

Prayer: in the Peace of Christ

**Melissa
Miller**



A five-session worship, prayer and study guide

Prayer: in the Peace of Christ

*A five-session worship,
prayer and study guide*

by
**Melissa
Miller**

“Prayer: in the Peace of Christ” *A five-session worship, prayer and study guide*, is published by the Christian Formation Council, and is designed to serve as a resource for the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada.

Copyright © 2003 Christian Formation, Mennonite Church Canada, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3P 0M4, 1-866-888-6785. This material may be reproduced for the use of Mennonite Church Canada congregations. All others must obtain permission from Mennonite Church Canada.

Cover image: The woodcut cover image is taken from *The Doré Bible Illustrations*, depicting Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary.

Music References:

Hymnal: A Worship Book

God’s Love is for Everybody, by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends (available from Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre 1-866-888-6785 or Faith and Life Resources 1-800-743-2484)

Editor: Dan Dyck, Justina Heese, Elsie Rempel

Cover design and layout: Lynette Wiebe



Formation

Introduction

Prayer: In the Peace of Christ invites us to find the foundation, the inspiration, the strategies and the sustaining power for all our peacemaking in Jesus Christ.

As people of prayer, we are invited into the heart of God, where we experience God's love and compassion for all creation. This can inspire and equip us to share God's great reconciling love as peacemakers.

As peacemakers, we are invited to show the world a better way of dealing with conflict. This can be overwhelming as we seek to bring the peace witness to the varied contexts that lack peace, and often lack it desperately. Prayer can strengthen, form and sustain us with the vision of the ultimate reality of God's Kingdom, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

The worship, prayer and study sessions in this year's Prayer week material begin with a global focus to illustrate the broad and deep needs for true peace in our world. From there Miller moves toward empowering the peacemaker, and encouraging us, through prayer and practical models, to connect with God's love and listen to God's leading. The theme of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in our relationships with the family and the church community is advanced by the use of concrete models for dealing constructively with conflict in our lives. From this basis, we then focus on the role of prayer in witnessing for peace in the public arena. Finally, the vision of prayer-inspired peacemaking broadens to include all creation and calls us to thankful responsible living.

The songs, reflection questions and suggestions for follow up at home are there for you to choose from and adapt to your particular situation. It is our hope and prayer that this resource will help equip its users for the challenges of faithfulness in the varied contexts of our lives. May we claim for ourselves the words Jesus spoke to his first disciples: *"I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*
—John 16:33

Elsie Rempel, Director, Christian Education and Nurture
Mennonite Church Canada
October, 2003

Contents



Session 1

"...for he is our peace..." _____ **6**



Session 2

"...we have this treasure in clay jars..." _____ **13**



Session 3

"...maintaining the unity of the Spirit..." _____ **23**



Session 4

"...in me you may have peace _____ **33**



Session 5

"...creation waits with eager longing..." _____ **40**

Session 1



“...for he is our peace...”

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.
—Ephesians 2:14*

Music

HWB 368 *O God of love, O Power of peace*

HWB 334 *Christ is the world's true light*

HWB 346 *Dona Nobis Pacem*

HWB 367 *For the healing of the nations*

If the War Goes On by John Bell, available in the March 2003 issue of Mennonite Church Canada's Resource Centre Update and from www.mennonitechurch.ca

Threats to Peace

In the winter of 2003, millions of people around the world issued a stunning, loud and strong cry for peace as they marched and sang and prayed, pleading with the United States and Great Britain to turn from their plans to declare war on and bomb Iraq. With many other Christians, I sang the aching lyrics, “If the war goes on, will we breach the gates of hell?...Will we ever be forgiven?” (*If the War Goes On*, John Bell and Graham

Maule, GIA Publications, 1997, rev. November 2002.)

Questions continue to haunt in the months since the occupying forces began their bombing in March, 2003. Was our despair as intense as the peaceful protests had been? What is the point of more prayer when our efforts seemed to have come to naught? What do we say to God and what might God be saying to us?

It's late summer, five months later, as I write these reflections. Outside my house lies a tidy treed street in a calm, orderly city in a country which is by and large peaceful and wealthy. Like many North Americans, I am blessed by a full fridge, money in the bank, loving friends and family, access to education and medical care. There is peace or shalom in many aspects of my life.

Daily the newspapers remind me of the many places where shalom is not known. Last winter's bombs have left Iraq less secure and more volatile than before; occupying troops continue to kill and be killed. The relentless bloodshed in the Middle East makes even more broken bodies, broken spirits, broken hopes. Decades-long violence in Colombia has left people unsure of their basic identity, for to claim such an identity is to be at risk of losing one's life. Travelers to Mennonite World Conference in Africa remind us of those parents — our Anabaptist sisters and brothers — who eat just one meal a day (or less) to ensure their children have food, and of whole generations at risk because of AIDS. God's tears must be drenching our world.

Other factors fracture our shalom. Fires rage out of control in western Canada, destroying hundreds of homes. Untimely deaths and horrible tragedies frighten and burden us. Our churches or our families may be strained by unresolved, biting conflicts and our own hearts may be far less charitable and compassionate than we wish. Our peace with God may be challenged by our disbelief, our struggles, our busy-ness, or our materialism.

Many of us lost family members during the harsh, chaotic events in the early half of the 20th century. Such horror mars us and we ponder our peacemaking as those whose faith has been tried by bloodshed. What is the word of Jesus to those who have lived through such anarchy and lost much?

Group response:

Recall and share where peace and peacemaking have been threatened in your experience.

Praying for peace is not for the faint of heart. It requires enormous discipline to turn our hearts to peace, to pray humbly, asking God to bring peace into our lives and into our world. Yet thank God who gives us the strength to endure, the courage to keep our eyes open, and a vision to sustain us.

Seeking the word of God in scripture, we find inspiration in Ephesians.

“...We who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh...he has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility, between us...he (has) created in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2:13-19)

Though the word peace is not used, this Hebrew prophet’s vision is so tender and beautiful: we may ache wishing for such a reality in our world.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11: 6-9)

Understanding Peace

As the peace protests of early 2003 proved, our world is desperately searching for peace. Millions of people around the world are pleading for an end to the cycle of death, destruction and bloodshed. We are inheritors to a tradition that speaks to the world’s deep hunger. We know peace. When our Anabaptist ancestors turned to the Bible, they discovered a Jesus who

modeled peacemaking and who bestowed such peace upon them that they met their deaths in flames singing hymns! This Jesus is just as available and vital today in these desperate times.

Our peacemaking heritage does not begin with the Anabaptist martyrs of the 16th century. Digging into our Biblical roots, Christian and Hebrew scriptures, we meet a God who passionately desires peace for the world and all of its peoples. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, is a multidimensional concept (*iridescent* says Biblical scholar and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary scholar Willard Swartley), signifying well-being and wholeness in all aspects of life. For the Hebrews, *shalom* was often linked to physical gratification in the present — fat flocks, many children, abundance. Given how life was structured, *shalom* necessarily took place within the context of community. All things — health, spirit, relationships with God, neighbour, family, and creation — shaped *shalom*.

As the people of God, Hebrews saw *shalom* as a gift from God, originally viewed as bestowed solely on Israel; it was not given to other nations. By the time of the prophet Jeremiah, when Jerusalem lay in ruins, a theological shift is evident. Jeremiah challenges the exiles in Babylon to “seek the welfare (*shalom*) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare” (29: 7). *Shalom* is seen as extending beyond the kingdom of Israel. Through the exhortations of a fierce prophet, a powerful theme emerges — that of the availability and working of an abundantly gracious God beyond contrived human boundaries.

Early Christian writers drew on their Jewish understanding of *shalom* as they spoke of *eirene* (a Greek word for peace). Grounded in the astounding reality of Jesus’ resurrection from death, they envisioned a powerful peace that was inner as well as communal. Jesus had fought and won a battle over death, and this reality transformed the cosmos and empowered his followers. The peace of the New Testament enabled a ragtag crew of fishermen to launch a new faith which continues with power and life today.

