

# VITAL CONGREGATIONS

Congregations that:

- † Nurture life-changing relationships with God
  - † Nurture life-changing relationships with one another
    - † Nurture life-changing relationships with the world





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#### From the Bishop



Roger R. Gustafson

God has indeed called us to a robust life of faith, both as individuals and as we gather together in congregations, campus ministries, and outdoor ministries. This resource – *Vital Congregations' Faith Practices* – is intended as an aid to you in your journey of faith as you respond to God's summons to enter into a deeper relationship with God, with God's people, and with God's world.

Vital congregations and ministries nurture life-changing relationships with God,

with one another,
with the world.

In future years we're going to explore each of those emphases, but this year the focus will be on the first: Nurturing life-changing relationships with God.

Whatever your circumstance and experience – whether you are a life-long Christian who already employs a number of tools to enrich your spiritual life, a newcomer to simply the idea of a deeper relationship with God, or find yourself somewhere between those two poles – I'm confident you will benefit from these resources.

These disciplines have stood the test of time and have proven to be valuable in people's faith walk. Some of what you find here may comfort you, some may challenge you. But I pray the result of your engagement with these resources is a deeper relationship with the God who calls each of us from darkness to light, from death into life

Blessings on our journey!

Roger Gustafron

- Roger Gustafson, Bishop





Daily Devotion

To encourage us to grow individually in our relationship with God ....

.... we commit to at least one new daily devotional practice for six months.

Some suggested resources for daily devotions:

#### **Augsburg Fortress: Bread for the Day**



A yearly collection of daily Bible readings and prayers designed for individuals, congregations, households and small groups. Available for order through Augsburg/Fortress

www.augsburgfortress.org/store/ category/286562/Bread-for-the-Day

#### **Luther Seminary's God Pause**

God Pause devotions are short, meaningful



reflections on the following Sunday's lessons and gospel written by Luther Seminary alumni and done for the purpose of enhancing your Sunday **SE** morning worship experience.

www.luthersem.edu/godpause

#### **Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations**



Father Richard Rohr mines the depths of Christian tradition through his Franciscan and contemplative lens. Each week builds on previous Contemplation topics, but you can join anytime!

https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/

#### **WELCA's Daily Grace**

Daily Grace is an on-the-go devotional guide, offering a faith reflection every day which can be sent to your email or downloaded

> through an app for IOS and Android devices.



https://www.womenoftheelca.org/blog/ category/daily-grace





Prayer Life

#### **Centering Prayer**

Be Still and Know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)

Centering Prayer is a receptive method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.

Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer - verbal, mental or affective prayer - into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Christ.

#### **Centering Prayer Guidelines**

Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Use a word of one or two syllables such as God, Jesus, Love, Peace, Let Go, Faith, Stillness.

Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. Imagine laying your scared word as gently as you would a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

When different thoughts come to your mind, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Centering Prayer is based on the wisdom of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: When you pray, go to your inner room and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:6). It familiarizes us with God's first language which is SILENCE.





Prayer Life

#### **Breath Prayer**

#### About:

Breath prayer is an ancient Christian prayer practice dating back to at least the sixth century. Known as the "Jesus Prayer" or "Prayer of the Heart," early practitioners would repeat to the rhythm of their breath the phrase, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." In time, the prayer was shortened to, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy" or simply, "Jesus, mercy."

Breath prayer is a good example of "praying without ceasing" and has the potential to become as natural as breathing. It is intended to be a very short prayer of praise or petition, just six to eight syllables. The words of the prayer can be easily adjusted to your heart's desire.

Praise is expressed by calling on one of the Divine names such as God, Jesus, Lord, Father/ Mother, Christ, or Spirit. Or you may prefer another name of adoration. Your request or intention is comprised by the words following. The breath prayer is usually said silently within. But some people sing it; others chant it. It's your prayer; use it your way.

You may also use the breath prayer for a focused time during a daily spiritual practice. Simply repeat the prayer over and over keeping your attention on the prayer. If your attention wanders, gently return to the prayer.

Begin with 5 minutes and gradually increase the time to 15 or 20 minutes as you become disciplined with the prayer. You may want to use a timer to free yourself from watching the clock. Some find it useful to write in a journal of their experience with the prayer.

(Continued)





Prayer Life

#### **Breath Prayer**

#### Instruction

Close your eyes and recall the line "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Be still, calm, peaceful, open to the presence of God.

