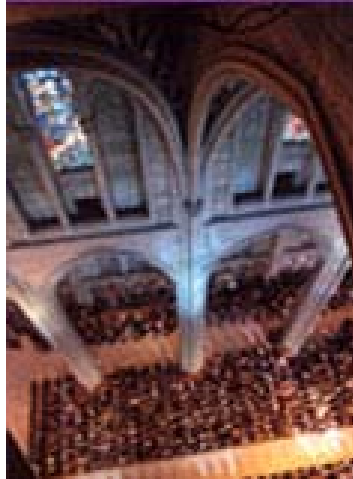


# 5. Community



A worship service at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA

**How do the discoveries we've made so far about our *own* prayer lives apply to the prayer lives of our *congregations*?**

- In what ways should praying for the world be integrated into our worship? Are we satisfied with what we are doing now?
- Who comes to pray for the world?
- Where are we blind to the needs of others?

## Coming together to pray

And so we turn, from personal prayers about world affairs, to the prayers of the gathered people of God. The prayers we offer in prayer partnerships, small prayer circles, and the ones we name in church.

And because this is a course in prayer, I have to challenge some of what we do—at least enough to ask if there are ways we can do it better.



Church service right after war broke out between U.S. and Iraq.

I have to challenge our fears that often keep us from suggesting prayer as we face difficult questions and discomfoting international needs and issues. The same people who would readily spontaneously offer to pray with a friend who is in personal pain, often hold back from suggesting prayer when in the presence of those who are troubled by what's happening in the world.



Sister Rose Stiet (lower left) leads a prayer vigil for 24-year-old Terrill Anderson Metcalf, who was shot and killed in Milwaukee. (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel 5/30/02 – photo by Elizabeth Flores)

It's understandable that we don't quite know how to integrate praying for the needs of the world into our common worship and daily relationships:

- Bedeviled by the extremes of the “social action” church on one side--and the “personal piety” church on the other...
- Trying to avoid overstepping our bounds into the political arena...
- Afraid of offending members...
- Belonging to denominations where it is “un-Christian” to question certain moral stands laid down by authority—or unwilling to take a moral stand for fear of being grouped with those rigid churches...
- Remembering the horrors carried out in the name of religion and struggling to reconcile the God who assists the Israelites in slaughtering the Canaanites, Hivites and Hittites, including women and children--with the One who commanded justice for the poor, widows, orphans, strangers and aliens...
- Surrounded by people who buy into the idea that they should choose a church that “meets their needs” for comfort, entertainment and “relevance” to their family and work lives...

- Constrained by time limits for worship services, into which we have to also fit reverence, awe, healing, petition, stewardship, fellowship, announcements and church housekeeping...

Yes, it's understandable that we don't quite know where praying for the world quite fits in. We end up, often, relegating the needs of the world to a short phrase or two during prayers of the people, a generic prayer for peace, the poor, the hungry, the sick, those in prison. And to collecting an occasional special offering.

***In other words, as faith communities, we generally pray for the world in exactly those ways that most people find personally to be least meaningful!***

With that as the model most church-goers are exposed to, comfortable with, and expect, can we—and should we—deepen our corporate prayers for the world?



Muslim pilgrims on the Hajj, sunset prayers at the top of Jabal al-Nour (Mountain of Light) above the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. (Amr Nabil / AP)

## For Whom Should We Care?

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

*--Matthew 15:21-24*



Jesus and the Woman of Canaan, by Rembrandt van Rijn (1660)

### **Stop right there.**

Because, like it or not, that is our story.

**Oh, most of us aren't so blatant and obnoxious about it.  
We're not the ones who say things like:**

"We shouldn't be spending so much on foreign aid,  
when we have our own needs right here."

"I worked hard for my money. Why should I waste part of it  
on people who screwed up their own lives?"

"We need to buy stuff that's made in this country and stop sending  
all our money and jobs overseas."

"There are plenty of agencies already serving in that area,  
no reason for me to get involved."

**But when it comes to our prayer lives, yes, we do.**

Not in so many words. Not with intention to ignore others.

In fact, we generally pride ourselves on caring for *everyone*, everywhere.

**But we're human.**

And when someone we love is critically ill, it's as if we're trying with all our heart and body and soul to pour health back into them. It's as if we won't be able to fully breathe again until they're well.

And if there's a sudden death in the congregation, or a catastrophe affecting people we know, shock and mourning take over, absorbing all our energy.  
Even at the good times, the exciting times, the busy times—we get caught up in the church building campaign, the preparations for the yard sale, or the centennial celebration.

**There is nothing left for the rest of the world.**

We may know that we *ought* to be praying for the world—but we just can't right now.  
Or maybe we even snap at anyone who suggests it.  
Or maybe—maybe—we just get into the comfortable habit of giving *money* to various aid programs, and think that's enough, even though we never actually *meet* those in our caring.