Peace is power. The key to staying tuned to that power is prayer, a gift of God that enables us to draw on our spiritual resources to claim peace for ourselves and to preach it to others.

Voices of Peace

■ Some years back I heard Dorothy, a returned MCC worker, speak of the devastation wrought by injustice and greed in the lives of the people she had met and worked with in the Philippines. Overwhelmed by her testimony, I inquired during the question period, “How did you manage to keep going?”

A glow spread across her face as she smiled and said, “We learned the absolute necessity of prayer and Bible study. We found out really quickly that we had to dig into those disciplines to restore us.”

■ As Anabaptists, we hold a precious legacy that the world is dying for. The world needs peace in this era just as desperately as before, if not more so. MCC Canada peace and economic justice coordinator Esther Epp-Tiessen is one articulate and passionate voice for peace. She says, “I am a pacifist because I am a Christian, a Mennonite, a student of history and a mother...I believe that our Anabaptist-Mennonite peace convictions are a tremendous gift that we have to offer the world.” (From a sermon preached at Charleswood Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, November 2002.)

■ A recently compiled book (*Coming Home: Anabaptist Stories from Britain and Ireland*, by Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray, Pandora Press, 2000) notes the stories of sixty modern-day Anabaptists — Europeans who chose this faith as adults. Half of them cite the 16th century example of Dirk Willms in drawing them to the faith. Willms was a Dutch Anabaptist who escaped from prison. While fleeing across the frozen river, he heard a crack and a splash. Willms stopped his flight, turned back, and reached out to pull his pursuer to safety.

What kind of spirit permits such an act? What kind of faith teaches such love of enemy? Did it sustain Willms that cold day as he was arrested beside the man he had saved, and during his subsequent execution? Did it comfort those left behind? What other faith teaches such a peace?

■ When telling a story of hardship or tragedy, Botswana Christians often remark, “God was there.” Such a proclamation declares their unshakable confidence in a God who provides steadfast, abiding presence. In a bleak time of life, my friend, who

was overwhelmed by the needs of sick children and struggling with her own depression, plodded on day after day with the confessional prayer, “God is”, unable to declare more. Still, the short prayer kept her going.

■ All of our prayers for peace are not forged in such desperate fires. We often offer prayers of thanksgiving for the peace we know — in Jesus our Saviour, in happy homes and harmonious churches. We seek the welfare of those we love. When staying with Willard and Mary Swartley last winter, I joined with them each night as they prayed for the safety of their children and grandchildren “in every way — physically, spiritually, emotionally, sexually.” I felt deep, powerful cords of protection surrounding their loved ones as the parents prayed.

Experiencing Peace as We Converse with God

Prayer is our conversation with God. Prayer changes us, moving us more into the centre of God, shaping us more into the likeness of Jesus, the Prince of peace whom we follow. As we pray and immerse ourselves in the peace of God, our journey of prayer leads us beside still waters. At a recent women’s retreat in B.C., Marilyn Houser Hamm, musician and church leader, compared this experience to “pouring water from a pitcher to a basin so that all could hear and see the cleansing, soothing water trickling down. ‘In the space of life and wholeness’, she asked them, ‘where is that space for you?’” (from a *Canadian Mennonite* article by Amy Dueckman, June 2, 2003, p 28.) What images help you experience the cleansing, soothing peace of God?

In these cold winter hours as we begin a new calendar year, we recommit ourselves to prayer for a number of reasons, including “so we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4: 16a). In praying, we tap into God’s limitless compassion, infinite power and lavish grace. Such resources are essential as we faithfully bear the light of peace into the cruel and frightening shadows.

Suggestions for Prayer Group Activity

1. Pray for areas where peace is threatened in our world today.
2. Pray for Mennonite World Conference and our international body of believers, remembering especially those areas and congregations where peace is threatened.
3. Pray for peace within and for the peace witness of Mennonite Church Canada.
4. Pray for peace in your congregation, your families and within your own life.

Suggestions for Nurturing Peace in your Home

1. Learn and sing along with the song *My Voice Alone*, on the CD "God's Love is for Everybody", by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends. How many peace voices do you know about?
2. Make a poster to show what peace is. Use phrases or pictures.
3. Brainstorm together as a household about ways you can make peace grow in your neighbourhood. Decide to do one of those things.
4. Start a scrapbook that is titled *Prayer: in the Peace of Christ*. On the first page show ways you see other family/household members being peacemakers.

Session 2



“...we have this treasure in clay jars...”

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. —2 Cor. 4:7

Music:

HWB 368 *O God of love, O Power of peace* (Theme song)
 HWB 167 *For God so loved us/Gott ist die Liebe*
 HWB 616 *Children of the heavenly Father*
 HWB 511 *God, who touches earth*
 HWB 573 *What a friend we have in Jesus*
 HWB 5 *There is a place of quiet rest*

God's Unconditional Love

Near the end of a conference on faith and self-esteem, we were asked to look at the children's photos we carried in our wallets. (Imagine the faces of the wee ones you now love.) Gazing at our curly-headed or bald, dark- or peach-skinned, black- or blue-eyed cherubs, we beamed with the pleasure these little loved ones brought to us. A tangible warmth rose from the group, and the leader asked, "Do you love these children?"

"Yes," we nodded.

“Why?” he queried. “Because of what they’ve done? Because they’ve earned your love?”

“Uh, no...” we stammered, momentarily forgetting why we loved them. Then we offered such possibilities as their smiles, their joy, and their charm.

“And do you still love them even if they aren’t smiling or joyful or charming?” he persisted.

Well...yes, we nodded, we do.

And when he asked why one more time, the light began to dawn as one of us responded, “Just because we do.”

Exactly, he said. The way God loves us. Not because we’ve earned it or because we’re beautiful or because we’re charming. God loves us because God chooses to love us. This “object lesson” has stayed with me over the years as I’ve pondered my relationship with God and taught self-esteem and God’s love to others.

God is passionate about us and doesn’t give up on us, even when we’re not smiling, joyful or charming. The Bible records God’s love affair with us. In Deuteronomy 7, the Israelites are reminded,

“...you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession...not because you were more numerous...(but) because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors...Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments” (v 6-9).

In later writings, Israelites were told that God’s love wasn’t reserved for them, but was intended for the whole world (Jonah; Is. 2: 2-4, 25: 6 ff., 42: 1-4, 49: 11-12). As Christians, we are heirs to that expansive love made available to us by Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. When we are reminded that we “have this treasure in clay jars” (2 Cor. 4:7), we know it comes from a long history of God loving and not giving up on us.

Yet we often forget that we are loved, that we are treasures of God. In our amnesia, we succumb. To self-devaluation. To selling for less. To other gods. To sin.

Connecting with God’s Love in Prayer

Prayer reminds us of our place in the heart of God. Prayer helps us retrace the line linking us to the God of the 16th century Anabaptists, of the apostles and the early church, of those who walked with Jesus, the God of Isaiah and David and Naomi and Hannah and Jacob and Noah.

Prayer, like conversation with a true friend, helps us see ourselves better and understand our friend better. Prayer nurtures the love connection between God and us. Correspondingly, with an absence of prayer, the love connection is strained, erratic or even broken. With a secure sense of our value in the eyes of God, we are equipped to be peacemakers in our world, our churches, our communities, and families, and in our own hearts.

The inner walk with God is foundational — like a precious spring that must be visited regularly to replenish the rest of our endeavors. God makes power, resources and love available to us. Prayer helps us to access those gifts.