With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Imagine that God is actually asking, "(Your name) what do you want? Like the blind man on the road to Jericho, Jesus kindly looks you in the eyes and asks, "What do you want from me?"

Give God a simple and direct answer that comes honestly from your heart. Write down the answer. If you have more than one answer, write them down. Your answer may be one word such as peace or love or help. It may be several words or a phrase such as "feel your presence" or "lead me into life." Whatever your answers, they are the foundation of your breath prayer.

Select the name that you are most comfortable using to speak with God. Combine it with your written answer to the question God asked you. This is your prayer.

Breathe in the first phrase/word (generally your invocation of God's name) and breathe out the second phrase/word (request or need).

Sometimes you may want to reverse the practice a bit by sitting in silence and letting the Spirit pray through you. Ask for God to reveal *your* name, and God's desire for *you*. This can be a profound experience. You may wind up hearing something like, "Beloved, you are enough," or "Mighty One, rest." Wait on God and see how you may be renewed.

#### **Sample Breath Prayers**

Jesus, let me feel your love.
Lord Show me your way.
Holy one, heal me.
Jesus Alleluia, have mercy.
Holy Wisdom, Guide me.
Father/Mother (Abba/Amma), let me feel your presence.





Journaling

Keeping a Spiritual Journal is a wonderful way to reflect upon your faith and be in conversation with God. The journal can take many forms, and there are a variety of resources available to help one begin.

#### A few considerations:

The style of journal will depend on what sorts of entries you propose to make. Blank pages or a grid pattern will work better for those who will include drawings and sketches in their journals. For those whose entries will be prose, lined pages make more sense.

Try some experiments. For example:

Vary the frequency at first to see what feels most comfortable. Will you write daily entries? A more in-depth weekly reflection?

Make different kinds of entries. Try drawing, poetry, lists, reflections on Bible passages, writing out prayers. See what feels meditative and useful to you.

Vary your forms of address. Write a letter to God. Imagine that you are a character in the Bible and speak as that person would speak. Write to someone in your life who needs to forgive you or be forgiven by you. Write as if God were speaking directly to you.

Don't give up if you miss a session or two. Just pick it up again.

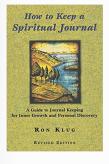
Choose a form that works for you. There is no "right way" to keep a faith journal.

#### **Online Resources:**

>https://www.wikihow.com/Keep-a-Spiritual-Journal

>https://grottonetwork.com/keep-the-faith/prayer/how-to-keep-prayer-journal/

#### Written Resources:



Ron Klug, How to Keep a Spiritual Journal



Helen Cepero,

Journaling as a

Spiritual Practice





Bible Reading

#### Lectio Divina

Listening to the Word of God in Scripture

Lectio Divina means "Divine Reading" and is one of the great treasures of the Christian tradition of prayer. It is a reflective reading of scripture, a method of prayer that leads us into the deeper meaning of scripture and the transformation of our lives. It is a way of deepening a relationship with Christ, a way of listening to the texts of Scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and he was suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on his word leads beyond mere acquaintance to an attitude of friendship, trust and love. Gregory the Great (6<sup>th</sup> century) in summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition expressed it as "resting in God."

#### Guidelines for Lectio Divina (can be done individually or with a small group)

Step One: Read passage and encourage everyone to listen with the "ear of their heart." What phrase, sentence or even one word stands out to you?

Step Two: Read the passage again and **reflect** on the word of God. Encourage everyone to be aware of what touches them, a thought or reflection that is meaningful. Allow a minute or two minutes of silence.

Step Three: Read the passage again and **respond** spontaneously to the word of God. Be aware of any prayer that rises up within that expresses the experience. Allow a minute or two minutes of silence.

Step Four: Read the passage a final time and **rest** in the word, reflect or pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Allow three or four minutes of silence.

To extend the practice, take the phrase, sentence or word into your daily activity and listen to it, reflect on it, pray over it, and rest in it as time allows during the day. Allow it to become part of you.

There are no "should, oughts, or musts." Listen with the ear of your heart and let the dialog with God unfold in its own time and let the Holy Spirit take the lead. We need to trust that God is eager to be with us and to share with us the inner peace and freedom we desire.



**Devotions** 

To encourage us to grow in our relationship with God ....