**At those times...**

It can be important to keep up the discipline of praying for the world, saying the words, naming the poor, the homeless, the ill, the lonely, the unjustly imprisoned, even if we're feeling all hollow inside.  
Or maybe it's time to let go and focus in on ourselves for a little while, knowing that our intense mourning, our intense prayer for healing for this one person, becomes part of the great big sweep of prayer crossing all boundaries of time and place, swept up into God's own loving tears and prayers, reaching out to pray for *all* the ailing, and *all* the dying, and *all* the mourning.

**At those times...**

It's important to remember that God's love never runs dry.  
That, after God has taken care of *one* human being, there are not just crumbs left over, insufficient remnants good only for dogs to snarl and fight for.  
The *whole* of God's love still remains, embracing our inadequate prayers, and with and through them, embracing all human kind.



Dogs fighting, 1809 ~ Charles Towne

*But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*  
--Matthew 15:25-28

# Music



Image from David J. Grossman's J.S. Bach website  
[www.jsbach.net/ images/organ.html](http://www.jsbach.net/images/organ.html)

**Music in worship—ethereal, stirring, triumphant, yearning, voice, organ, psaltery, drums or electric guitar... Does praying for the world fit in here somewhere?**

In the recently-published book *A Song To Sing, A Life To Live – Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, two musicians explore searching for God through music. Don Saliers is a church musician and professor at Candler School of Theology and Emory University; Emily Saliers, his

daughter, is half of the Indigo Girls, a folk-rock duo.

Thinking about songs of freedom and justice, such as *If I Had a Hammer* and Public Enemy's *Don't Believe the Hype*, causes Emily to question her father: "Why don't we sing more songs like this at church?"

But the question is broader than why we are more likely to sing *Peace Must Come* around a campfire than in church.

## Liberation theology

Hymns of liberation, justice, peace—those are sung regularly in countries where the people are oppressed. But we don't use them. Maybe we don't need them. Maybe they would just seem artificial and out of place.

Or maybe we really *do* need them, *especially* if we don't see the need to sing them. Maybe if we started singing them, we would see and pray our connection, under God, to the whole human race.



Church band in India, photo © Martin Lueders, published on The Digital Journalist

## Community building

And there's another issue that comes to mind. Think about the hymns that stir us up to follow God in caring for the poor and the lame, for example. Think of the modern ones, like *Here I Am, Lord* or *The Summons* ("Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?").



Soweto Gospel Choir, an award-winning South African group, that performs world-wide and has started a foundation that raises funds for AIDS orphans in that country.

Wonderful hymns, both of them. Lots of people love them, and feel called by them.

But here's the rub.

When I try to think of hymns that call us to care for the world, hymns that really, really appeal to people here today, all I can come up with are hymns like these: ones that call us to make *individual* decisions and *individual* commitments.

Maybe I just haven't met the right hymns. But I keep wondering:

***Where are the equally-beloved ones that call us as communities of faith, to jointly listen and discern and commit to caring for the world in God's name?***

## Who is in the Prayer Circle?



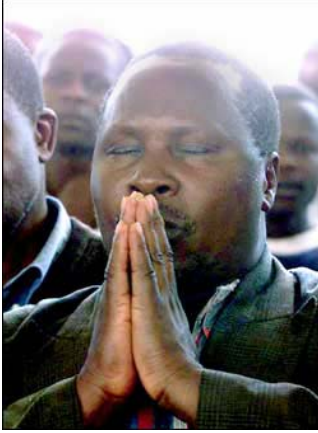
I've got to confess that there was something really startling about coming across this photo of the prayer circle at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles—as if it's the *place* that makes it a prayer circle, not the people who are there.

Then I started thinking.

- About the people who are not connected with any community of worship.
- About the ones who have grown up not exposed to church, or brought up to distrust and reject it.
- About the children who are sent off to the “children’s service” or to Sunday School during the worship hour, and don’t get exposed to “church” until they are at the disdainful impatient teenage years; about the liturgies that for all practical purposes leave children out.
- About the churches that act as if those “members” who aren’t there on Sunday don’t really count.



People at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC September 15 to say prayers and light candles in remembrance of those who perished in terrorist attacks. (Andy Nelson – Christian Science Monitor)



A man prays during a Kenyan Council of Churches memorial service held in Nairobi for victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. (2001 AP Photo by Karel Prinsloo CSM)



Thais release candle balloons during an interfaith mass prayer for the tsunami victims in Takua Pa, Thailand, Jan. 19, 2005. (Bazuki Muhammad / Reuters)



Indonesian women cry as they pray during the Muslim holiday of Eid al- Adha at the grand mosque in the tsunami-hit city of Banda Aceh, Jan. 21, 2005. (Supri/Reuters)

In times of great trial—when there are horrendous disasters, or terrors of war—people congregate because they know no other way to respond to their shock and pain. They come, desperately hoping for meaning, for comfort.

