



Congregational Spirituality:  
*Vases of the Glory of God*

## Editor's Reflections

The biblical history of humankind begins in a garden, and the Psalter opens with trees planted by streams of water (Ps. 1:3). Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:5). Paul writes that we should live our lives in Christ, “rooted and built up in him” (Col. 2:6-7). Teresa of Ávila compares the spiritual life to a watered garden, while Thérèse of Lisieux is known as “The Little Flower.” The Bible is almost unimaginable without images of agriculture and plant life, and those same images have become part-and-parcel of the Christian life.

John Calvin has his own contributions to this grammar of humility (coming from the Latin word *humus*, meaning “ground”), including a most lovely turn of phrase, “vases of the glory of God.” His use of this term, according to George H. Tavard<sup>1</sup>, concerns the promise of salvation, but I think that without adaptation the words are equally apt for life in the congregation. There God’s little flowers find themselves in great proximity and intimacy, sharing life and ultimately death, comingling a scent for all the world to share.

This issue of *Hungryhearts* is dedicated to congregational spirituality, a subject that we have often addressed but never so directly. Perhaps the reason is that at our best, Presbyterians understand that all we do in the Christian life is done together, in our relationships with God and others, whether in friendship or partnership, in what Martin Luther called “the little church” of the family, or in the congregation itself.

To slip into another prominent metaphor of the faith, while Christ is the head of the Church, the congregation is at the heart of the institutional church. It is in the body gathered week in and week out that all our theology — our thinking about God — takes on flesh and blood, bone and sinew. At its best it is the place

where we are not only fed for the days to come, but are inspired in the variety of ways we can feed others. And it is as this heart beats that the rest of the institutional church, in all of its manifestations, is able to live. It is for this reason that I believe proposals are needed to encourage small church development as much as new church development, making possible pastoral ministry in our smallest congregations. One way to address this would be to require that the many valuable specialized vocations be grounded by full-time service in and for the congregation. Ministry of Word and Sacrament, at its core, is service to the sanctuary, from baptizing the newborn to witnessing to the resurrection, sharing the silence of prayer and the trumpet blast of justice.

All of this is to underscore the importance of focusing on congregational spirituality. Such a perspective on spiritual formation includes the prayer groups and Bible studies, but is hardly limited to that. It is working in the soup kitchens, shaping meetings and classes so that they are practices of the faith, exhibitions of the kingdom of heaven to the world (*Book of Order* G-1.0200), building houses, and protesting injustice. That first garden was a place of community, where a man learned from God that it was not good that he should be alone. We are together because that is how God made us, vases made to help us remember who we are, why we are, and whose we are:

*for we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.* (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

Peace,  
Steve

<sup>1</sup>George H. Tavard, “John Calvin and the Christian Life.” Lectures at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada. Unpublished manuscript.



# What is Missing?

by Jane Rogers Vann

My friends Sarah and Alec are active members of a thriving congregation in a large southern city. This church seemingly has everything. The sanctuary is full on Sunday mornings. There are Sunday school classes for all ages. Opportunities for mission abound. Members enjoy times of fellowship and they care for one another in multiple ways. And yet Sarah tells me a few years ago there was “something missing.” While this church did all the things we have come to expect from congregations, Sarah and Alec and others in the congregation became aware of a gap that was very hard to name. It is often hard to identify what is not there, and yet, as the title of this journal indicates, when we pay attention to our hungers, the deepest yearnings of our hearts, we may begin to identify what it is we long for.

As I have studied over a dozen mainline congregations during the past two years, I have noticed a similar gap in many (but not all) of these congregations. Among thriving churches there are some whose yearnings have led them to search for that “something more.” Thriving churches share several characteristics that seem to be pervasive in mainline congregations. First of all, they are worship-centered. The worship of God forms the center of their life together and members of these congregations are eager to worship together on Sunday mornings and at other times. Second, they share deep and lasting relationships with one another. Their commitment to one another is for the “long haul,” through thick and thin, so they exhibit an abundance of patience, forbearance, and forgiveness in their dealings with one another. Their deliberations are marked by compassionate, courageous truth-telling where honest differences can be worked out in love.

