**Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection**

**Pre-Conference Study**

The Anglican Women at Prayer (AWAP) Committee, a committee of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross (SCHC), hopes that the Holy Spirit moves among you as you learn from one another and consider whether and how you might be called to cross boundaries of experience, culture and geography with women throughout the Anglican Communion through prayer.

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Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection

2014 Spring Conference Study for the Society of Companions of the Holy Cross (SCHC)

Program Objectives

- Share our experiences of prayer.
- Share our personal stories.
- Explore the diversity of the nature of God to whom we pray.
- Explore the cultural contexts of women’s prayers throughout the world.

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1. Introduction to the Pre-conference Study Materials

The AWaP Committee extends an opportunity for you to join in a common exploration and reflection of prayer in your own life and the lives of women around the world through these pre-conference study materials.

The study materials can be a way for those attending the conference to prepare for the conference as well as a way for those not attending the conference to participate from afar by providing activities that inspire reflection and thought on the practices of prayer.

How To Use the Pre-Conference Study Materials

This study uses Bible stories, poems, quotes, and an essay on the spirituality of women in Africa to explore the theme of prayer. There are a variety of activities that accompany the different kinds of materials such as discussion guides, mediations and lectio divina prayers. Specifically these materials are meant to provide a structure to:

- Share personal stories of prayer
- Explore the nature of the God to whom we pray
- Develop a deeper understanding of why, for what and how we pray
- Identify ways to pray for and with women across diverse global contexts of the Anglican women.

If you are a member of a SCHC Chapter: Your chapter is invited to use as much or as little of the study materials as fits the program plans and needs of your Chapter. We hope that the study materials strengthen and enlarge the vocation of intercessory prayer.

If you are a seminary student: We hope that the study materials elicit personal insights and inspire further study into the many facets of prayer.

If you plan to attend the conference: We hope that the study materials will serve as a foundation for the new ideas and practices about prayer which will be gathered from women in the Anglican community.

About the Conference

Aristotle is credited with saying, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” All of the ideas that have come together to create the design of the 2014 Spring Conference of the Society of Companions of the Holy Cross show that Aristotle was correct. The conference is entitled Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection. Contained within that title are our imaginings, hopes and plans to bring women together from around the world to exchange stories and learn about how and for what each woman prays. Examining the parts represented
in the title provides insight into the possibility of forming worldwide relationships of prayer during and beyond the conference.

Imagine, Anglican woman from across the world, bound by an abiding love for Jesus, sharing personal stories, deepest hopes, dreams and personal prayers... Women gathered, listening to one another and to God. Imagine Anglican women from across the world, forever bound in an international community of mutually supportive prayers. (Case Statement for the 2014 Spring Conference Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection)

This three-day conference, in partnership with Virginia Theological Seminary, will be held on the campus of Virginia Theological Seminary from March 14 to March 16, 2014. The conference is open to SCHC Companions, Anglican women from across the world, and seminary faculty and students.

The Unifying Image of Weaving

The weaving image was chosen because it is both universal and unique. While the task of weaving textiles is present in most cultures, weaving also expresses the unique art of each individual weaver. The act of weaving can be a metaphor for women’s call to be agents of reconciliation and understanding in their homes and communities, much like taking fragile, individual strands and weaving those strands into a textile that is strong and beautiful. The Anglican Women at Prayer (AWaP) Committee drew inspiration from the following prayer:

Spirit of love, you move within creation,  
drawing the threads to colour and design:  
life into life, you knit our true salvation,  
come, work with us, and weave us into one.  
Though we have frayed the fabric of your making,  
tearing away from all that you intend,  
yet, to be whole, humanity is aching,  
come, work with us, and weave us into one.  
Great loom of God, where history is woven,  
you are the frame that holds us to the truth,  
Christ is the theme, the pattern you have given,  
come, work with us, and weave us into one.


Forming Caring Relationships Based on Prayer

The tagline we chose for the conference is “weaving our bonds of affection.” A bond can be defined as a link that joins people together in relationship. The overarching purpose of this conference is to provide the opportunity of a time and place for a group of women from around
the world to create bonds with other women who share the belief that prayer makes a positive difference in their lives, societies and the world. Affection is often the outcome of being linked in a prayerful relationship. Intercessory prayer is the foundation of our care for another.

