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— A Guide for Study and Discussion —

ANGLICAN WOMEN  
AT PRAYER

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## THE SACRED THREAD WEAVING OUR BONDS OF AFFECTION

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ELEANOR RUTH SANDERSON

### *Summary*

With tenderness, Eleanor shares stories of her journeys with women in the Pacific and Africa. In her travels she experienced the centrality of weaving that binds the lives of indigenous peoples. Each cultural context enriches the metaphor of weaving: The Maori speak of *Te Aho Tapu*, the thread that never ends. A community in Fiji wove Sanderson a ceremonial mat used during her ordination that expresses the belonging to both past and present community. Sanderson listened to stories Anglican women in Tonga who weave mats and make tapa and garlands in the midst of intercessory prayer. The women in Tanzania gave her a basket that symbolized their fellowship. For Sanderson, “It is in being bound together, in being woven together that the sacredness of life is found.”

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Sanderson identifies weaving, being bound together, and affection as three threads of the 2014 conference “Anglican Women at Prayer.” Describe each of these threads in your own words. What are the sacred threads in your own life and the life of your community? How do they bind you to others and engender affection?
2. Sanderson shares her experience of sitting on a mat as part of the liturgy in which she was ordained. Such inculturation is a divergence from normative practices of ordination and honors the incarnational nature of worship and faith. What are the ways your particular cultural context is expressed in worship in your faith community? How does this bind your community to faith communities in other cultural contexts?
3. One of the women in the Tanzanian community shared, “Our hearts are our homes and our homes are our hearts. If our homes are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our hearts and if our hearts are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our homes.” What might this suggest about welcoming the stranger into your heart and home?

## PRAYER AS THE “LIFELINE OF THEOLOGY”

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MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

### *Summary*

Drawing upon a distinction made famous by the philosopher Bertrand Russell, Marilyn McCord Adams argues that theologians should come to know God “by acquaintance,” that is, through prayer. In a striking definition, Adams sums up prayer as “simply a way of being in the world with God.” Just as friends or partners or families build up lifetimes of intimacy through shared experience, through discussion and debate, through facing sorrows and joys together, so believers come to be “tangled up” with God through a lifetime of pilgrimage with the *Ens Realissimum*, the Most Real Being. Of course, the analogies break down: God and human creatures cannot share an intimacy or equality as do human partners; “God is very, very big, and human beings very, very small.” But the aim of a life of prayer is to reorder our subjectivity and attune us with God’s own passion and compassion, so that we take our share in the divine plan for the world and grow into our full stature as self-transcending creatures. Now it may seem that such emphasis upon prayer and its disciplines would make theology hopelessly subjective: “I pray, so I know God’s will like the back of my hand.” Not so, Adams writes. A lifetime of being in the world with God should make us more alive to the insights and corrections and dignities of others, keeping our “compassion raw,” and our spiritual senses sharp and alive.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Is prayer a form of knowledge, an “acquaintance” with God (rather than knowledge “under a description”)? Do we build up experiences with God much as we do with our human intimates? How might those experiences differ from our human relationships?
2. Do you think theology belongs in the modern university as a form of “realism”—preoccupation with Reality “with a capital R”? Who should study theology today? Why might the study of theology be important in a university or college setting?
3. Adams makes some daring claims about life with God: that we are to be “junior partners in a family business”; that God can appear at times to be like an “abusive Bedouin husband”; that “holiness is catching.” What do you make of these claims?

## MOTHERING SOULS: A VOCATION OF INTERCESSION

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DONYELLE CHARLOTTE MCCRAY

### *Summary*

Prayer is a profoundly democratic event; it waits not on hierarchy or office but on the power and call of the Spirit. In this eloquent essay, Donyelle McCray sets out the lay vocation of intercession by church mothers, an honored office within the Black church. Drawing on oral histories as well as biography and literature, McCray captures the vivid spiritual power of several well-known church mothers: Mrs. Mortley, Ida B. Wells, Mother Pollard, and Mattie Hopkins. In a striking phrase, McCray sums up the church mother as a woman who “lives behind an invisible *prie-dieu*.” Her office is to intercede, especially for those who suffer, and to extend the word of hope to the desperate, those “with their backs against the wall,” as Howard Thurman said. Such women were marginal to centers of authority and rank, but in no way powerless! They dissented, prodded, challenged, oversaw, knew. They followed some traditional patterns of spiritual authority: longevity, stability of place, holiness, and discernment. The task of the church, McCray concludes, is to “honor their vocation and tell their stories,” to take their gifts and witness with full seriousness, and to wait on the Holy Spirit to raise up the next generation, for the church and for the world.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. How has ministry “at the margins” been both a source of authority and of invisibility, in your experience? McCray suggests that “by resting on the Holy Spirit’s anointing rather than rank, education, personal charisma, or talent, the church mother announced the liberative possibilities within Christianity.” How have you seen these possibilities identified in your church?
2. McCray draws our attention to the intersection of gender and race in the vocation of church mother. How do you see these elements of human and social life expressed in these women’s lives? How do you see them in the lives of other female leaders in the church?
3. McCray notes that these spiritual leaders were not “nice little old ladies,” but rather women of power, courage, and resilience. In what ways does the life of prayer contribute to this daring, strength, and hope? How might this stand in contrast to the prayer life of the prisoners Ida B. Wells discovered praying for death rather than freedom? How has prayer shaped your own perspectives and actions?