Third, these congregations are unusually curious, indicated by the many questions they ask and the resources dedicated to supporting people’s searching questions. These churches are always studying, especially scripture, but theology, history, and other things as well. They have good church libraries and excellent study resources. Pastors, educators, and other church leaders help others identify their questions and locate appropriate resources for exploring them. Even the most challenging and skeptical questions find a receptive hearing in these congregations. One result of this communal atmosphere of curiosity and investigation is the emergence of a rich vocabulary of faith — a kind of congregational “native language” that recalls and names the church’s experience and understanding of Christian faith.

A fourth characteristic that marks thriving congregations is their awareness of the needs of others and responsiveness to participation in ministry and mission. People in these congregations willingly lend a hand in all sorts of ministries that support the programs of the church. They are

There is evidence of a significant hunger among us, a hunger of the heart and mind. ...It is as if many of us were becoming aware that something is missing from our lives... a yearning for something which could and even should be ours to have and to enjoy.

*Hungry Hearts, Hungry Minds:  
The Quest for a Reformed Spirituality*<sup>1</sup>

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also active in outreach and mission aimed at meeting the needs of those in their communities and beyond. Whether they sing in the choir, accompany the youth on a mission trip, or volunteer with Meals-on-Wheels, these Christians take a hands-on approach to living out their faith in ministry and mission.

With all of this activity and commitment, then, how could there be “something missing”? According to Jim Kitchens, co-pastor of Davis Community Church in Davis, California, what is missing is “any felt sense of the transcendent, any experience of the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the last few decades, as the “program church” has become the model for congregational success, church leaders and members seem to have assumed that if programs (Sunday school, worship, choirs, youth groups, after-school programs, mission trips, work camps, retreats, mother’s morning out, Bible study, scouts, church sports leagues, women’s circles, men’s breakfast, etc., etc.) were sponsored by the church, Christian spiritual formation would naturally take place. Programs like these are effective in many ways and are *not* to be abandoned!! However, as Sarah and Alec and many like them have noted, there is still something missing.

There is a qualitative difference between thriving congregations where there is “something missing” and congregations where hungers have led members to identify the gap and seek to be filled. Across the centuries and around the globe Christians have always learned the Christian life from the *experience* of congregational life. Or, as Christian educators are fond of saying, everything the church does teaches. Every activity the church engages in, as well as *how* it approaches that activity, teaches some-

thing about what it means in that particular time and place to live as a Christian in the world. The Christian life is embodied and learned in the midst of our life together in God. But as Christian educators are also quick to say, we cannot adequately learn from experience without intentional reflection on that experience. What is required is intentional remembering, pondering, and questioning of experience in order for its wisdom to be gleaned. Humans are pattern-seeking, storytelling, meaning-making beings, and in congregations where the patterns, stories, and meaning of experience are valued, people find the clue to what might be missing.

In the Christian life, reflection and meaning-making most often take place in the context of prayer and spiritual disciplines. When Christians gather for prayer, contemplation, and prayerful reading of scripture, with explicit openness to the presence of God, they enter into reflection on their lives of worship, study, ministry, mission, work, family life, and much more. They offer mutual encouragement and exploration as they listen for what God may be saying to them. And they challenge one another to further questioning and investigation. When congregations support and encourage individuals in their family and personal prayers, their experience of the Christian life can be profound.

Congregations where prayer and the practice of spiritual disciplines are woven throughout the life of the congregation are qualitatively different from those where spiritual disciplines are not pervasively practiced. They exhibit an added dimension of spiritual depth not seen in typical “program” churches. Their spiritual hungers have led them to seek the presence of God in all they do, and to become ever more

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attentive to what God is showing them. They pray when they are together, with their families, and when they are alone. They study scripture and ponder God's presence and guidance there. They reflect on their encounters with God in worship, in scripture, and in the faces of those they serve, so that their sense of God's presence becomes more and more pervasive. Otherwise, they say, the programs of the church are just so much "busywork." The strong and intimate friendships formed as they worship, pray, study, and work together form a relational foundation where difficult questions can be posed and probed. These congregations have given up ordinary polite chit-chat in favor of conversations that have depth and substance. They are willing to open themselves and their spiritual hungers to one another because they have learned that is at least part of what is missing. God is present among them as they discover the depths of their common spiritual longings. In all these ways and more these congregations practice communal and personal spiritual discernment.