Unsure about direction? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Weighted by sin? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Burdened by a loved one’s worrisome behaviors? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Unsure of your value or worth? Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Perhaps, like me, you select prayer when you’ve used up most or all of your other options. My misguided notions of self-sufficiency often mean I slug through more confusion, missteps and misery on my own than necessary, because I’ve chosen not to drink from the well before setting out. Always when I make prayer a daily discipline, I am blessed by clarity, settledness and a grounding in God’s steadfast presence.

Yes, there are wilderness moments (days, weeks or even months). When we wander through bleak and dry landscapes, we may lose the heart and will to turn to God in prayer. At such times, a daily discipline of prayer offers a mooring to hold us fast to our faith and our God. The act of prayer itself, even when we feel, or are, estranged from God, even when we are lamenting our sense of God’s abandonment, ties us to our Creator. We give voice to our heart’s deep cry, and the giving voice assumes someone somewhere is listening to our anguish. Such prayer calls us back to a renewed awareness that we have “treasure in clay jars.”

Finding God's Peace with Memorized Prayers

The simple power of the Lord's Prayer has proved most valuable for the Christian church through the ages. Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary professor Allan Kreider proclaims, "We ought to have a pretty good reason not to pray the Lord's Prayer every week." Marilyn Houser Hamm, church musician, says, "The amazing thing about a prayer like (the Lord's Prayer) is that we can mature into it. Prayers we have memorized call us and move us and teach us." (*Canadian Mennonite*, June 2, 2003, p 28.)

The Lord's prayer reminds us

- of the parent-like care God provides for us
- of our commitment to seek, pray for, wait, and bring in the reign of God
- that daily bread, whether we are rich or poor, comes from God
- of our ongoing need for, and responsibility to, exercise forgiveness
- of God's protection from temptation and evil

All of these points are essential elements to fuel our peace-making. Praying the Lord's Prayer calls us to lean on the source of our being, the source of our peace, as we strive to bring peace to others.

Stories of the Power of Prayer

In the weeks following my dad's sudden death, I felt such disorientation and confusion that normal daily activities seemed impossible. From a book on Jewish death customs, I learned of the custom of daily praying the Kaddish, a common Jewish prayer, which, as described by author Anita Daimant, "...addresses the meaning of life and death, immortality and redemption, the purpose and efficacy of prayer, community, and the ultimate goal of peace." (*Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn as a Jew*, Schocken, 1998, p 14.) "Kaddish is a sign that affirms the core beliefs and dreams of the Jewish people: God is beyond us. Understanding is beyond us. Holiness and beauty are all around us, but beyond us, too. We have work to do. There is hope. Peace is possible. Peace. Please. Peace." (p 16)

Such wisdom drove me to my Christian roots and a renewed appreciation for the Lord's Prayer, written down at approximately the same time as the Kaddish. Its familiarity, the memory of hearing my father pray it as he led worship, and its tie to Jesus proved to be grounding, a blessing, a still point on which I could stand in my mourning.

Some years ago I was asked to bring my peace "testimony" to an MCC meeting in Ontario. Having lived a rather protected North American life, I was unsure if I had much to offer. But my reflections included acknowledgment of my own mishandled anger. I spoke of tracing my pain back to childhood, where I remembered damage from other's hurtful words and actions. I confessed a belief that the line that divides good from evil exists just as surely in my heart as it does in others who may wield weapons or commit acts of brutality I cannot fathom. Like others, I must decide whether I will choose good or evil; to usher in or deny God's reign; to create or destroy. Prayer — turning my heart and life over to God; conversing with my friend and Saviour; seeking guidance and direction — helps me to line up my choices, resources and energy with God's good.

One morning when I greeted my friend as we escorted our children to school, she told me she'd been praying as she pulled her wagon of kids. When I asked about her specific prayer, she offered a powerful image I've carried, used and shared with others.

"I'm praying that if any hostility comes my way today — if anyone thinks or acts in a hurtful way to me — I'm praying that the aggression will bounce off the shield of protection God has placed around me. And..." she continued, "that it will be returned to the sender — transformed as love." What I know of her faith tradition seemed far removed from my Mennonite church, and I was humbled by the depth and generosity of her prayer — included in her morning as she ushered kids to school. What a profound and specific way to practice love of enemy!

Group Response

Recall and share where your peace making efforts were empowered by prayer.

Models of Prayer that can Empower our Peacemaking

Peace with God is the cornerstone of our Christian peacemaking. Knowing God, being known by God and resting in God's love is the ground of our being.

The ACTS Model

In preparation for this prayer series, I used a popular discipline based on the acronym **ACTS**. Each day in my prayer journal, I followed the form, first noting **adoration**, listing God's attributes that were particularly notable for me that day.

I then moved on to **confession**, unloading the ways I'd blown it or missed the mark. Included in confession was the assurance of pardon, written as a love note from God to me, or drawn from a familiar scripture like the empowering declaration of Romans 8,

"...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 38 - 39)

Afterwards I would mark a big X through my sins (a suggestion from Bill Hybels in *Too Busy Not to Pray*), a reminder that God crosses out my sins.

The next step involved **thanksgiving**, listing my blessings with specific attention to answered prayers. Finally I concluded with **supplication** — the prayers of request I made for myself, my loved ones, and my community.

Such a structure is not for everyone, nor helpful at every stage along the way. Our prayer life reflects our unique personalities and individual relationships with God — which change over time. Essential to deepening our faith and connection to God are regular, thoughtful prayer times where we commit ourselves to conversing with God, and especially to listening to God.

What I value about the ACTS form of prayer is that it reminds me to proclaim God's goodness — to praise God's compassion, power and life-giving force. Regularly noting my shortcomings helps me focus on repeated sins and areas I need to change, to bring God's forgiveness and transformative grace into those shadowy places in my heart.

Prayers of Thanksgiving

Prayers of thanksgiving are relatively easy for me. I am indeed grateful for the many ways God blesses me and answers prayer. For this part of the prayer, I sometimes follow the gratitude discipline described by Sarah Ban Breathnach in *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy* (Warner, 1995). In a gratitude journal, she daily notes five things for which she is grateful, an act which over time fills her with a deep appreciation, and contentment with, the richness of her life.

Thanksgiving helps us see all the areas where God **is** acting in our lives and blessing us, pulling our focus away from our all-too-human attention to our dissatisfactions, discontents, and problems. I have especially enjoyed thanking God these last months for these blessings.

Prayers of Supplication

Prayers of supplication can help track how God is answering a prayer. If we keep a record of them, matters of supplication can become a source of thanksgiving, because they present us with a written record of God's responsiveness to our pleas.

After writing down my supplications, I often pause to listen to what God might be saying to me — an essential yet often forgotten step. If I ask questions like, "Where would you have me use my gifts today?" or "How might I address this conflict with my sister?" or "What steps can I take to make peace?" and then listen and perhaps even record God's response, I deepen my God-connection.

Writing Down our Prayers

Writing down the whole set of prayers, but especially the supplications, reminds me of where my heart is most burdened, what my deepest concerns are. Daily prayer for those individuals and situations reminds me that God's power and care are vital resources for me as I love and seek to help others. I often mistakenly assume it's through **my** efforts that change happens, arrogantly missing the role of God and the Holy Spirit. Retired conference minister (Ontario) Doris Gascho says, "I do what I can and let the Holy Spirit fill in the cracks." When confronted with seemingly immovable obstacles, she offers, "I remind God I need some help here..."

As gifted, committed and wise as we might be, we must always see our efforts and influence as just one slight sliver of God's cosmic power and plan. Prayer enables us to keep perspective. We have a part **but** God's action and force far transcend our efforts.