#### Augsburg Fortress: Bread for the Day



A yearly collection of daily Bible readings and prayers designed for individuals, congregations, households and small groups.
Available for order through Augsburg/Fortress

www.augsburgfortress.org/store/category/286562/Bread-for-the-Day

#### • By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism



By Heart is a richly illustrated, in-depth exploration of the Small Catechism. It is suitable for group discussion, an adult study or personal enrichment. This guide will generate meaningful

conversations about the biblical and historical context of the Small Catechism, its link to the church's faith, and its connection to Luther's life and your life today. There is an accompanying facilitator guide and DVD that highlight the book for use in a 7-session course for longtime Lutherans and those new to the faith, as well.

https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/ product/23120/By-Heart-Conversations-with -Martin-Luther-Small-Catechism



**Prayer Life** 

#### **Prayer Ventures**

Each month, these petitions are offered as guides to prayer for the global, social and outreach ministries of the ELCA, as well as for the needs and circumstances of our neighbors, communities and world. Thank you for your continued prayers for the life and mission of this church.

#### www.elca.org/Resources/Prayer-Ventures

This resource may be copied and shared among members and friends of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Contact info@elca.org for additional information. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Telephone: 800-638-3522, ext. 2458.

#### June 2019

- 1. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Northeastern Pennsylvania, Montana, Southwestern Texas and Indiana-Kentucky synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 2. Pray that our unity in Christ across denominations and throughout the world will strengthen us and draw others into the community of all believers who know and share God's boundless love.
- 3. Pray for the leaders and volunteers of summer congregational programs, that they will stir and strengthen the faith of children and youth and introduce others to the good news of Jesus Christ through day camps, vacation Bible schools and other special ministries.
- 4. Summer is the busy season for ELCA Mission Builders, retired men and women who share their time, construction skills and spiritual gifts to build and expand the ministry capacity and physical resources of congregations and camps across the country. Give thanks for their volunteer service and pray that their witness will inspire others for lives of service and furthering the mission of the church.
- 5. Remember in prayer the service and witness of the six volunteers serving in the Young Adults in Global Mission program alongside our companions in Madagascar; the Rev. Kirsten Laderach, YAGM country coordinator; and the Rev. Lancelot Themba and Kwena Mkhabela, regional representatives for Madagascar, West Africa and Central Africa.





## Growing together in our relationship with God Prayer Life

- 6. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Western North Dakota, Central States, Metropolitan Chicago, New Jersey and Central/Southern Illinois synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 7. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Lower Susquehanna, Florida-Bahamas, Southwestern Washington and Northwestern Minnesota synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 8. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Virginia, Southwestern Minnesota and Southern Ohio synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 9. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the Eastern North Dakota Synod Assembly, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 10. Ask God to help youth and young adults seeking summer employment, that they will find open doors and opportunities for using their skills and gifts. Pray that we will find ways to share our wisdom, help them network for jobs and demonstrate our support for them through words of encouragement.
- 11. Give thanks for the persistent work of ELCA Advocacy and for the ministries, programs and resources that enable us to use our gifts, skills and concerns for the well-being of our communities, nation and world.
- 12. Pray for safe travel for all those who seek renewal, learning and greater awareness of the world through vacations, service experiences and trips. Wherever we go, may our faith shine brightly through our respect and care for the people we encounter, through our care for creation and nature, and through the joy and hope we convey in our words and actions.



**Prayer Life** 

- 13. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Northwestern Pennsylvania and Southwestern Pennsylvania synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 14. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Grand Canyon, Northern Illinois, Northeastern Iowa and La Crosse Area synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 15. Remember in prayer the leaders, voting members and others gathered for the assemblies of the Northeastern Ohio, Allegheny, Upper Susquehanna and Metropolitan Washington, D.C. synods, that the Spirit will strengthen, guide and encourage them in proclaiming the gospel, growing the church and doing God's work in the world.
- 16. Pray that we will always listen for what the Spirit is revealing to us and pay attention to how the Spirit is guiding and urging us throughout our baptismal journey.
- 17. Remember in prayer the many agricultural workers who travel across our nation to do the difficult and often unnoticed work of planting, tending and gathering crops so that the world may be fed. Pray that they receive fair wages and medical care, have safe housing, find support and encouragement in communities of faith, and be affirmed for their important work and service.
- 18. Remember in prayer those congregation members who spend seasons of the year in different areas of the country. Pray that every congregation will practice hospitality and care in sending, welcoming and involving people in worship and the life of the congregation, even if it's only temporary.
- 19. Today, Juneteenth, is the oldest known celebration commemorating the abolition of slavery in the United States. Pray for the end of racism, racial inequalities and hatred in our nation, for an end to all forms of slavery and human trafficking in the world, and, living in God's grace and forgiveness, that we will confess and confront our own prejudices and fears, serving as catalysts for change, reconciliation and healing.