According to David White, Director of the Youth Discipleship Project at the Claremont School of Theology, "Today's world requires discernment as a way of being, not just as something in which to engage in times of crisis."<sup>3</sup> Rather than an act of desperation when they don't know what else to do, these congregations are centered around discerning God's presence and leading in whatever they do. Spiritual discernment as a way of life pre-releases the lives of these congregations, a practice grounded in prayer and spiritual disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

At Sarah and Alec's church these days, the

calendar of events and programs looks pretty much the way it always has. Choir still meets on Thursday nights. Sunday school teachers still get together to plan and evaluate. Soup kitchen volunteers still cook and clean up. But in the midst of all the usual activity there is a new question. Rather than focusing exclusively on the tasks at hand, these faithful Christians have learned always to ask, "Where is God in this?" And they do not hesitate to draw attention to what God is doing among them. Programs continue to serve essential practical functions even while they fulfill their larger purpose of spiritual formation in congregations. Programs are "subversive acts, vehicles to

hot-wire for smuggling Christ into culture."<sup>5</sup> Programs are occasions for worship, prayer, study, and service, all of which give rise to noticing God's presence and being formed by that presence into the likeness of Christ. These congregations do not take for granted that programs organized by the church will automatically fulfill this spiritual formation function. They make spiritual discernment and formation an explicit part of all that the church is and does. Alec says


that while things look pretty much the same at the church, there is a profound difference in the focus of the congregation. They give generous attention to the Christian spiritual life and to their mutual support and accountability as they seek God's presence. The difference, he says, is prayer. Their pastor says, "It is prayer that powers this boat."

How did this change take place? It came slowly and took a long time, says Sarah. But it began with Sarah and others like her saying, "If things are going to change, I've got to help



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make it happen. I've got to be part of the change." Those who were tired of programmatic busy-work and were hungry for God began to say so. They abandoned the usual social politeness that governed their conversations and boldly named the empty place they sensed in their congregation's life. Then they began to learn the disciplines of intercessory prayer, contemplation, *lectio divina*, and other spiritual practices and to teach them to others.<sup>6</sup> They introduced practices of spiritual discernment into study groups, committees, circles, and work groups of which they were a part. They pursued their curiosity and questions. They wanted to know why they were doing what they were doing, so they asked a lot of questions and kept searching for understanding. And through it all they continued to ask, "Where is God in this?" As God's presence and guidance were revealed in their life together, discernment became a way of being and the congregation's spiritual life was enlivened.

The purpose of the Christian life is to give praise and glory to God. The purpose of the church is to broaden and deepen that praise until all of creation sings to the glory of God. Congregations which fulfill these purposes have worship at the center of congregational life and spiritual formation as their primary intention, no matter what programs they offer. They experience the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit in their life together and live in grateful thanksgiving to God. These congregations may not look much different from other "program" churches, but they *are* ! Just ask Sarah and Alec. 

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>*Hungry Hearts, Hungry Minds: The Quest for a Reformed Discipleship and Spirituality.*

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 203<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly. PDS 70-440-97-001.

<sup>2</sup>Jim Kitchens. "The Postmodern Parish." *Presbyterian Outlook*. March 18, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>David F. White. "Forming A Sustainable Faith in a Consumer Society." *Faith Matters*. The Fund for Theological Education, Inc. Vol. 2, No. 7, May 2001, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>For more information, see *Hungryhearts* Spring 2002, "Discernment: Listen with the Ear of Your Heart"; and Winter 2002, "Acts of Discernment."

<sup>5</sup>Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>To learn more about these and other spiritual disciplines, go to [www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation)

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Photographs in this issue are courtesy of **Presbyterian Disaster Assistance**.

Front cover — Vacation Bible School in Florida;

page 5 — rebuilding after a tornado in Birmingham, Alabama;

back cover — a work team in Virginia

## We Danced

There was no audible music;  
no beat or rhythm laid down.  
There was no touch,  
no physical embrace,  
no movement of the body.  
But we danced,  
soul to soul, spirit to spirit,  
kindred heart to kindred heart.