Prayers that Trust God and Let us Sleep

Minister and author Eugene Peterson suggests we revise our understanding of our place in God's work. "We go to sleep and God begins his work," he writes. "When I quit my day's work, nothing essential stops. I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while. I get into the rhythm of salvation...Human effort is honored and respected not as a thing in itself but by its integration into the rhythms of grace and blessing." The excerpt is quoted by Dorothy C. Bass in, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (Jossey-Bass, 2000). She adds, "Morning becomes a time to join in the labors that have already begun without us, and evening a time to let others — and Another — take over." (p 18)

When we wake, we join God and the Spirit who have been moving, shaping and influencing as we slept. Can you recall the spirit nudges that occurred during dreams, and the restorative rejuvenation experienced through sleep? Waking we join the creative, dynamic dance already in motion — adding our steps and flair to it. Sleeping we pause from the Spirit work that continues on as we rest.

The Consolation/Desolation Model

Finally, I offer one more discipline which has positively shaped my prayer life and faith for over a decade. At a low point in my life, a dear friend handed me *Sleeping with Bread: Holding what Gives You Life* (by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, & Matthew Linn, Paulist, 1995). This wise and small book offers examples and describes a way of praying set out by Ignatius of Loyala. This disciplined way of praying offers a means of tracking how we experience and lose sight of God, and involves reflection on two sets of questions —

- Where did I experience *consolation* today?
- Where did I most experience God's presence?
- Where did I feel most connected to God, life and others?

and,

- Where did I feel *desolation* today?
- Where did I most keenly experience the absence of God?
- Where did I feel most disconnected from God, life and others?

By keeping track of these reflections, one can deepen a sense of both who God is and who God wants us to be. As I practiced this prayer model, I came to agree with the authors that God created us in joy and wants us to live in joy. If practiced regularly, this way of praying, which is called the examen, can lead us to realize where God is creating joy in our lives, and where we are out of God's (joyful) will.

When I first began to practice the examen, there were often days when I had **no** moments of consolation, no sense of connection with my loving Creator God — clear indicators that I was far off the path. I am grateful that God pulled me from the pit; this discipline helps me stay aligned with God's good will for me.

Some families, couples or close friends use this discipline as a daily check-in, a way of debriefing the day, and sharing in naming to each other the God-moments in their days.

For Personal and Household Reflection

Are you conscious of your treasure within? Are you able to accept God's proclamation that you are a holy people to God, and God's treasured possession? How does such affirmation shape your peace witness? How do you nurture your relationship with God? How does prayer enable you to know God's love for you?

Benediction

May God strengthen you in your inner being with power through his Spirit.
 May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
 May you have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth.
 May you know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
 (From Eph. 2: 16-19.)

Suggestions for Prayer Group Activity

1. Divide into groups of six and pray for peace using the ACTS or examen model.
2. Reflect on how God was present to you during this time of prayer. How might this experience change for you if you practiced it regularly for several weeks? Write down and share your thoughts.
3. Spend some time with the personal and household reflections in your small group.
4. Speak the benediction, from Ephesians, to each other before you disperse.

Suggestions for Nurturing Peace in your Home

1. Learn and sing along with the song, *In the Highways*, on the CD "God's Love is for Everybody," by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends. How and where do you listen for God to call your name?
2. A very simple form of introducing the examen form of prayer in your household is to end the day by talking and praying about the things that made you glad, sad and sorry that day. Try it in your household for a week and then reflect on how it blessed your family/household and spiritual life.
3. Or - Use the ACTS model of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication for a week and reflect on how that blessed your household and spiritual life.
4. Add a second page to your scrapbook on *Prayer: in the Peace of Christ*, where you list ways praying together helps your family make peace.

Session 3



“...maintaining the unity of the Spirit....”

Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. —Ephesians 4:3

Music

- HWB 368 *O God of Love, O Power of Peace* (Theme Song)
- HWB 141 *The sacrifice you accept, O God*
- HWB 137 *Forgive our sins as we forgive*
- HWB 145 *There's a wideness in God's mercy*
- HWB 352 *Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us*
- HWB 353 *Lord, listen to your children*

Guidelines for Peacemaking

The Bible offers **lots** of guidance for peacemakers, for those who earnestly desire to offer Christ's peace witness to those who are near and those who are far off, to be loving, kind, faithful, generous contributors to family, church and community life. Consider these words from Ephesians 4:15-16:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way...into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

This passage and the conflict resolution model of Matthew 18 (to cite just two relevant Biblical passages) offer far more directives than one can easily grasp or readily apply. In fact, it might take a whole lifetime to become the kind of Christian who consistently, instinctively models such practice. For Christian peacemakers, though, a grounding in such Biblical wisdom provides markers to guide our journeys with those with whom we live and worship, those who know us — warts and all — and still love us.

Learning from the Attitude of a Child

The old-fashioned concept of humility makes an uncharacteristically bold appearance in these two passages. This summer while attending a family reunion in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, I went with others to a historic village and watched a film which noted humility as a key value of the Amish. Many aspects of traditional Amish life are channeled into shaping this value in its members. Conformity of dress and behavior, simplicity, and lack of adornment on people and homes help the Amish develop humility, and the related characteristics of not “sticking out” and not being prideful.

The concept raised questions for me like —

- How does this value represent a God who is showy, who lavished creation with a myriad of colours, shapes and sounds, and delights in that creation?
- How do we celebrate the joy we experience when others share their God-given gifts of music, art and other kinds of leadership in ways that make them “stand out”?
- Isn't there a place for confidence and healthy pride in a Christian world view?

Even with my questions, though, I am confronted by consistent Biblical teachings of the necessity of humility in maintaining peaceful human relations. Ephesians 4 lists humility with gentleness, patience and forbearance as qualities which help one maintain the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:2, 3). Some, like my 12 year old friend Lucy, seem to have a natural abundance of these qualities. Lucy's humility is composed of a mellow, joyful, pleasant, kind spirit, which seems to have come

in her genes. Her mother Beth, a quick-tongued, spirited woman often remarks that she prays she may become more like Lucy.

Those of us not endowed with instinctive humility may gain some insights in Matthew 18. In the ongoing discussion Jesus and his disciples have about greatness and power, Jesus here offers an object lesson. Calling a child to stand among them, perhaps a child like Lucy with her calm gaze, generous compassion and mellow spirit, Jesus says,

*“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes **humble** like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew.18:3-4)*

While I've pondered Jesus' meaning at length, I'm still not certain exactly what he meant. I do believe that I can learn something about what he meant by watching children. When my son was young, I noticed the easy, quick way he and his friends resolved their conflicts. What was producing tears, shrieks and acts of violence one moment dissolved into giggles, camaraderie, and spirited tussles the next.

What makes children so quick to forgive, I wondered? Is it because they live so concretely in the present that they are ready to move on quickly from an offence? How do the brittle insecurities that often mark adult conflicts develop? Are adults cursed with memories that keep track far too long?

Are children's soft and malleable egos less attached to concepts of rightness, saving face and self-protection? Does children's youthfulness mean they are closer to God, having endured less time being shaped by the fallenness of the world? Are they closer to the original spirit of humility God intends for us?

Learning from the Attitude of Christ

It seems evident that Jesus encourages an attitude of humility for cultivating peaceful relationships. Jesus modeled such humility; as the early Christian hymn of Philippians 2 testifies,

“...though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross” (v 5 - 8).

Prayer helps us cultivate such a quality in ourselves.

Group Response

Recall and share experiences where you have observed a childlike or Christlike attitude contribute toward the bond of peace.

Speaking the Truth in Love

Another phrase which emerges in the text supplements the quiet quality of humility. “Speak...the truth in love,” we are counseled in Ephesians 4:14. Now here’s a challenge for us. We may be able to speak the truth and we may be able to love, yet many of us find it difficult to bring the two of them together.

Not wanting to appear judgmental, hurt someone’s feelings or rock the boat, we stay silent and call it love. Worried or angered by another, we speak our truth harshly or with sharp edges. Speaking the truth in love, or speaking from the heart, as it’s known in some conflict resolution circles, is an empowering, enriching tool when wielded skillfully. To do so requires thought, timing, discernment and clarity, gifts given to us through prayer.