**Women throughout the Anglican Communion**

The conference is designed to invite women throughout the world to share experiences of prayer with one another beyond our individual churches, communities, and countries. As members of the Anglican Communion, we are blessed to be a part of a global community, specifically churches throughout the Anglican Communion that share common beliefs, practices and histories.

The Anglican Communion is a worldwide association of 38 provinces in more than 170 countries. The Anglican Communion is comprised of many churches that agree on essential doctrines and whose members can participate in the sacramental life of any church in the Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the symbolic head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, but has no formal authority outside the Province of Canterbury. Bishops across the Anglican Communion, including the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (currently Katharine Jefferts Schori), gather periodically by invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury to pray, worship and discuss issues of mutual concern.

Prayer is part of common life of all Anglicans. Each Province has a Book of Common Prayer that is a source of prayer, reflects the community’s identity, guides liturgy, and instructs members about their common life together. Anglicans pray alone and in community in women’s prayer groups throughout the Communion. Advocating for women and children’s issues and praying for social justice is the work of many women’s groups around the world.

**What the Anglican Women at Prayer (AWaP) Committee Learned about How Women Pray**

Prayer takes many forms throughout the world. Not surprisingly given different cultures, experiences, and histories, women across the Anglican Communion pray in a variety of ways. In both 2012 and 2013 the AWaP Committee and the SCHC New York chapter met with women from across the world who attended the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) to hear firsthand about the diverse ways we pray. Our guests said this about prayer:

- We give thanks to God in all things.
- We pray in song, often which emerges as the spirit moves individuals and the group.
- We have direct conversations aloud with God as if God is sitting across the table.
- We pray for specific outcomes such as concrete blocks to build a school, expecting to receive those blocks.

We learned much from one another at these gatherings. We invite you to explore prayer, also. Each of us has a unique relationship with God, and we can learn much from sharing this relationship through prayer.
2. What is Prayer? Questions for Reflection

It might be obvious that the basis of relationship is the people who are involved, but we often overlook this when considering prayer. How we speak to and interact with God depends on who we are and who we believe God to be. So, it is essential to consider our understanding of God. In this exercise we begin by exploring our images of God. We then turn to how and for what we pray.

Throughout the Bible people pray for many things and in different ways. They imagine God very differently. In the beginning, God is the One who blesses creation and creates humankind in his image. Five chapters later, God is vengeful—destroying the earth with a flood. People call God Elohim (God) in chapter 1, Yahweh Elohim (The God of Israel) in chapter 2 and El Shaddai (God Almighty) in Exodus 6.

The gospels, too, present different images of God, relationships between Jesus and God, relationships between God and the people, and even relationships between Jesus and God. In Mark, Jesus cries “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God appears to be absent. In Luke, Jesus says, “Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.” These two prayers are not contradictory. One expresses the breadth of Jesus’ feelings while he was on the cross, and the other his disciples’ feelings when they reflected back upon the meaning of the cross in the light of the resurrection. The early church was able to see the truth expressed in both statements. We, too, have different relationships with God that reflect our own images of God. They are not necessarily contradictory. They reflect our experiences, like a beautiful prism—different facets of one God.

Exploring Your Images of God
Consider these questions on your own, and then share with the entire group or in twos or threes.

- How do you imagine God?
- What is the basis of this understanding? It may be events in your life, particular concerns you bring before God, family members, friends and other companions.
- How would you describe your own cultural context? You might consider geography, ethnicity, life experiences, and economic background.
- How does this context shape your images of God or way of expressing your understanding of God?

Exploring Your Prayers
Remember two times that you have prayed over the past month. Consider these questions based on these prayers on your own then divide into groups of twos, threes or fours to share your answers.

- How would you describe prayers?
- In what way did you pray? (words, images, standing, sitting, alone, in community, etc?)
- For what and for whom did you pray?
What are the challenges you have or are experiencing in your prayers?

What sustains you in prayer?

After your small group conversation, gather as the entire group and share what you learned.

