

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Thinking about prayer

I pray, but apparently not in the ways many other Christians pray. I think a lot about prayer but rarely write or talk about it. My silence is partly because a lot about prayer baffles me. However, it's also because I see that my views about prayer differ from those of many other Christians.



I wonder why. Do others know something I don't know and need to know? Do they experience something I don't experience, or do we merely use different language to describe similar experience? Are our differences due mainly to personality? I'm not sure.

We pray in different ways

I know that some other Christians' views and experience of prayer are similar to mine but that like me they mostly keep quiet about it. Some fear there's something wrong with them, while others simply want to avoid the flak they think they'd get if they revealed their real beliefs and uncertainties.



I come across these closeted Christians every now and then. I recently heard a clergywoman dare to say, "I no longer pray in the way that most church members think of as prayer." Others in the group were in spoke up immediately. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that, because I don't either." A reassuring discussion followed, about what we believed were and were not essential ingredients of prayer.

Prayers that pose a problem

Although I sometimes wonder why my main methods of private prayer apparently differ from those of many other Christians, that difference doesn't pose any problem for me. What does pose a problem is my inability to connect with most of the corporate prayers I hear, in



What kind of God?

"How we pray reflects the character of the God in whom we believe and to whom we pray," says Baptist clergyman H. Stephen Shoemaker in his *Finding Jesus in His Prayers* (Abingdon, 2004). Most of Shoemaker's book left me cold, but in that statement he said something I consider very important.



What kind of God do you pray to? Is it a God who causes some people to die of cancer and others to be cured? One who chooses some people to die young and others to live long lives? One who chooses some to be killed by tornadoes, highway accidents, or terrorist attacks, while others escape?

Whose prayers will God answer?

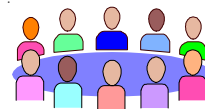
If you pray for something to happen and it doesn't happen, is it because your faith wasn't strong enough, or you weren't religious enough? I recently heard a friend trying to answer this for herself. "He was such a religious person," she mused soon after a friend of ours had died, "such a good Christian. When God doesn't answer my prayers I'm not surprised, but when God didn't answer his prayers and heal him . . . I just don't know."

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.
—James 5:16

What about those who aren't healed?

If we believe someone was healed because of prayer, how do we explain the many others who were prayed for but weren't healed? We tend to avoid such questions in church, but maybe we'd become more mature as Christians if we talked openly about them and looked for real answers to them.

In your church, how might you help provide more settings in which members felt safe talking openly about their questions and doubts about prayer? How could you help them get beyond simplistic, pious-sounding answers that don't really answer anything? Would this kind of talk be more likely to strengthen churchgoers' faith or weaken it?



worship services and other Christian gatherings. Those prayers are often obstacles for me.



A lot of their words distract me. I tell myself that I should focus on the pray-ers' intentions instead of their words, and focus on God instead of on what I'm hearing, but that rarely works for me. (I'm using "pray-er" here to mean the person who prays, and "prayer" to mean what that person says or does.)

Sermons in disguise

Many prayers I hear in worship services don't seem directed to God. Thus they're not really prayers. Instead, they're sermons in disguise.



They're giving information or advice about what the Bible says or what is currently happening in the world. Surely God doesn't need to be told those things.

Speaking about God rather than to God is a clue that pray-ers are addressing their human hearers rather than God. If the pray-ers were really speaking to God, they'd say "You are our rock," not "God is our rock."

Hearing a pray-er speak to God in one part of a sentence and about God in the next is even more distracting to me. So is mixing King-James-Version words and contemporary words—calling God "thee" in one sentence and "you" in the next. When I'm a captive audience for that kind of grammatical confusion, I can think only of how it needs cleaning up.

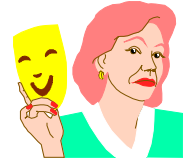
What do we believe?



Prayers like these raise a question that goes beyond grammar, however. It's the question of what we believe about God. If God is involved in today's world, as we claim to believe, we don't need to use seventeenth-century words for speaking to God. We can use today's words. That does away with the struggle of thinking whether to say "thou" or "thee" and thinking how to conjugate verbs like "dost" and "wouldst" and "hath."

Using today's conversational language in prayer also avoids giving other false impressions about God. If in prayer we use outdated or flowery lan-

guage that we don't use for any other purpose, we in effect say that in order to get a hearing from God it's necessary to develop skill in using a special language. We say that presenting our concerns to God and being heard requires having qualifications that few of us have.



We also tell hearers that they need to present a false front to God. We tell them that in order to be acceptable in church one has to wear a mask that keeps one's real and presumably less admirable self from being seen. Yet all those messages contradict what we claim to believe about God.