When speaking our truth in love, we reduce the chances of being destructive, misunderstood, or misinterpreted. We increase the chances that the other will value our counsel, that the relationship will be stretched and strengthened, and that we ourselves will learn and grow through the dialogue. Speaking the truth in love cannot be underrated.

Using the Matthew 18 Model

Further instructions for peacemaking in communities are spelled out in Matthew 18. Right in our scriptures is a wonderful model for conflict resolution, laid out for us by Jesus hundreds of years ago. The steps of Matthew 18 assume ongoing relationship. In fact it seems to be addressed to Jesus’ followers, a guide for Christians in how to deal with conflicts with other Christians. Matthew 18 also assumes conflict is a natural part of church relations and offers us a framework to address those conflicts.

Imagine the transformation if all Christians committed themselves to the process of Matthew 18. Imagine how church conflicts would be addressed. Imagine how family relations

would be strengthened. Do we want shalom in our churches and families? Follow the teaching we’ve been given.

Take note of the very beginning. Delay your acts of worship! Leave your gift on the altar. The first injunction makes the point that our relationship with God cannot be separate from our relationship with others. God expects us to at least attempt to make peace with our brothers and sisters before proceeding to worship.

Step 1. Go to your brother or sister. That’s right. Go directly to the person with whom you have the conflict. The beginning step involves the two people where the conflict is lodged, and actually many conflicts do get resolved at this level. With a willingness to speak the truth in love, humility, and a desire to listen to the other and be reconciled, many people find they are able to work it out, to resolve differences and to jointly build and enter into more of the shalom God intends for us.

But if it doesn’t work, proceed to...

Step 2. Take one or two others along with you and talk to your sister or brother again. Here the invaluable presence of others has the potential to expand the understanding of the conflict and its resolution. The presence of others can help us

- listen better
- behave better (demonstrate better manners)
- see things differently
- through encouraging us
- by giving us new insights

My friend John once found himself in an unusually prickly situation, so he invited his mother along to a meeting to address the conflict both because of her excellent listening skills and sensitivity, and also, because as he said, “I figured if she was there, I’d be less likely to say something I regretted later.”

What stops us from being true to Jesus’ teaching? Is it fear that binds us from dealing directly with the person with whom we’re in conflict? Do we trust Jesus and his teachings enough to follow, believing that though risky, such faithfulness will lead us to ushering in and receiving the “kin-dom” of God?

Step 3. The conflict resolution team widens to include the whole church. Jesus lays out a process that assumes there is value in conflict being dealt with openly, by those most affected by the conflict. There is value in the wisdom and counsel of the larger church being brought to bear. There is value in the group of people who have committed themselves to following Jesus, to practice love and generosity, discipleship and accountability — there is value in inviting that group of people to discern a way through the conflict. What if all church leaders committed themselves to teaching and practicing this model in our churches?

Group response

Remember situations where Matthew 18 was used appropriately. Remember situations where it was used in a self-righteous or unloving manner. How can we use Matthew 18 lovingly and righteously in our present contexts?

The Matthew 18 passage touches on the mysterious connection between our actions and that which happens in heaven. What we do does **matter** to God and to others. Our actions — the way we treat others and manage our conflicts — has spiritual significance. Our actions can make room for God’s reign or can make it more difficult for God’s reign to be seen/present.

How might Matthew 18 be applied to family conflict? I have witnessed it in many ways.

After acknowledging that this conflict affects one’s ability to worship, we are instructed to speak to the other as honestly and respectfully as possible (Step 1).

Imagine the situation where the following conversations could happen and role play some of the following in your congregation.

Step 1 situations

A: Conflict resolution teachers often use the model, “I feel _____ when you _____ because _____.”

B: A spouse might say, “I feel sad when you work through dinner. It gives you so little time to connect with the rest of us.”

C: A sibling might say, “When you told that story about me at the birthday party, I felt embarrassed; it didn’t present me in the best light.”

D: A young couple I know once spoke clearly to their parents who lived at a distance. “We want you to be a regular part of our children’s lives. We are happy to have such good families to nurture them. Please plan with us so we can jointly build the bonds by scheduling regular visits.”

E: Recently a family member identified her concerns to me this way, “I wish you would be direct in what you want to say because otherwise I get confused about your meaning, and then I feel frustrated.”

Step 2 Scenarios

In step 2, one could involve friends or other family members to give witness and perspective. As described in 2 Cor. 5:18, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, which can be exercised powerfully in our closest relationships. I believe most of our family relationships, particularly our marriages and our parenting, are strengthened by an attitude of openness and engagement with others who support us.

A: Driven to distraction by a sibling’s inscrutable habits? Talk it out with a friend.

B: Feeling at the end of your rope by the incessant demands of young children? Tap the wisdom of other parents who have been there.

C: Unsure you can sustain your marriage commitment? Go to your pastor or attend a marriage enrichment weekend.

D: Self-esteem beleaguered by the rapid-fire hostility of your teenager? Set up a regular coffee time with other parents of teenagers to receive and give support.

E: A counselor or mediator might be engaged to help the two (or more) people in conflict talk with and listen to each other. I have both used and offered such services and can testify to their usefulness in helping transform conflict and bring reconciliation. The principles of Matthew 18 and other Biblical teachings are applicable in many ways.

F: Regarding step 2, I have observed Christians ask the church to walk with them as their marriages disintegrated, as they confronted abuse, and as they sought healing from long and deeply held rivalries. In many cases the willingness of the church to step bravely and sensitively into the fire was a major source of healing and empowerment for those involved.

Sometimes the church needs additional resources and supports to know how to most helpfully assist those who are struggling. Consider the mediation or counseling services in your community, or ask your provincial MCC office for resources.

What we are reminded of in Ephesians 4 and 5, and at other points, is that our life in Christ gives us new life. We are new people and our behaviors — the way we act towards other believers, towards our family members and towards “outsiders” — is shaped by our faith and following Jesus. We are different than the world.

Though human and not yet “complete as our heavenly Father is complete” (Matt 5: 48), we are called to act with humility, with open engagement in our conflicts, with an intention to maintain right relations as integral to our relationship with God. There is no end to the journey, before we lie down for our final rest. As long as we are in relationship with others, we can expect seasons of estrangement, misunderstandings and regular conflict. We can also expect that our Christian tools will guide us during such times.

The Role of Prayer in Conflict Resolution

1. Praying about my conflicts has taught me that prayer is the most successful way I know to melt my hostility and bitterness. Regular prayer balances my peacemaking, and makes it more centred in Christ and more effective. Perhaps, like me, you often find yourself feeling like a victim, the undeserved recipient of someone else’s offenses. Prayer reminds me that carrying intense anger is harmful to myself as well as to others. Prayer reminds me that God loves me and my “offender” equally.

Take note that anger itself is not a sin. Anger is an emotion, given by God like other feelings — joy, concern, peace and

confusion — which enriches our lives by pointing us to knowledge about ourselves and about the divine.

We want to ensure that anger does not dominate us, or get used by us to damage others. In Ephesians 4: 26 we read, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” I am not always successful on the second half of the teaching, yet the point is well made. Anger is okay, but dwelling on it, feeding it or using it destructively is counter to the new life Christ gives to us.

2. Praying about my conflicts has taught me that when I can’t do anything else, I can always pray. I may be unsure whether to speak or to remain silent, whether to speak boldly or indirectly, whether to try one more time to speak to the other person, or to involve one or more others. I may be totally overwhelmed by fear or anger or confusion. I may be blind to any direction to pursue, be stuck or paralyzed. I may feel hopeless, or that my hands are tied.

When I cannot **do** anything or when I am unsure of what to do, praying is a resource that helps me minimize further damage and will (in time) lead me to a path.