**Prayer Life** 

- 20. Pray that, amid world events that provoke anxiety, uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness, we will assure one another of our peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, our sure and dependable hope, strength and comfort.
- 21. Pray for communities that are recovering from recent natural disasters and severe weather across our nation and around the world, and for those who are still involved in the long-term work of rebuilding their lives, homes, businesses and communities. Ask for the guidance and help of the Spirit as we seek ways to be effective bearers of hope, support and encouragement for as long as needed.
- 22. Give praise and glory to God, who formed the vast universe and earth yet tenderly cares for humanity and our peculiarities.
- 23. There is no affliction or problem in life spiritual or physical that is beyond God's power, mercy or ability to heal. Praise God!
- 24. Remember our outdoor ministries and camps during this very busy time of the year and pray for God to sustain and energize staff members and volunteers so they can greet every new camper with a freshness of spirit and faith that is infectious and inspiring.
- 25. Remember in prayer victims and survivors of gun violence across our nation. Ask God to nurture in us the strength, wisdom and compassion we need to provide steady care and support for those who ache for healing and relief from their pain, grief, suffering, anger and fear.
- 26. As people of God gathered in communities of faith, give thanks for how God comes to our aid, sustains and comforts us, is present and patient with us, cares for the poor and suffering, guides us in ways of justice and peace, and invites and equips us to share in this hope-filled, life-giving work in the world.
- 27. The ELCA "Three Sides" podcast shares unique stories, perspectives and diverse voices of our members, congregations and global companions. Give thanks for its ministry of expanding our awareness and our understanding of how God calls and uses us in every expression of the church.



# Growing together in our relationship with God Prayer Life

- 28. Pray that ELCA congregations, synods, colleges and universities, seminaries, outdoor ministries and other related organizations involved in special appeals and fundraising be successful in their efforts to start, grow or sustain ministries and programs for the sake of accomplishing God's work in the world.
- 29. Pray for teachers, professors and school staff who have time off during the summer, that they will be renewed, strengthened and prepared for serving their students, parents and communities when the new school year begins.
- 30. Pray that we will grow in understanding the freedom we have in Christ, which moves us beyond our self-interest to attend to our neighbor. Pray that our lives be guided by the Spirit to exemplify love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.



**Prayer Life** 

#### **Ignatian Spirituality**

St. Ignatius of Loyola is the founder of the Society of Jesus (The Jesuits) and the creator of a set of spiritual exercises which have brought peace and deepened spiritual meaning to many generations of Christian practitioners. Along with Saints Peter Faber and Francis Xavier, Ignatius created in the Jesuit order a community of religious leaders who were formed by prayer, devotion, and study. There are many Jesuit universities throughout the world providing excellent education grounded in service to the world.

Ignatian Spirituality refers to several types of formation which Ignatius perfected as the Father General of the Jesuits. The practices most commonly practiced to this day are the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, a set of prayer practices, devotions, and meditations which can be done regularly. Perhaps the best known of the Spiritual Exercises in the Daily Examen, a daily devotion with readings and exercises around a theme like *gratitude* or *mercy*. (There's an app for that! Try "Reimagining the Examen" at your friendly local app store, like Google Play or the Apple Store.)

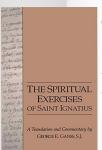
There is an Ignatian Spirituality in Kansas City which does guided retreats and prayer groups. There are also Ignatian Spirituality resources online and lots of great books to help you learn these prayer and devotional practices (see below for a few).

Here is a form of the **Ignatian Daily Examen** from ignatianspirituality.com:

- 1. Become aware of God's presence.
- 2. Review the day with gratitude.
- 3. Pay attention to your emotions.
- 4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
- 5. Look toward tomorrow.

#### **Resources:**

Ignatianspirituality.com Ignatiancenterkc.com



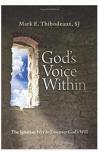
George E. Ganss,

The Spiritual

Exercises of Saint
Ignatius



Mark E. Thibodeaux, Reimagining the Ignatian Examen



Mark E. Thibodeaux,

God's Voice Within





# Growing together in our relationship with God Spiritual Practice

#### **Dwelling in the Word**

Dwelling in the Word is a practice that may be used to help in communal discernment. It is: An intentional practice...hopefully, a habit. It involves:

- Reflection
- Deep listening to one another AND to God's Word
- Patience
- Faith...that God will be revealed and the The Holy Spirit will guide us

#### Begin with prayer

#### Reflect silently

Find a person you know least well – or a friendly looking stranger (or a strange looking friend!)