**The Many Ways of Praying**

- If you or others in your group have relationships with women from different cultures, ask them to share what they have learned about different experiences of prayer.
- Consider what women shared at the UNCSW gathering about how they pray:
  - We give thanks to God in all things.
  - We pray in song, often which emerges as the spirit moves individuals and the group.
  - We have direct conversations aloud with God as if God is sitting across the table.
  - We pray for specific outcomes such as concrete blocks to build a school, expecting to receive those blocks.
  - We pray with one another by cell phone and email.
  - We pray in meetings of the community, Bible studies, and workshops.

Do these ways of praying differ from how you pray? How are they alike?

- Consider what you have learned from one another in your chapter about how you pray. How do they differ? How are they alike?
- Do their witnesses challenge or affirm your image of God? If so how?
- How might these differences reflect the diverse cultures and experiences across the world?
- How might these differences reflect a variety of images of God?
- Do the ways various people pray challenge your own prayer practices? If so, how?

Based on the ways in which people with whom you are studying pray, consider planning a day in which one or more of you leads the group in her method of praying. Examples might be *lectio divina*, centering prayer, poetry, body prayer, drawing, and many others.

**Conclude with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.**

*A Woman’s Creed*

by Maline Devananda from Colombo, Sri Lanka

I believe in God who brooded over the waters,
Who brought forth creation in beauty and harmony,

I believe in God active in my land,
Bringing order and peace from chaos and destruction,

I believe in Jesus, who was conceived in the womb of
A simple village girl, making her burst into song.
I believe in Jesus, who allowed himself to be touched by
A bleeding woman, marveling at her faith,

I believe in Jesus, surrounded with women,
Who appeared to Mary on that first Easter morning,

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the woman in God,
Active deep in our land, strengthening women and all life.

I believe in the Holy Spirit present everywhere,
Binding all in love and renewing all creation,
I believe in the Holy Spirit active in every person,
Calling us out of our passivity to a fuller life.

3. Personal Timelines: Life Events that Shape Our Prayer

Our histories shape our prayers. Our earliest memories of prayer might be a loving mother, father or other caregiver praying with you at bedtime. Or it might be a spontaneous prayer of thanksgiving witnessing the beauty of bright stars in the night. Perhaps it was to pray to God when a close friend or family member was sick or dying or for protection in a time of fear. Whatever the beginnings, our understanding of prayer continues to change as our experiences and relationship and conversations with God continue in our life. This exercise asks us to consider the arc of our prayers through our life events.

Individually, take two blank sheets of paper and a pen. On the first sheet, write 6-8 important events in your life in chronological order from early childhood until now.

Turn the second sheet of paper sideways and draw a line from left to right, spanning the entire length of the paper. Close your eyes and think of your first memories of prayer. How old were you? Were you praying alone or with another person? What was your image of God? For what were you praying? On the far left line, write the year (or your age) of this memory and the current year on the far right. Write the events listed in step 1 in chronological order on your timeline and circle each. For each event, consider your prayer life.

For each event, write above the line your image of God at that time. It doesn’t need to be a physical image. It can be how you understood God’s nature. Was God close or far away? Was God healer, companion, comforter, angry, loving, etc.? Does an image such as a flower or an emotion such as anger come to mind? Below each line write the places and the ways you prayed. At that time, for what or whom did you pray most often? Do the same for your life today.

Take a moment to reflect on your timeline.

- How did your prayers change throughout your life?
- Were there times when praying were easier or more difficult? If so, how?
- What questions about prayer or God did you have during your life?
- What questions do you continue to have?
- Which events were most influential in shaping your prayer life? In what way?
- Did a particular person influence your understanding of prayer? How?
- What cultural settings have affected your prayer? How?

Share your thoughts in two’s and three’s. When all groups are finished, gather with the entire community to share your learnings.

Conclude with this poem or a poem or prayer of your own choosing.
The Weaver by Janet Bartram-Thomas, from Richmond Hill, Ontario Canada

From age beyond time
Proudly earthbound
Comes a woman with her sister.
Unceremoniously she weaves
Minutes and fleeting hours,
Heartaches and brief triumphs,
Joys and the eternal ache
Into the humble warp and woof of
All over, everyday rhythms—
The makeshift tumblings and
Sandshifting plans of
Life itself.

Her colours are the greys of grief,
The deafening darks of unknowing,
Gentle shades of soft words
Deep and strong in the thick night.
One strand reaches a woman’s old heart,
Another holds a child’s wild fear.
In her rich tapestry there is time to
Throw a balancing thread across to
Steady the pride in ageless man.