3. Praying about my conflicts has taught me that I am not the centre of the universe. A joke I share with some of my family members when we observe self-centred behavior in ourselves or others is to wryly comment, “IAAM” — an acronym for “it’s all about me.” Praying grounds me in the true centre of the universe, the heart of God. In doing so, I gain a much better perspective on who I am and my place in the big picture.

4. Praying about my conflicts has taught me that prayer changes things! Especially me and my attitudes. Also, prayer changes others, often in surprising ways. If I am actively praying for someone with whom I am fighting, or for a conflict situation, I’m more likely to be open to seeing the good in the other person, and to the Spirit’s nudges about positive actions I might take, or positive developments that are present because of the other’s actions (independent of me). Prayer keeps me focused on the positive.

Suggestions for Prayer Group Activity

1. Reflect silently on areas of hostility and bitterness in your personal and congregational life. Bring these before God and ask God to keep those attitudes from harming you and others.
2. Write down some situations where you feel helpless and out of control and offer them to God in prayer. Share these with others if appropriate.
3. Remember that it's all about God's reign and not all about me/you. Ask God to help you maintain a healthy perspective about your part in resolving conflicts you face.
4. Pray actively for someone with whom you are in conflict and watch how prayer can change things.

Suggestions for building Peace through Prayer in your Home

1. Learn and sing along with the song *When God's in Charge*, on the CD "God's Love is for Everybody," by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends. How can putting God in charge help you get along with others?
2. Make a list or a poster of areas of your life where Jesus points you to being a peacemaker in your home and your community.
3. Pray for the courage, the wisdom, strength and grace to speak openly and lovingly about your conflicts to the person involved instead of to others.
4. In your *Prayer: in the Peace of Christ* scrapbook, add a page about how speaking the truth in love helps your family make peace.

Session 4



"...in me you may have peace"

I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. —John 16:33

Music

HWB 368 *O God of Love, O Power of Peace* (Theme song)
 HWB 154 *This is my Father's world*
 HWB 401 *This little light of mine*
 HWB 417 *All who love and serve your city*
 HWB 412 *We shall walk through the valley*
 HWB 409 *What does the Lord require*

Serving God and/or Country?

Like other Christians, Mennonites have ambiguous relationships with their governments. At times in the past and today, Mennonites have experienced persecution, even to the point of death. At other times, governments have offered protection and supported our decision to follow God as we see fit. Some of us have lived through the chaos of anarchy and have a deeply rooted fear of such absence of law and order, which may result in our valuing strong government over other values.

Some of us lean heavily on Biblical passages such as Romans 13:1 and see government as instituted by God and therefore deserving of our respect and obedience. Others turn to Jesus' teaching on "render to Caesar" (Matt. 22:21) and Peter's confession that "we must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5: 29), and claim a stance of critiquing government. Other Mennonites, particularly those who live under oppressive, violent governments, gain strength from reading Revelation. They tend to agree with depictions of government as evil and advocate a stance of resistance.

How do we find our way in the midst of alternative interpretations and varied times? What is our response to government? What is or should be the role of government in our lives? What is the relationship between church and state? How does our faith help us to be good citizens? How does our citizenship in a particular country affect our faith? How do we pray?

I grew up in Pennsylvania, in a part of the United States which often equated God with country. Many people saw no distinction between their loyalty to country and being a faithful Christian. My dad had allegiances in a number of places. He was a registered and typically voting Republican; a card-carrying member of the carpenters' union who valued the union's role in promoting the safety and well-being of workers; and a committed pacifist who actively lobbied for his own CO status during the Korean war and instructed young men in the 70's how to negotiate official recognition of their peace positions with draft officials.

One thing that was clear to my dad was where he placed his ultimate loyalty. In matters of conscience, there was no question in his mind that, as a Christian, he must follow God's command. This key point for Christians is sometimes more obvious to our sisters and brothers living under persecution than it is to us who reside in democratically governed countries.

Biblical references which teach this ultimate value include the previously mentioned Acts 5 passage and Jesus' bold response when some Pharisees urged him to flee because of Herod's intent to kill him. (Luke 13:31-33)

Having said that, it is not always clear when the Christian is called to accommodate and respectfully obey the government, and when the Christian is called to take an oppositional stance. Christians have, in fact, been wrestling with this same question since the early times of the church, sometimes confused themselves and confusing those around them.

Understanding the Issue

1. A basic question appears to be whether the government is acting as God intends, for the good of those it governs. Are basic human rights upheld? Are the poor and the vulnerable protected and cared for? Are people allowed to practice their faith freely? Does the government work towards equality and justice for all? Such governments are more in keeping with God's plan as described in scriptures. (Rom. 13: 1-7, 1 Pet. 2: 13-17)

2. Further, do the leaders of the government understand themselves to be **under** God's sovereignty, or are government officials demanding that individuals place their ultimate loyalty in them — to view them as God-like? Governments who respect the ultimate allegiance that Christians give to God offer less tension for Christians.

3. Finally, Christians observe closely the relationship between the church and state — a separateness that is key in North America but not so in many other parts of the world. We are called rather to see government as one of God's good ordained institutions and the church as another **separate** institution. Doing so invites less blurring of the boundaries between being a citizen of God's kingdom and a citizen of Canada. When such separateness is clear in the minds of Christians and in the expectations of government leaders, it is easier for Christians to live peacefully as citizens of the land.

Ways of Responding

New Testament professor Walter Pilgrim offers the following paradigm to guide church-state relations:

- A critical-constructive stance...*when the powers that be are attempting to achieve justice*

■ A critical-transformative stance... *when authority errs, but can be realistically moved to salutary change*

■ A critically resistant stance... *when the powers are responsible for demonic injustice or idolatry and refuse to be responsible to change* (*Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament*, Fortress, 1999, p 192.)

Pilgrim concludes from his detailed study that even when Christians must resist the government, they do so non-violently, practicing the love of enemy that Jesus modeled.

Whatever government we are living under and whatever response we understand God to be directing us to make towards that government, we are strengthened in our commitment by prayer. As in other aspects of our lives, prayer — conversation with God — helps us to tune into God’s will for us, including our response to our governments.

The Role of Prayer in Responding to Government

1. If we are living under fair and just governments, we pray to:

- thank God for such a government and for the freedom and security it provides for us
- ask God to bless and guide our leaders
- offer thanksgiving when our government acts to bring justice to the poor, and protects the vulnerable
- ask God to remind us of our ultimate loyalty to God, and of our history of how God has redeemed us from slavery
- ask for help in avoiding the idolatry of worshiping the government or trusting in the government or its military for our ultimate security

2. Given that we take our cues from God’s “kin-dom”, from God’s values as demonstrated by Jesus, we will prayerfully discern and always have a somewhat critical stance towards government, what Pilgrim describes as “uneasy neighbors” (in his text noted above). We will ask whether the government is fulfilling God’s mandate of providing for the welfare of all

peoples in its midst, regardless of faith or race, of being humble caretakers of God’s good earth, of protecting the vulnerable — the poor, oppressed, widowed, infirm, and the sojourner.

3. We will pray for help to follow faithfully the laws of the land which do not violate our Christian conscience. We will be good citizens in every way that we can, demonstrating our willingness to follow those who govern — when their demands fit God’s plans.

4. We will thank God for the witness of the martyrs from the past **and today**, whose sacrificed lives testify to the potential of governments to claim our ultimate loyalty — a conflict to which Christians respond by proclaiming their allegiance to God and by relying on God to sustain them, even to the point of death and beyond.

5. We will pray for enlightenment, discernment and strength as we steep ourselves in scripture.

6. We will ask God’s direction to determine where and how we speak to our government to encourage or challenge it to be more in keeping with God’s reign. When called to do so, we will speak out boldly and sensitively and with great humility.

7. We will ask God’s direction to discern when we are called to disobey the laws of the land. While all our prayers are strengthened by having individual and corporate expression, it is especially necessary to have our intentions to practice civil disobedience be evaluated by our praying community. If such direction is affirmed, it is vital for our communities to hold fervently in prayer those individuals and the servants of the state who may be responding to their disobedience. Prayer becomes the ocean that holds all of us in such times.