We danced  
but it is more than that.  
Our dance was not  
just an exercise or a game.  
We danced the dance  
that is the stuff faith is made of;  
dance that steps with grace and joy  
deep into the soul, to the place where  
the divine in you touches the divine in me.

Dance that moves beyond understanding;  
dance that changes who we are  
because its steps take us to places we've never been;  
places that give us glimpses of who we can become.  
Dance that frightens  
because it hints at things we cannot comprehend.

We danced,  
and even though we haven't seemed  
to travel anywhere,  
the place where we are now  
is not the same place it was.  
We participated in the dance;  
dance that is larger than life,  
larger than the universe;  
dance of meaningful existence.  
Now, neither we nor the dance  
will ever be the same.

We danced.

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# Heartbeats

## Choosing

Desire-guided choosing brings fewer choices;  
what we thought we needed  
turns out to be not ours to have and hold  
and closes doors we thought would always be open.

Need perceived only from within:  
magnified myopia that cannot see  
the forest of creation's glorious scheme  
for the trees of self's voracious appetite.

Hunger from the soul's plumbed depth  
will not be satisfied for long  
by the sharp but fleeting spike  
of the sugared blood of wanting.

To trust and hope that choosing,  
released from eye and appetite,  
could bring a blessed satiation  
is the risk of every Sacred encounter.

Holiness' choice, both rich and strong enough,  
satisfies the hunger that want and desire  
have never quite been able to touch;  
whole and holy finally reach their blessed union.

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work has been found in a variety of publications,  
including weekly articles on The Presbytery of Middle  
Tennessee's website, [www.presbymidtn.org](http://www.presbymidtn.org)*

# Spirituality in the Faith Community

by Freda A. Gardner and Lisa M. Hess

How would you describe the spirituality of your faith community? Does it center around the Word and sacraments? Does it involve active service in the local soup kitchen or food pantry? Does it educate children and adults through story and song about God's presence in this world? What *is* congregational spirituality anyway? We hope to pique your interest in the subject of *congregational spirituality* first by sharing the "Project in Congregational Spirituality," and then by inviting you to consider your own congregation's spirituality and to actively engage in it for the good of the Church.

Unlike much of Western individualism, an awareness is emerging in many denominations that "the spiritual life of a human being" is not an individual venture! Instead, classical Christian spirituality refers to the concrete lives of faith lived by individuals *in a corporate body of faith* that in turn forms and re-forms its participants. Individuals participate in the life of a congregation and shape its lived identity, but congregations, engaged in their local and global communities, shape not only their participants but also the world in which they serve. Congregations can be powerful agents of change, both for individual members' spiritual journeys and for the local or global communities in which a congregation lives. Awareness of this mutuality in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) began a collaborative project with Lilly Endowment, Inc. to explore the growing need for models and learnings about *congregational spirituality*.

Princeton Theological Seminary, Auburn Theological Seminary, and what was then the Christian Faith and Life Program Area of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (now Theology, Worship, and Discipleship) birthed "the Project in Congregational Spirituality" and nurtured it through the first phase. The two seminaries continued developing the project in a second phase. Each phase operated on a retreat model of formation. Leaders and participants, who were ordained and non-ordained leaders of local congregations, gathered for Phase I, at Stoney Point Conference Center in New York, and for Phase II, at Princeton Theological Seminary, to experience worship, reflection, and interaction. Each phase of the Project in Congregational Spirituality brought clergy, educators, and leaders of various congregations together in a 'grass-roots' educational approach in which it was assumed in trust that God was working in and through each congregational body. The task, therefore, was simply to discern God's movement and actively participate in it.

While the leadership of Phase I came from different parts of the country, thereby incurring more expense, the second phase of the Project offered a repeatable and cost-effective model for exploring one's own congregation's spirituality. Twelve different churches sent leadership teams — made up of a pastor and three to four parishioners — to three retreats. The first retreat explored the substance of Christian practices, relying on the work of Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass.<sup>1</sup> The second retreat explored the specific worship practices of a congregation, both in action and in architecture, in order to celebrate the common Presbyterian ground and the freedom of worship

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expression in context. The final retreat identified congregational missions for each of the teams, and began to explore vehicles by which the Project in Congregational Spirituality could take hold in larger contexts of presbytery, synod, or general assembly.