This woman knows the hues of
Sunrises and holy tears,
The blend and harmonies of
Shared laughter and tender friends.
She catches with her ceaseless shuttle
Flecks of joy and patches of fun
Interspersing them tirelessly with
Life’s monotones and bland uniformities.

The feminine colours find her as she
Tends, soothes and finally
Receives into her matchless work
The souls and unending pains of the
Fragile, the inwardly lost,
The stumbling and the bravely sick.

With the mercy of angels
Her fabric dances brightly.
What shining brilliance

Source: Lifting Women’s Voices, Prayers to Change the World, page 156. Used with permission.
4. Sharing Our Stories: The Celebrations and Challenges of Prayer

The following poem by Edwina Gateley relates what happens to us when we share stories with one another.

*The Sharing*

by Edwina Gateley

We told our stories, that's all.  
We sat and listened to each other  
and heard the journeys of each soul.  
We sat in silence entering each one's pain  
and sharing each one's joy.  

We heard love's longing and the lonely reachings-out for love and affirmation.  
We heard of dreams shattered and visions fled.  
Of hopes and laughter turned stale and dark.  
We felt the pain of isolation and the bitterness of death.  

But in each brave and lonely story  
God's gentle life broke through  
And we heard music in the darkness and  
smelt flowers in the void.  

We felt the budding of creation in the searchings of each soul  
and discerned the beauty of God's hand in each muddy, twisted path.  

And God's voice sang in each story.  
God's life sprang from each death.  
Our sharing became one story of a simple lonely search for life and hope and oneness in a  
world which sobs for love.  
And we knew that in our sharing, God's voice with mighty breath was saying: love each other  
and take each other's hand. For you are one, though many, and in each of you I live.  

So listen to my story and share my pain and death. Oh, listen to my story and rise and live with me.

After you have read “The Sharing”
Recall when another person’s story, whether someone close by, afar or a story you read in a book or article, provided a window of understanding or a fresh perspective on an idea or situation.

- Who was the storyteller and what was the story about that made an impression on you?
- Did you gain new understanding and insights from the story? If so, share them.
- Did the story inspire you to any kind of action?

Remember a time when you were the storyteller.

- To whom did you tell your story?
- Did you gain new understanding and insights from telling your story or from the person with whom you shared? If so, what were they?
- How might your story have inspired others to a new understanding or action?

The far-reaching impact of stories
Consider what the results might be if stories were exchanged between women in the greater Anglican Communion across the world. That is the goal of the 2014 Spring Conference Weaving Our Bonds of Affection.

- Do you pray for a particular person, group or others in the Anglican Communion? If so, whom? Do you pray with that person or group? For what do you pray? How does the political, social or cultural context of that person or group impact your prayers? How does your political, social, and cultural context shape yours?
- How might knowing about a clan conflict in South Sudan, a contaminated well in Niger, or a struggling secondary school for girls in India impact your intercessory prayers? What would be the benefits and the challenges of expanding your intercessions based on the personal stories of women around the world?
- What things would you ask women on the other side of the world to pray for concerning your life?

Conclude with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.

*Surprising and Unexpected*
by Kathleen Connor, from Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Creator God,
Who made place and creature in infinite variety,
Enable us to do as Jesus taught:
To see and serve You in all those chance has made our neighbor.
Keep our hearts open to celebrate
Your work in surprising places and unexpected people. Amen

*Source: Lifting Women’s Voices, Prayers to Change the World, p. 354 Used with permission.*
5. What Do We Believe? What Have Others Said?

Examining another person’s ideas about prayer can inspire us, clarify our thoughts, and challenge us to expand our own understanding of prayer. Use the following quotes to begin a reflection about prayer.

Suggestions for how to use the quotes:
- Choose your favorite from the following quotes. Examine why you chose the quote either by journaling or discussing the quote with others. Recall an experience in your own life that affirms what the quote says. Be prepared to tell your story.
- Choose a quote that you do not understand or that challenges your beliefs about prayer. Examine what your questions are or the reason the quote does not feel entirely true by journaling or discussing the quote with others.
- Search out your own quotes on prayer that are meaningful to you. Be prepared to share the reason you chose the quote and how it applies to your own experience.