A PASSION FOR INTERCESSORY PRAYER:  
THE HISTORIC VOCATION OF THE  
SOCIETY OF THE COMPANIONS OF THE HOLY CROSS

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FREDRICA HARRIS THOMPSETT

*Summary*

Fredrica Harris Thompsett chronicles the history of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, a community of over eight hundred women dedicated to a life of simplicity, thanksgiving, and intercession. The commitments of the Society's "founding pillars," Emily Malbone Morgan and Vida Dutton Scudder, to an informed life of prayer, advocacy, and works of mercy and justice has shaped the life of the Society, which is largely situated in Northern America. The 2014 conference "Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection" sought to cross these boundaries and to broaden the community of women who pray for one another in their particular contexts. Thompsett encourages the Companions to continue this effort to expand their ministry and to serve as a resource to strengthen the "bonds of affection" within the Anglican Communion.

*Questions for Discussion*

1. The Society's Intercession Paper (IP) is a monthly publication for the Companions to guide their daily prayers. The prayers are organized into seven categories: thanksgiving, mission in God's world, unity of all God's people, social justice, peace and reconciliation, growth in the spiritual life, and personal needs. What particular issues of today are in need of prayer in each area? How might you pray for each?
2. Emily Morgan wrote annual letters to the Companions. Establishing a library is among the first items mentioned in her inaugural letter in 1895. What does this priority suggest about the character of the Society? How might this valuing of education and informed knowledge of the world affect a commitment to follow the cross and to practice simplicity, thanksgiving, and intercession? Are these values you share? How might you enact them in your life as individuals and as a community?
3. From your reading of the article, what binds the individual members in the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross in their differences? How might this inform what can sustain the common life among diverse provinces of the Anglican Communion?

FROM DIS-BODIED DISCIPLESHIP TO  
EMBODIED RELATIONALITY:  
EXPERIENTIAL FORMATION IN THE LIFE OF PRAYER

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ERICE FAIRBROTHER

*Summary*

Eric Fairbrother turns our attention from the contemporary preoccupation with relying on the wisdom of prayer experts to the internal wisdom of our lives as the primary source of prayer. The art of listening to one's life in context is what brings us to intimacy with God. Fairbrother ends by introducing the Emmanuel Prayer, a practice of inner listening to God that enables "hearing with the heart" in a time-poor society.

*Questions for Discussion*

1. Find a relaxing position, such as sitting down on a chair with two feet firmly on the ground or sitting on the floor. Breathe in while saying, "Come, O Come." Breathe out while saying, "Emmanuel." Acknowledge any thoughts that might come to you during this prayer, and gently let them go. After five minutes open your eyes, and gradually awaken yourself to your surroundings. Without judgment, name how you felt during this prayer and receive it with thanksgiving. You may choose to do this exercise each day for a week and gently notice how your experience may have changed.
2. Fairbrother reminds us that St. Benedict called the brothers to "listen with the ears of their hearts." This image comes from 1 Kings 3:9, when Solomon asks God for wisdom, also translated as a "hearing heart." How might wisdom and a hearing heart be related? How might you cultivate a "hearing heart"?
3. Thousands of websites online offer short verses and prayers of inspiration. While these may inform our prayer, praying with the real "stuff" of our lives engenders intimacy with God that is a gift of the presence of God and self. What from your life this past week could be the source of your prayer?

## WILL YOU PRAY?

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FLORENCE MAY MEI JEE

### *Summary*

Praying in public can be an uncomfortable proposition, yet it need not be so. Florence May Mei Jee offers her own stories of discomfort with public prayer as well as times of honest thanksgiving and petitions. She lists with stark honesty, and quickly dismisses, seven reasons people resist praying in public. With encouragement and admonition, she leaves no reason not to get “online with God.”

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Florence May Mei Jee identifies two times people are prompted to pray: facing death and “at wit’s end.” In a recent book Anne Lamott identifies three essential prayers: help, thanks, and wow. What circumstances inspire or compel you to pray? What words would you use to describe your prayers at those times? In what way does your prayer reflect your relationship with God?
2. The structure of a collect—a form for common prayer—can provide a helpful framework for praying in public. The framework is this:

Line 1      God who \_\_\_\_\_ :  
*(characteristics of God or actions God takes)*

Line 2      We thank you for \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
*(gifts God has granted you, your community, or the world)*

Line 3      So that we might \_\_\_\_\_ .  
*(how you might use those gifts for the glory of God)*

Write a prayer using this framework based on your concerns or thanksgivings on this day. Share this prayer with your group. Consider writing a group collect by asking members to add a variety of items to each line. Here is an example:

God who *formed the earth and all that is in it:*  
We thank you for *bringing the springtime breezes, buds, and rain,*  
so that we might *join you in caring for all creation in our daily lives.*

3. Florence May Mei Jee lists seven common reasons people resist praying in public. Which ones ring true for you? What are some simple, practical ways you might begin to overcome these obstacles?

