Reconciled in worship: An accidental ecumenism

by Ryan McDermott in the January 27, 2004 issue

When my wife, Darrah, and I met Andy in the Los Angeles airport, we thought we would never have a real conversation with him. This tall, muscular guy nonchalantly palmed a Bible as if he were pacing across the stage of a megachurch. But we soon realized that we would talk with him again, and soon. We were all missionaries, and we were all on our way to teach English at the same university in central China.

As we waited for our flight, Andy raved about the book *Wild at Heart*, a pop-Christian version of *Men Are from Mars*, *Women Are from Venus*.

“It says that every man desires three things,” he said, his bright blue eyes burning into mine as he held up a huge hand and began counting them off. “A battle to fight, an adventure to live and a beauty to rescue.”

Darrah and I squirmed under his gaze, mumbled something like, “Surely all men don’t want the same thing,” and walked away rolling our eyes. I had grown up in the evangelical mainstream, but I turned away from that tradition at an evangelical college where McChristianity diluted the gospel into pop therapy. My wife grew up Southern Baptist, knowing she should have “a personal relationship” with Jesus Christ, but never quite discovering what that meant. In college we quickly became high critics of low-church America, and directed our newfound intellectual powers at all the easy evangelical targets.

We married, were confirmed in the Episcopal Church and accepted an assignment to China as missionaries of the Diocese of West Virginia. We were confident that our Anglican tradition was the ideal vessel for faith in Christ—sacramental, communal and biblical in the fullest way.

But then we met our 45 fellow foreign teachers, most of them evangelicals from Bible churches in right-wing America. Having cut ties with a pop-evangelical expression of Christian faith, how would we ever commune with all these *World* magazine readers?

These questions became urgent when some of the teachers began forming a fellowship that met Sunday nights (separate from the official Chinese Three-Self church we attended Sunday mornings). The leaders were theologically averse to structured authority, so they invited all of us to “share a message as the Spirit led.” Some shared wacky teachings about the End Times and “new teachings” of prophecy that the Holy Spirit had revealed to them. One time the service lasted over two hours as three unscheduled speakers got up to throw in the Holy Spirit’s two cents’ worth.

We had expected culture shock in China, and the stares and constant shouts of “Laowai!” (Foreigner!) from the Chinese followed us wherever we went. But we were more shocked by our fellow Westerners. We woke up one day to realize that we were living, working, eating and worshiping with a segment of Christian culture that we had no idea how to relate to. Discouraged and feeling alienated, we continued to attend the Sunday evening services, but winced through the facile praise songs and cringed at talk about the Eucharist as “a nice symbol.”

We began praying for members of the community who rubbed us the wrong way, and we found that our prayers bounced back at us, saying, in effect, “They *might* change, but you *must* change.” I gradually let go of a resistance to leading in worship—a grudge that I had been holding against the egalitarian, free-form style of the fellowship—and suggested having the Eucharist every week. Several members of the community embraced this idea, so Darrah and I began leading a vesper service every Thursday evening.

At first the only people who attended were Diane, who had recently become a member of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod; Victor and Annie, Catholics of Eastern European origin; and Mary Alice, a cradle Episcopalian who had been in and out of nondenominational churches for the past 20 years. All of them were old enough to be our grandparents.

When all of our “members” attended, we felt the support of a like-minded community whose members had faith that reading scripture and saying time-honored prayers was better than emotive, electric-guitar worship music. When time allowed, Darrah led us in a hymn on the flute she had played in high school. All in all, it was pleasant, peaceful and good.

We did not consider inviting the others to our service. When Andy asked me where I was going I said I was going to a meeting. If I had said I was going to vespers, he would have felt guilty for not going, for not “sharing with a brother,” and I didn’t want him to attend out of guilt; I would have felt patronized. Besides, about a third of the teachers described themselves as Spirit-filled, which told us something about what they thought of us “spirits-filled” Episcopalians.

But one week Darrah and I let it slip—I to Andy and she to Lynn, another cradle Episcopalian now connected to Northern California Vineyard-style activist churches. They showed up with nervous grins. We timidly gave them the handout we used and asked each to do a reading. We explained that we shared the lectionary reading for the coming Sunday, which put us on the same page with about 1 billion Christians around the world. We told them how some of the prayers have been prayed by saints through the centuries. We showed them how “the people” read the parts in bold type.

The small group, and our role as leaders, allowed Darrah and me to do what we’d always wanted to do with the prayers of the people—extend the period for silence and personal intercession between each of the items of the prayers. Until this particular evening, our small group of traditionalists had observed these silences reverently, occasionally whispering the name of someone we specifically wished to include in the prayer. But on this evening, when we came to the first silence after a prayer for peace, Andy began fervently to pray for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Iraq. After a prayer for the sick, as the rest of us mumbled names, Lynn prayed—and asked the rest of us to join her in prayer—for her ex-husband who had just had a stroke. As Andy and Lynn prayed the way they knew how to pray, the rest of us began to join in, realizing that in our silence we had been isolating our prayers.