The most important feature of the Project was the recognition that the spirituality of each congregation would be unique to that congregation and its context. A one-size-fits-all curriculum is impossible! Congregations attentive to their own contexts may better translate God's word through their own concrete actions in real and tangible ways. The challenge is in making explicit connections between a congregation's reflection on spirituality with its concrete acts of ministry, be they oriented to mission, education, worship, or pastoral care. To help interested congregations in making these connections, the Project in Congregational Spirituality website may be found on the Internet website of Auburn Theological Seminary at [www.auburnsem.org](http://www.auburnsem.org).

Blessings on your own explorations of congregational spirituality!

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997 and Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," *Practicing Theology*. Louisville: William B. Eerdmans, 2002.

### Write us!

Send in your poetry or photography, your artwork, or book reviews. Visual images are needed for *In Plain Site*.

Do you have questions we should add to our FAQs? Words or spiritual disciplines we should add to our glossary?

**Send your contributions to:**  
[sshusset@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:sshusset@ctr.pcusa.org)

## Staff Notes

Many of the readers of *Hungryhearts* have become acquainted over the years with the work of our colleague Brad Kent, and will want to know that after serving as Associate for Spiritual Formation since 1997, Brad left his position on the national staff in early November.

Some of you encountered Brad through his presence at annual meetings of the General Assembly and his widespread work with presbyteries and conferences. Some of you have known Brad only through his writings, including the article on Reformed Spirituality that he contributed to *Hungryhearts* a few years ago. And a fortunate few will have experienced Brad's dramatic presentations in the persona of John Calvin.

During his years on the staff Brad coordinated the work of the former Resource Team for Spiritual Formation, and also was responsible for beginning to develop the Spiritual Formation Leadership Network. (The work of the Spiritual Formation Leadership Network will continue to move forward despite the gap in our staffing that is created by Brad's departure.)

Please join me, along with Steve and Cathy, in giving thanks to God for Brad's time with us and for his gifts to the church, and in wishing him the best as he enters this new period of his life and ministry.

Kris Haig,  
Coordinator for Spiritual Formation

## “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!

*Romans 10:15*

I've been re-reading *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a spiritual classic worth our attention. The first chapter of the book struck me with what I think was, and is, a real indictment of the church. The Pilgrim's search for a deeper relationship with God began after one morning's worship included Paul's injunction to “Pray unceasingly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). So he went to the preacher and asked how one might pray in such a fashion, only to get very little real response. He went to other kind and religious people, to good churches to hear good preachers, but with minimal result.

The Pilgrim relates that he was learning what prayer is, why it is necessary, how it will affect you, but nothing more. It was only as he continued along his way that he encountered someone who could tell him, from personal experience, that prayer is not just a good idea, but shared one way *how* he could pray.

How many people come to our churches, hoping to hear a word on how they might develop a deeper relationship to God, but leave only knowing that such a development would be a good thing? It is the difference between knowing *about* Jesus and knowing *him*.

**Are there sermons you have heard or preached that tell people not only that prayer is good, but this is a good way to do it? Would you be willing to share this good news with others who might share it further still?**

Contributions will be posted on our website ([www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation)), and as space allows, printed in *Hungryhearts*.

Send in your sermons (preferably electronically) on the practice of prayer to:

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## We Believe in One God:

A Theology Convocation for the Whole Church

April 23-26, 2003

Pittsburgh, PA



*We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Office of Theology and Worship is engaged in encouraging the whole church, “its congregations, governing bodies, ministers and members,” in the renewal of our vocation to think, pray, and live the faith.

A national convocation will be held in Pittsburgh on April 23-26 to explore the Nicene Creed. Plenary presentations on the first article of the Creed, seminars, workshops, visual and performing arts events will be offered. There will also be Bible studies and small daily prayer groups. All of this will be undergirded by a regular cycle of community worship with preaching and the Eucharist.

