

Prayer lab: We need living models

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Prayer can be taught. Indeed, learning to pray is the quintessential means of learning how to be Christ's disciples. It is no coincidence that Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer appears in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' manual for godly living. When we pray "Thy kingdom come," we are asking for divine assistance to help us realize what Jesus taught his disciples in the rest of the sermon. In uttering the petition "Give us this day our daily bread," we're acknowledging that provisions for our daily needs come to us as gifts from God. We need not worry about what we will eat or what we will drink. God will provide.

Over the past 20 or 30 years many Protestant seminaries have instituted spiritual formation programs that introduce the spiritual disciplines, including prayer, to their students. Borrowing from the history of Catholic spiritual formation, these programs are considered an essential aspect of preparation for ministry, alongside learning the classical disciplines of biblical, theological and practical studies. As a consequence of these formation programs, it is not unusual to hear seminarians confess that it was in seminary that they learned how to pray for the first time—or learned how to pray all over again.

There may never have been as many aids for learning to pray as there are today: a plethora of books on how to pray and myriad books containing prayers; spiritual directors to help one mature in a life of prayer; and retreats where one can learn from others the rhythms and patterns of prayer, including silence and contemplative prayer. But ironically, the people who avail themselves of these resources are usually those who already have an active prayer life. All these resources may be helping to create two kinds of Christians: those for whom prayer is a way of life, and those who may say grace before meals but otherwise pray only when they or their loved ones are in a tight spot.

These two tiers of Christians are much less likely to be found, however, in congregations that have experienced revitalization through a recovery of ancient Christian practices like attending to the church year, maintaining a vital liturgical life

and using contemplative forms of prayer, including meditation and daily offices. These congregations see themselves as laboratories of prayer, where members help one another to connect to our Creator both corporately and individually. In her article “Power line” (p. 30), Marilyn McEntyre suggests one strategy: forming small groups in which participants learn from others what works for them in prayer.

Yes, prayer can be taught. But it can also be caught. We need living models—individuals whose exemplary life of prayer can show the rest of us the way.