We happened to be praying a form of the prayers of the people that had a fill-in-the-blank prayer. I usually skipped this item, but Andy and Lynn reminded me of the very personal nature of our prayers, so I asked for personal prayer requests that we could all remember to include throughout the week. Everybody, it seemed, had something on his or her heart that would not have been revealed otherwise. At the end of the service, we all felt that the Spirit had moved us and transformed our staid little liturgy. Andy slapped me on the back and said, “That was awesome, man. Awesome!”

After that the vesper service drew teachers from a wide variety of nondenominational groups. Although at first the liturgy seemed weird and confining to them, they were also struck by the richness of the prayers, the grand, comprehensive structure that pulls people out of their habitual prayer ruts. Meanwhile, they made us realize that liturgy can be an excuse not to really pray, not to open oneself completely to the presence of God, not to knock loudly at the door.

While these insights are nothing new, the way our liturgical community developed can, I believe, be a good model for high-church types who would like to be in closer communion with nondenominational, low-church evangelicals who, according to a recent Gallup poll, constitute nearly 40 percent of the American population.

In the intimate fellowship of prayer, we can transcend stylistic and doctrinal differences and learn from each other. High-church types learn that the language of the personal relationship with Jesus Christ is more than smarmy emotionalism for many evangelicals. Many take up their crosses to follow Christ daily, are attuned to the leading of the Holy Spirit, seek Christ in word and are prepared to seek him in sacrament as well.

In return, mainline churches can offer the structure of the liturgy, which provides a neutral ground in which intimate, interpersonal communication can take root and grow. The wonderful gift of liturgy, and especially of the daily offices, is that it develops organically, adapting to the people it serves as it grows. For example, on Ash Wednesday we held our first major liturgical service, which about 20 people of all ages attended. After the lectionary readings, I began to speak about connections between the texts. Colleen—who is known for praying aloud while she runs stairs, her laps getting faster the harder she prays—jumped in and made an observation. I wasn’t expecting a discussion, but it shouldn’t have been a surprise. Others responded to Colleen, and after several minutes of this I realized I was experiencing something completely unknown to me—a dialectical homily.

For the rest of our Lenten services we made room for this short, rewarding time between the readings and prayers. We set the tone by concentrating on the unity of the readings, and stressed that the lectionary texts were specially chosen to complement each other. The result was often the kind of dialectical exercise in synthesis that every professor of literature hopes to inspire in her class. Listening to the others’ comments, I came to understand them better as people, to pray for them more insightfully, and was encouraged by their very personal, deliberately lived faith

in Christ. Darrah and I found reconciliation by transcending stylistic and theological differences through the sharing of prayer and the word. So did Lynn, an antiabortion, antitax pacifist and environmental activist who often butted heads with Loralea, a quiet prayer warrior who believes in submitting to all authority. Their relationship improved when they began praying together at our Lenten services, where the liturgy provided neutral ground.

The highlight of our liturgical year was the Maundy Thursday service (the teachers' fellowship having claimed Good Friday and Easter). Darrah and I love the Maundy Thursday liturgy; to us it has the raw dramatic power of an Aeschylus tragedy. So we approached the day with a sense of loss. Instead of a stone church we had a sterile meeting room; instead of an altar, Formica conference tables. Our cross was two knitting needles conjoined by a length of yarn. The candles had already been used during our frequent power outages. Moreover, we were sure our announcement of foot washing would scare most people away.

But they came. The youngest person was four, the oldest about 60. They came outfitted with basins, soap, fragrant oils, washcloths. None of this symbolic foot rinsing for them. They scrubbed and massaged. They anointed with oil. They laughed and prayed and splashed. Then, as Darrah cleaned up, I lit candles and began the solemn readings and prayers. Darrah's tidying had the effect of stripping the altar. The brightly colored cloths and bars of soap disappeared. The splashed water, Christ's antepenultimate symbol of service, was soaked up. We draped the crossed knitting needles with a cheap pink dishcloth. The fluorescent lights went out. Finally, after the prayers, we blew out our candles and walked out together in silence.

Andy became one of my best friends. We met every week to pray together, sometimes forgetting the time, praying for a couple hours and missing appointments. Through him I began learning what it means to take up your cross every day and follow Christ. On Maundy Thursday we washed each other's feet. While he was rubbing soap between my toes, he looked up and said, "Hey, you remember that first day in the airport? We've come a long way, bro."

"Yes," I said. And I told him just how far I had come.