Group Response

Recall and share the difference that prayer has made or can make in your responses to your government as a Christian citizen.

Finding the Response to which God is Calling Us

Prayer helps us pay attention to the unique paths God would have us follow. As there are many things we **could** be doing, prayer helps us discern what it is God would have **us** doing.

1. Through prayer and discernment, some of us will be drawn to clean up a nearby waterway, or develop neighbourhood centres to give children and youth a safe place to play. Some of us will lobby politicians to avoid military actions, or withhold our taxes which go to support such violence. Some of us will farm to share food with the hungry; others of us will work with legislators and civil servants to develop policies which reduce poverty and increase the resources and status of those who are vulnerable.

2. As witnesses, or in some cases, victims of abuse or violence at the hands of government officials, we may struggle with anger or a desire to wreak revenge. We will pray to conquer the hatred and bitterness in our own hearts, a feat possible only through the grace of God.

3. We will ask for God's help so that we might model Christ-like behavior to strengthen our witness to those who govern. We will pray for the capacity to engage in respectful dialogue, especially with those with whom we disagree.

4. We will ask for God-like eyes that see both the potential and actualized evil present in government structures — the powers— and in the precious human that may be representing the government to us. We will pray for God-like eyes that enable us to see that the people who represent government are children of God, like us.

Suggestions for Prayer Group Activity

1. Reflect silently and then discern together about what areas of witnessing for peace you and your congregation are being called.
2. Think of the areas where you are victimized. Pray that the grace of God will help you conquer and be freed from hatred and bitterness.

3. Pray for the capacity to model Christ-like behaviour and engage in respectful dialogue with all levels of our government.

4. Pray for the ability to see others, and especially those who govern us, from God's perspective; to recognize and affirm the image of God in them as well as the potential and actualized evil that we need to confront.

Suggestions for Overcoming the World with Christ in your Home

1. Sing the songs, *My Voice Alone*, and *When you learn to follow Jesus* on the CD "God's Love is for everybody," by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends.

2. Paint a picture about what this world would look like if everyone lived according to God's values.

3. Write a letter or send an email to your political representative that encourages him/her to make choices that are loving, fair and peaceful.

4. Pray daily for a person/government leader you find hard to forgive. Let God help you share his forgiveness with that person.

Session 5



“...creation waits with eager longing...”

The creation waits with eager longing for the children of God to be revealed. Romans 8:19

Music

HWB 368 *O God of Love, O Power of Peace* (Theme song)

HWB 53 *God of the earth, the sky, the sea*

HWB 90 *For the fruit of all creation*

HWB 148 *By the Waters*

HWB 226 *You are salt for the earth*

Deep Calls to Deep, track 2: *We Hunger for Beauty* by Steve Bell. Available by calling 1-800-854-3499 or at www.signpostmusic.com

God's Faith Inspiring Creation

As I walked my dog on an unusually warm late summer night, I gazed at a full moon with Mars shining bright and red nearby. Just at that moment, high above me, a gull-shaped flock of small white birds swept past, twisting and undulating as if they were riding the thermals. My heart pierced by the beauty of their swift and graceful flight, I stood still, face upward to receive the benediction of God's marvelous creation.

Many of us have been privileged to know such moments. In the fall, Karen can gaze out any window of her Ontario farmhouse to feast on the sight of trees bathed in richly coloured leaves. Walking beside an eastern ocean, with salt-spray moistening her face, Pauline feels God's presence. Winter's white, cold stillness moves Gene to grateful prayers. Phil and his buddies spend a spring weekend annually (the Boys' Birding Bonding Bash) delightedly tracking the amazing variety of migrating birds.

For many, the link between creation and faith is a clear one. As retired pastor Helen Reusser says, "The shortest path between God and a child's heart is through nature." The link between peacemaking and creation may be less clear, though there are many voices helping us to make the connections. Young people often express their concern for and commitment to the environment, seeing that peacemaking extends to how we exist in creation. Older people within our churches often model a decades-long lifestyle of simplicity and frugality, which instructs us how to use less of the earth's resources.

Group Response

Reflect on and share ways that creation has brought you closer to our Creator.

A Biblical Relationship with Creation

Christians desiring a respectful relationship with the rest of creation draw inspiration from these verses from Psalm 85.

"Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps." (Psalm 85:10-13)

As noted previously, shalom, the Hebrew word for holistic peace, is a multi-dimensional and holistic concept. My shalom cannot be realized apart from the shalom of all, including the shalom of all creation. Melvin D. Schmidt, quoted in *Second Mile: A Peace Journey for Congregations*, Pathway A, notes, "The gospel we preach does not stop when it reaches human ears and enters human hearts. Through human hands and feet,

our gospel of resurrection reaches out to endangered species as well as endangered souls.” (Creation Care 4)

Additional reasons Christians have a mandate to make peace with creation

1. God delights in creation, and cares for the well-being of all creatures. Read Genesis 1 to hear the Creator’s pleasure in the earth and its inhabitants. As followers of God, we attempt to act like God; hence our response to creation ought to mirror God’s.

2. Creation also reveals God’s character. Passages such as Romans 1:19-20 and Psalm 148 describe how we see God through creation and how creation praises God.

3. “Human beings **are** creation,” emphasizes Old Testament professor Arthur Walker-Jones (University of Winnipeg). We are inseparable and connected to all of the rest of creation. Our creation from dust (Gen. 2:7) notes how linked we are with the earth. Other parts of Genesis 1 and 2 describe our dependence on and interconnectedness to creation.

Joanne Moyer, writer for MCC’s *Seven Days — It is Still Good* website (www.mcc.org/7days), says, “We tend to think of ourselves as separate and therefore think of the call to peace as applying only to our relationships with humans. But people are integrally a part of the created world. We are creatures also with rocks, trees, birds and fish. Therefore (a) principle...like loving our neighbour applies to the natural world just as much as it applies to people.”

4. In addition, we have a special responsibility and role within creation. Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) professor Dan Epp-Tiessen offers helpful clarification on the context in which Genesis 1 was first written and its meaning for us today. When humans are described as receiving dominion over the animals (Gen. 1:26), they do as those who were created in God’s image. “In the ancient world,” writes Epp-Tiessen, “the king was supposed to reign in such a way as to promote justice and well-being for the nation and its citizens. Both in Israel and in the Ancient Near East, kings were often compared to shepherds whose calling it was to care for their subjects (see Jer. 23: 1-6;

Ezek. 34: 1-6, 23-24). Therefore, if humans are to rule creation in keeping with God’s purpose, then they must tenderly and lovingly care for it.” (*Second Mile: A Peace Journey for Congregations*, Creation Care 3.)

5. Environmentalist and professor (University of Wisconsin) Cal DeWitt writes, “In pursuing justice, peace and integrity of Creation we must give human beings, animals, and land their Sabbath rests (Ex. 23: 10-12); not relentlessly pressing ourselves, others, land, and creatures. Beyond this, our fruitfulness must not be at the expense of the rest of Creation, but must respect God’s blessing also to the other creatures:

‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth; (Gen. 1: 20-21).’”

(For more information on DeWitt and his seasoned, Christian response to earth-keeping, visit www.ausable.org)

6. God’s plan of salvation includes the restoration of creation. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom. 8:22) and “(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...through him and for him...and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Col. 1: 15-23)

“For two thousand years,” notes Cal DeWitt, “Christians have confessed Jesus Christ as the One through Whom all things were made and are sustained (John 1: 1-5 and Col. 1: 15-20). Christians have read believingly that God’s love for the world was so great that God gave Jesus Christ (John 3:16) to suffer, to be obedient to death upon a cross, and to reconcile all things” (Phil. 2: 8; Col. 1: 19-20; 1 Cor. 15).