Among the seminars offered, two are to be led by the Office of Spiritual Formation. Kris Haig will speak on “Sabbath Keeping for Pastors,” while Steve Shussett's topic is “Trinitarian Spirituality.”

### **For more information, contact**

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## Give us a word...

In the early days of the church, pilgrims in search of wisdom would seek out desert mothers and fathers, often presenting themselves with the request, "Give us a word." Those with the gift of wisdom and insight may no longer tend to live in the wilderness, but their words speak to us still.

### **Lent and Easter: Prayer at Home**

Mark G. Boyer.

*Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2002.*

ISBN 0-87793-971-3. 126 pp. \$8.95

In this lovely little volume, Roman Catholic priest Mark Boyer presents suggestions for individual, family, or small group prayer for the seasons of Lent and Easter. The book is divided into three large sections: Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. Each section has several short chapters (for a total of 59) focused on specific themes appropriate to the liturgical season. Some of these themes focus on particular *days*, such as Mardi Gras, Easter Sunday, and Pentecost. Others attend to *practices*, such as almsgiving, fasting, and prayer during Lent. Many of the chapters examine the *things* of daily life (wine, water, clothes, yeast), while others take up specific *biblical themes* (shepherd, gospel, exodus). Each chapter includes a scripture verse, a brief reflection, a question for meditation, a prayer (taken from the Psalms), and questions to prompt memories. Boyer suggests that the reader use the meditation and memory questions for personal journal-keeping; they would also be suitable as a basis for discussion around a family dinner table or in a small group.

A concluding section entitled "Blessings for Lent and Easter" contains blessings for a variety of symbols that may be in the house during these seasons: candle, cross, palms, water. Boyer also provides meal blessings for each week of Lent and Easter, each patterned after the traditional Jewish meal blessing, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for you bring forth bread from the

*Please note that reviewed materials are not available through the Office of Spiritual Formation.*


earth." All of the blessings here are simple but not simplistic models of prayer easily used by all ages, using central images of the Christian faith. The section on blessings also contains one of the gems of this volume: a very brief "Renewal of Baptismal Promises" which, in a single page, presents a simplified version of the classic reaffirmation of baptism service: renunciation of evil, slightly abbreviated Apostles' Creed, declaration of the promises made at baptism, and signing of the cross using water. This could easily be used in a home, with or without children. It provides an appropriate way to mark the beginning of Lent, reminding us that for the baptized, the season is about remembering and reaffirming our baptism.

Throughout the book, Boyer maintains a consistent focus on the disciplines of daily living and their connection to the wider world. In the chapter on fasting, for example, he encourages the reader to attend to a simpler diet in order to become more mindful of those even in our own country who do not have enough to eat. His attention to prayer never leads him to withdraw, but always leads outward to concern for others. This commitment to the connection of "liturgy and life," as it is sometimes called, gently reminds the reader that Christian piety focuses on the formation of the self, not for the sake of self alone, but for the sake of the world.

As with any book of prayers and reflections, some chapters are more profound than others. The chapter on "Exodus," for instance, too

glibly draws a connection between the biblical exodus and our life transitions from one phase of life to another as “exoduses.” The chapter entitled “Altar,” on the other hand, offers an evocative reflection on the connection between food and death. Because there are fewer chapters than there are days in each liturgical season, a reader may choose to linger on chapters that are particularly helpful and move quickly through the ones that offer less substance for meditation or discussion.

Protestant readers will stumble across several references to things or practices that are particular to Roman Catholicism: canon law, the Stations of the Cross, penance, and others. At these moments, Presbyterians and other Protestants may feel as though they are momentarily intruding on someone else’s world, a world with more candles and incense, perhaps, than is familiar. These references, however, do not prevent Boyer’s reflections from being useful to Protestant Christians; indeed, they serve as helpful reminders that the Church is much broader and deeper than our own particular experience of it.

In this volume, Boyer has given a spare, thoughtful guide to prayer that can be used by people in a variety of settings. Through it, he enables prayer to become, as he puts it, “less of what we say to God and more of what God says to us.” 

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### Christian Classics Ethereal Library



A church library. Most congregations have one, but many are filled with multiple copies of out-of-date Sunday School materials, unwanted books donated by previous pastors, and old denominational resources. Church budgets are always tight, so such a collection is to be expected.

