pastoral care,” one pastor noted. In smaller congregations, a time for spontaneous sharing by worshipers is more likely to happen, followed by a prayer that gathers up the requests.

In general, pastors do most of the praying in worship. Given Mennonite preferences for egalitarian church structures, this practice is a bit



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surprising. And since the prayers of the faithful or the prayers of the people (intercession) were historically offered by lay leaders or deacons, current Mennonite practices seem somewhat incongruent.

If congregations desire more vital spirituality, one way to encourage such growth is to expand the opportunities for prayer in worship—both the frequency of prayer and the personal engagement of worshipers. The motto of the

ancient Christian church—*lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing)—reveals their conviction that what happens in worship is formative: how we pray in worship shapes the prayer and action of our daily lives. If we want ordinary Christians to encounter God more powerfully in prayer, then it must happen first in public worship.

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Another step is to invite vocal participation in intercessory prayers. For example, in a bidding prayer, various categories of needs are named—the congregation, the local community, and the world. In silent spaces in between, individuals can be encouraged to speak aloud their own specific requests—a way of breaking the sound barrier.

Other congregations engage worshipers in intercessory prayer with fixed responses. In one congregation, for example, congregational sharing is interspersed with an appropriate response:

Leader: Lord, in your mercy or For this we say,

People: Hear our prayer. or Thank you, thank you.

In some churches, the responses are sung. In *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #380, “Let us pray,” can be used as either a petition, “Lord, hear our prayer,” or a response of gratitude, “Thanks be to God.” Other hymns can also be sung as responses to prayer, such as #358, “Oyenos, mi Dios,” or #353, “Lord, listen to your children praying.”

What these congregational responses do is open a pathway to prayer. People learn to speak their petitions to God, and in so doing, their hearts are opened to God’s immanent presence even as their tongues are trained in the language of prayer.

Another way to expand the opportunities for prayer is to make space for extended times of prayer. On special occasions or holy days, such as Good Friday, some congregations participate in prayers of intercession as worshipers kneel beside a cross.

Spiritual retreats provide a setting for practicing extended times of prayer. Seasonal retreats during Advent or Lent can be particularly fruitful times for deepening the practice of prayer.

A specific form of prayer that has grown significantly in recent years is prayers for healing with anointing. Though Mennonites have always practiced healing prayer, this ministry was usually offered at sickbeds or in private settings. By incorporating healing prayer into public worship, worshipers learn

how to call on God in times of need; they discover the blessing of communal support and the power of corporate intercession.

Still another growing trend in Mennonite congregations is the reintroduction of small prayer rooms for meditation. Though these rooms were not unusual in the past, they disappeared or were turned into storage



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closets during the years when prayer fell out of favor. Now these rooms are being simply decorated and equipped with comfortable chairs, a lamp, candles, a small collection of books about prayer, a notebook for prayer requests, finger labyrinths, and other aids for prayer. Simply by being available, prayer rooms encourage people to gather to pray.

Freedom to pray

Beyond expansion of opportunities for prayer, another approach for encouraging spiritual vitality is to cultivate a climate of freedom for prayer. Some pastors observe considerable reluctance to pray among lay people (much like the Sunday school class described earlier). While older generations may still value and believe in intercessory prayer, younger, more educated people struggle. One pastor said, “Prayer is a foreign thing in a secular world.” People are often more comfortable saying to someone who



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has expressed a need, “I’ll be thinking of you this week,” rather than “I’ll be praying for you.” Still others think it is more useful to work harder and dispense with prayer.

Another pastor observed that some intellectuals, particularly men, find intercessory prayer too vulnerable, and said “It feels awkward or pious or too evangelical,” one pastor said. This pastor went on to tell of a group of urban Mennonites who met in the home of a family

with a sick child. Though they thought they should pray for the child, they were sidetracked by a discussion about their discomfort and doubts about prayer. Finally they decided to “just do it”—on the off-chance that it might do some good.

Though such caution or resistance often stems from theological confusion, leaders can nurture a congregation toward more freedom to pray in two simple ways: by making space for silent prayer and by highlighting the role of singing as prayer.

If people are embarrassed to pray publicly, they may be more willing to participate in silent prayer. Freed from the judgment of others and even from their own doubts, they can address God or listen to God in whatever way feels comfortable. In one congregation, a small change has garnered positive response. When the instrumental prelude ends at the beginning

of worship, a leader strikes a gong. As noted in the bulletin, worshipers are invited to be silent and offer their prayers to God before worship begins (the silence lasts about two minutes). An opening hymn breaks the silence. This pause for prayer has transformed the first moments of worship into a more intentional encounter with the God who longs to meet her people.

The hesitance many people feel about engaging in public prayer usually disappears when they sing. Mennonites express far more passion for God in song than they likely disclose elsewhere. To strengthen the role of singing as prayer, leaders can note what kind of prayer is being offered: praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament, or intercession. Sometimes simply humming a stanza of song expands the freedom to pray, as does repeating a pertinent stanza or refrain. Because the whole self—body, heart, mind, soul—is engaged in singing, this mode of prayer can be a reliable path to intimacy with God and unity with other worshipers.