#### Ask that person:

- 1. What captured your attention or imagination?
- 2. What question might you want to ask a Biblical scholar?
- 3. Take 4-5 minutes each. You will report out your partner's answers and thoughts. This is the deep listening part try not to express your own thoughts, but, rather, those of your partner.

#### Reflect as a group:

What might God be up to in this passage for us today?

#### Called Forward Together in Christ: A process to decide ELCA's future directions

Called Forward Together in Christ is a process that will help leaders of this church make decisions about future directions and priorities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is a process that invites people in the pew, church leaders and staff working for different expressions of this church to engage in conversation about the future of the ELCA.

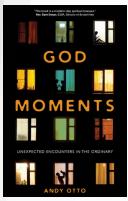




## Growing together in our relationship with God Spiritual Practice

#### **God moments**

God Moments: Unexpected Encounters in the Ordinary



Where do you seek God? Are you waiting for him to appear in a monumental, life-altering event?

In *God Moments*, Andy Otto shows you how to discover the unexpected beauty of God's presence in the story of ordinary things and in everyday routines like preparing breakfast or walking in the woods, drawing on the Ignatian principles of awareness, prayer, and discernment.

Otto identifies three practices that help find God in all things:

- Awareness—Gain an understanding that God is present in the ordinary messiness of our lives such as a battle with depression or sharing in the struggle of a friend.
- Prayer—Develop a prayer life using Ignatian practices such as asking for a morning grace
  and examining how your prayer was answered at the end of the day. That way you can
  focus on a personal relationship with God that finds everyday physical activities such as
  making a meal as an opportunity to talk to him.
- Discernment—The more you are aware of God's presence and draw closer to him in prayer, the better you can learn how to plug into God's narrative of the world in a way that enables you to participate in the divine story through the use of your gifts and talents.

https://www.avemariapress.com/product/1-59471-647-1/God-Moments/



## Growing our community's relationship with God Service Projects

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

--1 Peter 4:10

One of the most tangible ways for us to live out our faith commitments is to be of service to our communities and the world. From the moment God created human beings, God implored us to care for the world around us. The public ministry of Jesus Christ centers upon caring for a variety of persons with a multitude of needs.

#### **Getting Started**

- Know your community. Try drawing a map of the area and filling in as much detail as you
  can. Speak to community stakeholders (school staff and faculty, social service agency staff,
  municipal leaders, faith leaders) to find out what the people of your community need and
  how you can help.
- Figure out the gifts you bring as individuals and community. Do you have quilters? Persons who can do handiwork? Teachers? Match your gifts to community needs for the best long-term fit.
- Decide on a structure for your service. Would a week-long service trip be possible? Is one
  night a month of serving at a shelter better? Would you prefer to take on projects you can
  do at home or in small groups, like quilting or assembling care kits?
- Pray. This is a discernment process, and God wants to help you.

Have these conversations before you offer your help to an organization.

#### ➡ Ready, Set, Serve

- Reach out to someplace that can use your help, using the work you've already done to determine the best fit.
- Try a shorter term commitment at first, until you know that it is a good fit. You can always set up a regular commitment.
- Pray before you engage in service, and spend some time in prayerful review afterward.

#### Be Invitational

- Once you have set up a regular commitment, invite others to join. They don't even have
  to be members of your church. People like to serve, and it can be a good entry point to
  your community.
- If you are doing a one-time event, like a service trip or a VBS for another community, invite others to join you—other churches or neighbors. Service is a great connector.





# Growing our community's relationship with God Spiritual Practice

#### **Story Matters**

Marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Spirit, we receive a new identity as followers of Jesus, and the story of Jesus becomes our story. Story matters. The Story Matters Initiative is designed to help congregations articulate their unique missional Identity using the Bible as the framework for finalizing this identity. Once the congregation has chosen a Biblical passage or story that is representative of their missional identity, the congregation becomes intentional about developing discipleship and mission strategies, using their selected Biblical passage or story as the theme for these intentional activities

#### Download the ELCA resource