But what if a library of many of the great classics in Christian writing were available for free, just a few keystrokes away? Just type in [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) and there you will find a wide variety of texts, from Albert the Great’s *On Cleaving to God* to *The Sermons of George Whitefield* (sorry, no Zwingli yet!), the fifth century Augustine to the twentieth’s Dorothy Sayers. And yes, John Calvin is well-represented, with his *Institutes*, *Of Prayer*, and *On the Christian Life* on file.

Inspired by a Calvin College professor’s discovery of Thomas á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* at a time when he needed it most, **Christian Classics Ethereal Library** provides scanned texts available in the public domain, either free on-line or by purchasing a CD. Numerous classics are provided in several languages, and for those of a Benedictine bent, audio files allow you to listen to many of the selections, chapter by chapter.

Visually this site does not have much to offer, and the quality of the audio files is mixed. But that is not the point. To find so many great classics of Christian literature available with such ease means no pastor, and no church library, need ever to be without the words of so great a cloud of witnesses.

**Christian Classics Ethereral Library:** 

Scale:  sheds a lot of light —  lights out

# A Fast for Justice and Fair Food

In June 2002 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) endorsed a consumer boycott of Taco Bell restaurants and products. This boycott is an effort to establish three-way negotiations between Taco Bell, Florida tomato growers and farm workers in regard to wages, and working and living conditions. Farm workers who pick tomatoes that go into Taco Bell products are earning between 40-50¢ for each 32-pound bucket they pick and haul. Most earn around \$7500 a year. Their average wage has not changed in more than twenty years. (For details visit [www.pcusa.org/boycott](http://www.pcusa.org/boycott).)

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based workers organization led by and composed of Immokalee farm workers, has received PC(U.S.A.) support for the boycott with gratitude and joy. The CIW invites Presbyterians to support the workers in a hunger fast at the doorstep of Taco Bell headquarters in Irvine, California. The fast calls upon Taco Bell to take responsibility for the sweatshop conditions in the fields where its tomatoes are picked. The week-long fast will begin Monday, February 24. A massive, peaceful rally by supporters will take place Friday, February 28 from 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. We hope that Presbyterians will pray for the workers and for the transformation of the fast food and agricultural industries, join them in fasting and other acts of solidarity, and write letters to the Taco Bell President Emil Brolick urging him and his company to address this problem through three-way negotiations. Congregations might consider a “rolling fast,” in which members agree to fast on different days during this week. For example, all those with last names beginning with A-D fast on Monday, E-H on Tuesday, and so on. Or perhaps one meal each day might be given up, with the money saved sent to support the workers who are fasting.

Is this not the fast  
that I choose: to loose the  
bonds of injustice, to undo  
the thongs of the yoke, to  
let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Isaiah 58:6

Fasting is a spiritual practice embraced by many faith traditions. Fasting is attested to in Scripture and was practiced regularly by John Calvin. In Jonah we find that the people of Ninevah illustrate their desire to repent and live rightly by putting on sackcloth and ashes and observing a fast (Jonah 3:5-10). The prophet Isaiah warns that fasting must be connected to the seeking of justice, or else it is a hypocritical action to which God will not respond (Isaiah 58:1-14). Though Jesus did not prescribe fasting, he presumed that his followers engaged in the practice of fasting, giving instructions to limit prideful exhibitions (Matthew 6:16).

There are a variety of “purposes” for fasting, but a central purpose is that of reconciliation – with God and one’s neighbor. Through the practice of fasting we may see God’s vision for our world more clearly and so live with integrity. Fasting helps us identify the grave injustices around us, acknowledge and take responsibility for our participation and complicity in such injustice, and prepares us to act with God to transform our world and ourselves.

For more information about the boycott and additional resources for the fast, visit [www.pcusa.org/boycott](http://www.pcusa.org/boycott). Write to Emil Brolick at:

Mr. Emil Brolick, President  
Taco Bell Corporation  
17901 Von Karman  
Irvine, CA 92614

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The Rev. Noelle Damico is coordinator for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) boycott of Taco Bell.