Language and theology of prayer

At root, the difficulties many contemporary Mennonites experience with intercessory prayer are theological. They arise from misunderstandings of the God to whom we pray and our expectations of what prayer does. The language used to talk *about* God or to talk *to* God in prayer reveals our theology and beliefs; our words also expose our own lived (or un-lived) experience of God. This insight raises the questions: Who is the One to whom Mennonites pray in intercession? What do we think happens when we pray? And what difference does language make?

Other than the pastor of an immigrant church whom I interviewed, Mennonite pastors described their congregants' views of the God to whom they pray as all over the map. For some, God is "up there" or "out there"—all-powerful and ready to intervene, if asked. For others, God is a loving and compassionate Being who created the world but is no longer personally engaged with daily life. Some see God as indifferent, capricious, or arbitrary, a Being who cannot be trusted to act on their behalf. Still others view God not as a Being but as a form of loving energy flowing in the universe. In the immigrant church, worshipers tend to believe in a sovereign God who intervenes when people pray; as their pastor said, "We have nowhere else to go."

Despite these variations, many North American Mennonites would likely insist that they believe in a personal God. At the same time, unlike their immigrant sisters and brothers, they may not expect God to be

active in their lives or in the world. They might describe prayer as comforting or restorative. In a sense, prayer is palliative. It calms and soothes but fundamentally does not change anything. Corporate prayer is not a high priority where this attitude prevails because a low-grade suspicion of prayer persists beneath the surface. Intercessory prayer seems especially irrelevant because it does not seem to “work.”

Clearly, there is a formation and teaching task ahead in order to reclaim the vitality of an encounter with God through prayer. If worshipers



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understand prayer as utilitarian, they will miss its potency and depth; if they perceive it as perfunctory, they will neglect its possibilities.

Pastors, spiritual directors, and other leaders who want to inspire more robust practices of prayer can do no better than to encourage in-depth exploration of the book of Psalms. With their breadth of imagery for God and honest portrayal of the whole range of human experience, the songs and prayers of the Psalms provide rich territory for theological inquiry. Prayers of praise, confession,

and lament reveal a trust in an immanent and transcendent God, a God who is beyond our imagining but always near at hand. The Psalms model how to cultivate gratitude and resilience, how to remain faithful in prayer, even when evil and suffering seem to prevail. They show that prayer is more than *communication*; it is *communion*—a relationship, a way of being that unites us with God’s purposes in the world.

If prayer is to be vital, the choice of words matters. Though there is a worthy place for the elegant language of classical prayers or artless, heartfelt spontaneous prayer, there is also a place for fresh poetic language and compelling images. Tired language strips the moment of its power; the attention of worshipers drifts away from an encounter with God. Authentic, creative speech not only brings us into God’s presence but also draws us deeper into the depths of the Mystery.⁶

6 A particularly fine source of creative and biblically formed worship resources is the Iona Community: <https://www.ionabooks.com/>.

The compilers of worship resources in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* sought to expand the theological imagination of those who pray by choosing

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words to address God that resonate with the intent or focus of the prayer. Rather than rely heavily on overused names for God (masculine images like Lord or Father or conventional phrases like Almighty God), the editors selected fitting words of address such as “God our healer” for a prayer invoking God’s mercy and comfort (#723); “Listening God” for a prayer of intercession (#719); “Spirit of peace” for a prayer inviting God to quiet and calm our hearts (#729); “Hidden God” for a prayer acknowledging God’s mystery (#745). The pause in which God is named at the opening of a prayer is an

opportunity not only to focus the congregation’s encounter with God but also to enrich the formation and transformation of personal prayer.

Fortunately, today’s pastors are receiving more training in prayer practices. The practices of contemplative prayer, according to those I interviewed, have especially deepened their own relationship with God and offer rich possibilities for congregational life.

When sturdy foundations of teaching and modeling are provided, space is created for examining difficult questions: Who is listening when we pray? Who are we when we pray? How does intercessory prayer “work”? How does it form and shape our awareness of God’s presence and activity in the world? How does it transform us? Through such exploration, the church experiences intercessory prayer not as an awkward formula or empty tradition but as living water that slakes our deepest thirst.

A personal word

In the end, prayer is fundamentally *an act of love*. As we intercede, we join God in loving each other and the world. And because love always transforms both the giver and the receiver, intercessory prayer changes us and the world.

I yearn for the day when intercessory prayer becomes as natural to us as breathing, because such prayer breeds compassion, an essential virtue for sustaining our life as peacemakers and as members of the body of

Christ. We cannot be a people of peace without the practice of intercessory prayer.

Praying for others engages us in the circle of love emanating from the Trinity. The Holy Spirit intercedes in prayer; Jesus intercedes; and so do we, as members of the Beloved Community. Intercessory prayer matters because it supports and expands the flow of God's healing love in the world. It gives us life and is the midwife of new birth in our world.

About the author

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