## THE DIVINE CALL TO BE MYSELF: ANGLICAN TRANSGENDER WOMEN AND PRAYER

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ELLEN CLARK-KING

### *Summary*

Ellen Clark-King shares the voices of six transgender Anglican women who reflect on their lives of prayer as they journeyed in transition. The women engaged with astounding honesty with self and God toward the integration of their inner and outer selves. The stories of these women testify to the deeply incarnational nature of the Christian faith and challenge.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. The transgender Anglican women shared their journey of prayer as they relate to identity. What in your life resonates with their stories? Name a time of transition in your life. Remembering that it is natural to experience both consolation and desolation in prayer, how would you describe your relationship with God through prayer at that time?

2. During the time of transitioning, Rebecca found assurance of God's love in prayerful reflection of Psalm 139. Read Psalm 139:1–18 and return to these verses:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. (vv. 13–14)

What word or phrase from these verses stands out to you today? In what ways has God revealed to you that you are “fearfully and wonderfully made”? For those reflecting as a group, divide into twos or threes to share your reflections.

3. The reflections of the transgender women remind us of the radical embodied nature of our faith. In what ways does your faith community recognize and celebrate the body? What liturgies or study/prayer groups or faith formation programs might broaden that sense of embodiment?

“WE PRAY FOR THE DEATH OF ‘GOD’”:  
SOUTHERN AFRICAN WOMEN IN PRAYER

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GCEBILE GINA

*Summary*

Gcebile Gina, a South African theologian, makes the bold claim that prayer to a deity perched atop a chain of hierarchy and abuse is prayer to an idol. In workshop and interview, in historical example and protest, Gina discovers Anglican women praying for deliverance from a god who sanctions their degradation, rape, and suffering. They pray that this “god” will be exposed, unseated, superseded by the true and living God, the God of Jesus Christ, who is the voice and champion of the oppressed. This is a God who shields the powerless and feeds the hungry with his very life. Prayer to this God is Mary’s prayer: to cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Such prayer is the ground and dynamism of liberation, the struggle for freedom and human dignity that is the true vocation of Christians. Gina contrasts the spirit of this revolutionary movement—the spirit of *imbokodo*—with the “wildly romanticized” spirit of *Ubuntu*, a notion still infected, Gina reports, with hierarchy and abuse. To pray with and for women in South Africa and Liberia is to pray for deliverance from all oppression, and for the birth of the true liberty of the children of God.

*Questions for Discussion*

1. Gina notes the lasting scars of class and race within the women’s movement. In what ways do think prayer could be a form of healing and repentance for such scars?
2. Have you prayed to or feared false gods? What or who might they be? How did you come to be liberated from them and discover the true God? What false gods do you still fear?
3. “Persons in relation” has been praised in recent years as an antidote to Western individualism and atomism. Gina dissents from this view. She suggests we must look instead to a God “who is at the periphery with them and who takes seriously this periphery as central in God’s own relation to humanity,” a God who thus overcomes male violence and bigotry. How do you balance autonomy and interdependence in your own life? Where have you found Christian teaching on obedience and liberation that was life-giving and true?

## THE VISUAL IMAGE AS A MEANS OF PRAYER

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MARGARET ADAMS PARKER

### *Summary*

As verbal creatures, we human beings are tempted to reduce all things to words, even prayer. Margaret Adams Parker resists that temptation with a wide-ranging and graceful account of art as visual prayer. Her essay aims to develop a “theological model for visual prayer,” drawing upon the typology of prayer—lament, contemplation, intercession—and the rich association of image with sacrament and, at greater remove, with icon. Women’s prayers, Parker notes, have largely gone unheralded, as have visual prayers in general. The conference “Anglican Women at Prayer” included an exhibit (curated and juried in part by Parker) by the same name: two remedies to the silence that has greeted women’s creative and spiritual expressions. Parker comments on several images from the exhibition, placing them within the larger vocabulary of Western artistic tradition, and tying them to the practice of prayer. She concludes with the persistent search for the inner life of the artist whose work is prayer: can the image speak when the artist cannot (*ex opere operato*), as we see in the haunting life of Caravaggio? Or is it better to say, as Parker does, that in the end, all prayer, all image returns “to silence”?

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. Have you found images a channel or an obstacle to prayer? If a channel, what painting or sculpture or icon has led you deeper into prayer? If an obstacle, what verbal or sightless practice has been more welcoming of prayer?
2. Parker has placed images by women artists within the long high-culture tradition of Western art, executed by and large by men. Do you see a difference in these images across gender lines? If so, how might you account for that difference? Is it religiously significant?
3. Do you agree with the bold claim that “it would be safer to turn to geniuses without faith than believers without talent”? What would you say is the proper relationship of the inner life of an artist to the work that he or she produces? How does that relationship apply to all Christians in their daily life and work?