# Calvin and Centering Prayer

by J. David Muyskens and Steve Shussett

In an as yet unpublished paper, J. David Muyskens offers a helpful review of Calvin's teachings on prayer, and their relationship to Centering Prayer [see "Centering Prayer," *Hungryhearts* Summer/Fall 2001]. Muyskens opens by reminding his readers that the reformer entitled this longest single chapter of the *Institutes* (III.20) "Prayer, Which is the Chief Exercise of Faith... by Which We Daily Receive God's Benefits." This designation of "chief exercise" is apt, according to Muyskens, because "the whole purpose of Calvin's *Institutes* is to move us to practice piety, a heartfelt attitude of living for God."

While many are uncomfortable with remaining silent, and suspicious of contemplative prayer, it is evident that Calvin was not. For example, in his Catechism of 1538, Calvin wrote "True prayer ought to be nothing else but a pure affection of our heart as it is about to draw near to God... to pour out our prayers." When addressing how this "true prayer" might occur, his words are telling: we are to "descend into the innermost recesses of our hearts and from that place, not from the throat and tongue, call God" (quoted in Muyskens).

In his teaching of prayer, Calvin offers four "rules," each of which has some value to a contemporary understanding of Centering Prayer in light of the Reformed tradition. The first of these is that proper preparation is necessary for conversation with God. On a practical level, this speaks to the guidelines of environment, body posture, and selection of a sacred word before commencing, "to have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God" (*Institutes* III.20.4). But much more vitally, this rule sets the very context making contemplative prayer not only permissible but valuable within the tradition. Calvin writes of "pure contemplation of God (*Institutes* III.20.4), possible only as we are not "distracted by wandering thoughts" that divert us from that (*Institutes* III.20.5).

We are to rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind, itself a wanderer, is borne about hither and thither, drawn away from heaven, and pressed down to earth...but [instead] rise to a purity worthy of God (*Institutes* III.20.4).

The second rule speaks to the intention of prayer. For those concerned that wordless, thoughtless prayer might be dangerous in its lack of explicit attention to Jesus Christ, Calvin's attention to intention — a point in common with Thomas Keating (see *The Diversity of Centering Prayer* 13-19), is valuable. "Sincere affection of the heart" is what is ultimately necessary in approaching God (*Institutes* III.20.29). Calvin continues


[T]he Heavenly Teacher, when he willed to lay down the best rule for prayer, bade us enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray to our Father in secret, that our Father, who is in secret, may hear us [Matthew 6:6]...he at the same time adds something better: that is, to enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray. By these words, as I understand them, he taught us to seek a retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within. He promises that God, whose temples our bodies ought to be, will be near to us in the affections of our hearts (*Institutes* III.20.29).



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Humility and submission are called for in the third rule of prayer, directing us toward trust in the mercy of God. A second dimension to this trust, however, might be considered in regard to God's ability to hear what is not spoken. I would argue that a degree of humility is necessary to believe that God's knowledge of our joys and concerns is not dependent on our making this evident. If that were so, we could never say enough. Rather, as found in the Psalter, while "[t]here is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:3-4). Truly, God does know our words completely, even before they are on our tongue (Psalm 139:4). This connects well with the final rule, in Muyskens' words, "that we pray with a confident hope." Trust and humility lead us to a new way of understanding God, ourselves, and our prayer, such that we might truly have "a sure hope that our prayer will be answered" (*Institutes* III.20.11). But we have this hope accepting that the answer may not come in our terms.

One final piece to this, as Muyskens concludes, speaks to the ability of two twenty-minute periods a day to affect a twenty-four hour period. Mindful of Paul's admonition that we are to pray unceasingly (1 Thessalonians 5:17), Calvin, ever the realist, recognizes that our weaknesses make this impossible (*Institutes* III.20.28). For this reason he sets certain times for daily prayer: when we rise in the morning, before we commence our daily work, when we sit down to food, when by the blessing of God we have taken it, and when we retire to rest (*Institutes* III.20.50). But, as Muyskens observes, "By spending the time at 'certain hours' as Calvin recommends, we come into a closer relationship with God. The result is an awareness of God in every moment." 

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