**We rather hope that where they congregate will be in church.**

We plan special liturgies, extra services, deep compassion.

**But I've been wondering about the people like those I just named above.**

*How will they know to come?*

*And if they do, will there be a way for all ages to express their prayers?*

*A way for all to learn to listen for the voice of God?*



Stained glass window designs from Haeger Studios of San Jose for St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Monterey, CA



## Assignment #5A: *Candle-lighting ceremony*

### **In preparation:**

Take time to remember and list all the peoples (nations, tribes, ethnicities, religions) you have prayed for who were trying to wipe each other out.

*Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, Serbs and Croatians in what used to be Yugoslavia, for example.*

Set out a large number of votive candles. If you don't already know it, learn the melody to Peter Yarrow's "Light One Candle."

You can do this by yourself, but it's really designed to be done in a group. If possible, involve both young people and adults in this ceremony.

### **The service:**

*Sing the first verse.*

*One at a time, each person comes forward, lights a candle and names one of the peoples that has survived, saying, "We light a candle for the \_\_\_\_\_ children, with thanks that their light didn't die."*

*Continue rotating through the group, until all peoples on your list have been named.*

*End by singing the whole song.*



## LIGHT ONE CANDLE

Peter Yarrow- ©1983 Silver Dawn Music ASCAP

Light one candle for the Maccabee children  
With thanks that their light didn't die  
Light one candle for the pain they endured  
When their right to exist was denied  
Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice  
Justice and freedom demand  
But light one candle for the wisdom to know  
When the peacemaker's time is at hand

chorus:

*Don't let the light go out!  
It's lasted for so many years!  
Don't let the light go out!  
Let it shine through our love and our tears.*

Light one candle for the strength that we need  
To never become our own foe  
And light one candle for those who are suffering  
Pain we learned so long ago  
Light one candle for all we believe in  
That anger not tear us apart

And light one candle to find us together  
With peace as the song in our hearts

*(chorus)*

What is the memory that's valued so highly  
That we keep it alive in that flame?  
What's the commitment to those who have died  
That we cry out they've not died in vain?  
We have come this far always believing  
That justice would somehow prevail  
This is the burden, this is the promise  
This is why we will not fail!

*(chorus)*

Don't let the light go out!  
Don't let the light go out!  
Don't let the light go out!



The Arch of Titus in Rome (built in 83 C.E.) commemorates emperor Titus' conquest of Judea, ending the Jewish wars (66-70). Here, the conquerors carry off the spoils, including the sacred Menorah.

## Assignment #5B



### Can you walk a mile in someone else's shoes?

In many religious traditions, fasting—abstaining from food—is a common way of putting yourself aside, so that you may better know God. It's used for repentance. And it's also a traditional way of identifying with those in need.

But in today's modern America, where it seems as if everyone is constantly dieting, or failing to diet, or trying a new diet, fasting may conjure up more memories of our unsuccessful diets than thoughts of God.

So, how about using your creativity to come up with some *different* kinds of fasts—ones that don't rely on food, but instead call on us to give up some other common necessity.

Just to start you thinking, I'll give you two ideas:

(1) People fleeing from natural disasters or war often end up without shoes. They didn't have time to find them before fleeing; they fell apart or fell off. What few shoes they have may have been taken from dead bodies, stuffed with rags and held together with twine to make them stay on. Even when relief shipments reach them, there are rarely enough shoes to find ones that fit. *Could you, like these people, give up your comfortable shoes, and spend a day walking in someone else's ill-fitting shoes?*

(2) In parts of the Third World, one out of five children dies before reaching five years of age. Choose a Sunday. On that day, every 5<sup>th</sup> person who walks through the church door is draped with a black scarf. During that day, no one may talk to those persons or acknowledge their presence. Skip over them during communion; pass them by at the fellowship hour. *They are the silent witnesses to those who have died.*



**Choose a creative way of fasting, and fast for a day.**

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, 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.*

*--Philippians 2:4-8*



## Community

# Discussion Questions

### 1. Church

Are you satisfied with the way praying for the world occurs in your church? Why or why not? Think about how it fits into preaching and prayers of the people, hymn choices, special worship services in times of crisis, small group prayer circles, children and youth involvement, etc.

### 2. Blindness

What types of world issues are most likely to engage your congregation? If you were truly honest, what would you say are its blind spots?

### 3. Image

Do you think your local community perceives your church as a place to turn in times of international disaster? If yes, what happened that led non-church members to see it this way? If no, should this be a role of your church—and if so, what might you do to change community perceptions?