Most prayers I hear also give the mistaken impression that God is male, and that's a big obstacle for me. It's even bigger when the pray-er doesn't just use "Father" once or twice but starts almost every sentence of the prayer with "Father." Even more grating are "weejus" prayers, in which nearly every sentence starts with "Father, we just . . ."



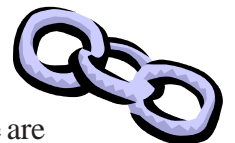
All these messages about what God is like, which the words of many prayers communicate and which seem mistaken to me, keep me from hearing much else the prayers are saying.

Yes, no, wait?

Also troubling for me are a lot of the explanations I hear, about why some prayers are answered and others aren't. Trying to prove that God answers all prayer, some Christians explain that the answer is sometimes "yes," sometimes "no," and sometimes "wait." This explanation is unconvincing to me, however, because it could apply to a chair or a wall or anything else someone might pray to, not just to God. In addition, it covers all possible results. To be convinced that prayer influences what God does, I'd have to see desired results always happening when people pray for them, and not happening or at least rarely happening otherwise.

Do bigger numbers get better results?

Another problem for me is numbers. I can't believe that God is more likely to heal people for whom large numbers of people are



praying, than to heal those for whom fewer are praying. Prayer chains seem to be based on that belief.

I know that many Christians feel they see prayer chains' effectiveness proven repeatedly, and maybe they're right. It too often seems to me, however, that when desired results happen, that's claimed as proof that the praying worked, but when the desired results don't happen, that goes unmentioned.

Also I'm uneasy about prayer chains because it's so easy to convince ourselves that we want to know about others' problems only in order to help them by praying, when we may actually be motivated more by mere curiosity. It's easy for prayer chains to be gossip chains.



The order within all that exists

Much of my uncertainty about prayer comes from seeing God addressed as a human being, and a rather capricious, arbitrary one—sort of a cosmic Santa Claus. That's not how I see God.

I can't describe exactly how I do see God, but it's less like a person and more like the principles by which the universe operates. It's like the order that governs nature, if nature is defined not as just plants, wild animals, oceans, mountains, sky, and such, but as all that exists. That order, I believe, functions best when the people in it treat each other with love and justice, as Jesus taught and modeled.



Praying for God to be with me or with someone else therefore seems pointless to me, because I see God as a presence that is always with us. What seems

appropriate to pray for is that we will become more aware of that divine reality and will get more nearly in tune with it.



Connecting with others through God

Real prayer, for me, is less like talking to a person and more like getting in sync with that cosmic order. I see prayer as some kind of spiritual communication between myself and that order.

That communication is also a kind of rapport with other people, who are also part of the divine order. The rapport happens when our messages to each other, spoken or unspoken, somehow pass through the divine center of that order and establish links between what is holy in each of us. What I see as answers to prayer, therefore, are most often insights, brainstorms, new understandings, new developments, and especially, surprising connections with other people.



Reading, writing, crying, reflecting

My personal prayer isn't always consciously addressed to God. It's often journaling, letter-writing, reading, or conversation. It's an effort to sort out strong feelings, to make sense of what seems senseless, or to see how to deal with anger or disappointment or a problem that seems unsolvable. Sometimes it's crying or even screaming when I'm alone and feeling unusually discouraged about something that's happening or failing to happen. Often my prayer is reflecting in silence, on something I've read or heard.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Sometimes I do it in writing, and sometimes only in my mind.



It's okay to be different

Silent reflection is the kind of prayer I'd like more opportunity for in worship services, especially after scripture readings and sermons. Yet I know that other attenders would be as turned off by that kind of prayer as I am by the spoken prayers I typically hear.

Besides, the amount of silence I'd want would seem unbearably long for many other worshippers. On the rare occasions when worship services include what's announced as a time for silent prayer, the al-

lotted time is usually only a few seconds. It ends before I've even begun to focus my thoughts.

So what's the remedy for my inability to connect with the prayers I encounter in church and other gatherings? I'm not sure. Maybe there's not one. Maybe I merely need to keep remembering that connecting with God and other people in ways that many wouldn't even call prayer is prayer for me, and that's okay. But I'll keep thinking and wondering about it.



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Connections

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Thinking about prayer

October 2004

What is prayer for you? A regular practice? Something you rarely do? Something you do only in church? Only in private? Silently? Out loud? In writing?

How did you experience prayer while you were growing up? Did you say "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." at bedtime? (I did, and it was scary. Was I really likely to die before I waked, I wondered? I still wonder why that was a bedtime prayer taught to children.) Did your family say a table grace before meals? Do you do so now? Only at home, or also when you eat in restaurants and other public places?

Is prayer appropriate in schools, at sporting events, at meetings of civic organizations, and in other secular gatherings that people with many different religious beliefs attend?

You might find it interesting and helpful to compare answers to these and other questions about prayer with members of your church group, with other friends, or with family members.