7. Another link between peace and creation is seen through the negative, devastating effects of war on the earth — the poisoned water, broken land and destruction of wildlife. “Destruction of Creation is contrary to God’s will,” writes DeWitt. “It prompts explicit warnings in Scriptures.” (He cites Ezek. 34: 18 and Is. 5: 8.)

Creation Consciousness Leads us to Prayer and Peacemaking

Prayer often occurs spontaneously and un-selfconsciously as we experience God in creation. (My dad would often burst into a chorus of “How Great Thou Art” when he was moved by some beautiful part of creation, embarrassing his teenagers, yet faithfully praising his God.) We are awed and humbled by the God we glimpse in a soft rosy dawn, in the bright flash of a cardinal against the snow, or in the irresistible scent of honey-suckle — a God who bestows such lavish, abundant gifts on us freely! “Why do we hunger for beauty?” asks the haunting refrain in Steve Bell’s version of Jim Croeggart’s song, tracing the connection between our hunger for God and the beauty of creation.

Our peacemaking is fed by our prayers. Regular, respectful engagement with (the rest of) creation is a form of prayer which grounds and sustains us.

One Labour Day weekend, I was privileged to attend the wedding of two friends at an island camp on Georgian Bay. All of the 140 guests arrived by boat, some of them staying for one or two nights. The day of the wedding dawned sunny and warm with the picture perfect blue sky that often graces Canadian lakes. I had a chance to swim before the wedding, and as we witnessed the couple make their sacred vows I was struck by the oneness I felt with the beautiful creation that surrounded us, the other guests and God. It was a shalom moment, one of the strongest I have ever experienced. Peace prevailed.

Other ways to allow creation to minister to you:

- binding yourself to care for one specific part of creation, be it a family farm, a favourite tree, an endangered species, or a nearby lake or stream
- daily walks to remember the rhythm of the seasons and what each one teaches us
- stargazing
- conducting morning devotions by a window which allows natural light to bathe you

- taking retreats and vacations which engage you with nature. At one silent retreat, I “felt” God in the presence of the moving air — sometimes a gentle breeze, sometimes a gusty wind, yet always present; a powerful experience that continues to comfort and strengthen me today.

- make a creation pledge, possibly one you write, or this one from MCC U.S.

1. *I pledge to walk gently on God’s creation, touching its life with my stewardship.*
 2. *I will try to understand more of the Creator’s message because God speaks to me through creation’s beauty.*
 3. *I will try to discover some new beauty every day.*
 4. *I will observe the sunrise and sunset from special vantage points.*
 5. *I will examine the snowflakes under a magnifying glass.*
 6. *I will listen for the music of the universe in water flowing over rocks, wind blowing through trees, raindrops pattering on the roof, and birds singing.*
 7. *I will take the time to smell the fragrance of flowers, fresh rain on dry ground, the ocean’s salt spray.*
 8. *I will savour each bite of food and recall that many of God’s children never have enough food to satisfy their hunger.*
 9. *I will spend time with a young child walking hand in hand.*
- (Trek: Venture into a World of Enough)*

Praying for Peace with the Land

Perhaps our main prayer is one of confession. For we have blown it, and the mess in our natural world today has much to do with our wrongdoing. Many of us feel creation concerns are too overwhelming and depressing even to consider. The course we are on is killing **us** — a sobering prospect; humans cannot live in a world without clean air and clean water. Maybe our first prayer is to acknowledge our hopelessness and seek God’s help to strengthen our weak hearts, and fortify our souls for the task that lies ahead.

If we want to be faithful Christians, if we want to experience shalom, the only option is to confess to God our sins in abusing creation, to ask for forgiveness, and to take steps to honour the good earth God has entrusted to us.

Consider these words from children who were asked, “Why save endangered species?”

“Because God gave us animals,” wrote Gabriel.

“Because we love them,” Travis and Gina responded.

“Because we will be lonely without them,” a third answered.

“Because they’re part of our life. If we didn’t have them, it would not be a complete world. The Lord put them on earth to be enjoyed, not destroyed.”

As the author summarized, “The children are expressing the moral and spiritual imperative that there may be a higher purpose inherent in creation, a purpose that demands our respect and our stewardship quite apart from whether a particular species is or ever will be of material use to humankind.” (“The Spiritual Value of Children,” from *Target Earth Newsletter*, quoted in *Second Mile: A Peace Journey for Congregations*, Pathway A, Creation Care 2.) May we become like children.

In conclusion, a word from the aboriginal community. The Grassy Narrows reserve in northern Ontario lies in a beautiful wilderness of old trees and rushing rivers. For decades now, the people have suffered from the effects of relocation, mercury poisoning from a paper mill, and flooding by Ontario hydro. Their traditional lifestyle has eroded and with pressure from loggers, they are increasingly at risk. Many use the term “genocide” to describe their struggle. Correspondingly, people have protested the impact of such destruction on their lives, specifically trying to halt the destruction that comes from clear-cutting the forests. Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) have joined them.

CPT’er Matthew Schaaf related one of the gifts the aboriginal community offers to European Canadians through the words of one elder speaking to a reporter about the Grassy Narrows protests. “We are doing this for the white people, too,” he said. “We are the older brothers and sisters. We know that the trees are the lungs of the earth; we humans need the trees. We want to protect them. And we want the white people, the younger brothers and sisters, to know this too.”

May God give us expansive hearts to live peaceably **in** creation.

Suggestions for Prayer Group Activity:

1. Spend time giving thanks to God for the many gifts of creation.
2. Reflect silently on ways our society abuses creation. Confess our corporate guilt and ask God to help us rebuild a more biblical relationship with creation.
3. Reflect silently and then create an appropriate “Peace with Creation” pledge you could share with your congregation. Say it together prayerfully.
4. Acknowledge the hopelessness you may feel about your part in restoring creation to what God intended. Ask for God to strengthen our weak hearts, fortify our souls and feed our imaginations to fit us for the tasks that lie ahead.

Suggestions for Encouraging Creation Care in your Home

1. Listen to the instrumental piece *God’s Family*, on the CD “God’s Love is for everybody,” by Bryan Moyer Suderman and friends and meditate on the good gifts of creation. How do you think God felt after creating the world?
2. Begin planning a camping trip for the spring time that will honour God’s good earth.
3. Pick favourite scripture passages that describe how God speaks to us through creation. Read them and draw pictures for each verse.
4. Visit MCC’s Seven Days – It is Still Good website (www.mcc.org/7days) and begin a virtual pilgrimage that will help you and your family care for God’s earth.

From the introduction:

As peacemakers, we are invited to show the world a better way of dealing with conflict. This can be overwhelming as we seek to bring the peace witness to the varied contexts that lack peace, and often lack it desperately. Prayer can strengthen, form and sustain us with the vision of the ultimate reality of God's Kingdom, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

May we claim for ourselves the words Jesus spoke to his first disciples: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." —John 16:33

—Elsie Rempel, Director, Education and Nurture,
Mennonite Church Canada Formation

About the author:

Born in Pennsylvania, Melissa Miller settled in southern Ontario where she worked as a counselor for Shalom Counseling Services in Kitchener, as an author, public speaker and active lay leader in the Mannheim Mennonite Church. In 1994, Melissa wrote the book, *Family Violence: The Compassionate Church Responds*. Several years ago she was transplanted onto the Manitoba prairies when her husband, Dean Peachey, became part of the Administrative team of Canadian Mennonite University. They are the parents of a teenage son. Melissa has joined Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, where she is currently leading a Bible Study group. She also operates *Family Ties*, a counseling service, and continues her part time theological studies at AMBS.



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

600 Shaftesbury Blvd
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4
Toll free 1-866-888-6785
T: 204-888-6781
F: 204-831-5675
E: office@mennonitechurch.ca
W: www.mennonitechurch.ca