After exploring the quotes, consider these questions:
- What is the nature of the God to whom you pray?
- Why do you pray?
- For what do you pray?

______________________________________________________________________________

We may be very uncertain about the way we pray, about the things we pray for, often about our sincerity of motive, but we need never be uncertain about the answer, for it is always sure to be right, no matter how we pray. Right in the supremely beautiful and perfect end toward which we draw nearer every day. Our petitions for the best part must be sadly imperfect, as is our vision of God and His nature. Prayer and praise are but the rudiments we learn here of the great universal and Heavenly language. Emily Morgan, The Letters of Emily Morgan

Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts. Mother Teresa

Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden. Corrie ten Boom

There is a lovely prayer of a fisherman who, concerned not to be too harsh in exploiting the river, asks its permission to fish. What a reverent attitude toward creation. Desmond Tutu in An African Prayerbook

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. It is laying hold of His willingness. Julian of Norwich
Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine. Kathleen Norris

If the only prayer you said was thank you that would be enough. Meister Eckhart

Help is a prayer that is always answered. It doesn't matter how you pray—with your head bowed in silence, or crying out in grief, or dancing. Churches are good for prayer, but so are garages and cars and mountains and showers and dance floors. Years ago I wrote an essay that began, "Some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom. “ Anne Lamott in *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

Through a moment of deep meditation in which I prayed for God’s guidance, and the constant working of the Holy Spirit, I suddenly saw the light. I realized that I should see my personal prestige as worthless for I was merely a small servant of the Lord. Florence Li Tim-Oi in *Raindrops of My Life*

Prayer imparts meaning to life, to everything in life, even the terrible things. It doesn't make bad things good. It doesn't erase our sorrows. It won't make the widow happy that her husband has died; it won't even make it understandable. But it will connect her with a reality beyond her sorrow that is bigger than she is, a reality in which she may rest and which can comfort her if she wants to be comforted. Barbara Crafton in *Meditations on the Book of Psalms*

I strain toward God, God strains toward me. I ache for God, God aches for me. Prayer is mutual yearning, mutual straining, mutual aching. Macrina Wiederkehr in *Tree Full of Angels*

What if the windows of our hearts had such lights turned on signaling our prayers for the aching world? Then surely the old year would be graced as it ends and the New Year would begin with tender care. Gunilla Norris on her Facebook page, December 2011.

Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer. L.M. Montgomery in *Anne of Green Gables*

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy. Thérèse de Lisieux

Oh, God, you know I have no money, but you can make the people do for me, and you must make the people do for me. I will never give you peace till you do, God. Sojourner Truth

The presence of the holy is not only beyond us and before us, but also deep within us. The very impulse to pray is of the Spirit. Martha L. Moore-Keish in *Christian Prayer for Today*.
In order to have a personal relationship, however, it is helpful to name the Divine. “Sophia” has become the best divine name for my prayers. I resonate immensely with her qualities of guidance, truth-bringing, and companionship. Joyce Rupp in *Prayers to Sophia*.

Prayer connects us to God and God’s power. Changes take place when we pray. Sometimes the issue is transformed, at other times we are the ones changed. Either way, God’s power is at work. One of seven reasons to pray found in *The Prayers We Breathe by the Mothers’ Union*.

All shall be Amen and Alleluia. Augustine

Conclude with this prayer, or a prayer of your choosing.

*Have Mercy, Oh Lord*
by Pritty Sangma, from Guwahati, India

God Almighty,
You have created us for a purpose.
Help us to fulfill it by your Holy Spirit.
Give us your wisdom from above
to work, serve, and feed the people
who are hungry.
Have mercy, O Lord,
God Almighty,
Bless the children of yours,
So that they know not hunger and suffering.
Let them live with dignity and plenty.

Have mercy, O Lord.
Let your love flow, O Lord.

Amen

Source: *Lifting Women’s Voices, Prayers to Change the World*, p. 67. Used with permission.
6. Prayers Seeking God’s Will: The Widow and Elijah

Prayerful Listening Results in God’s Abundant Provision

Gather
Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. Luke 6:38

Read
Introduction: In the following Bible passage, we meet a widow who becomes the rescuer of the Prophet Elijah. In order to keep Elijah safe during a great drought and famine, God directs him to go to the region of Sidon. God’s words to Elijah are, “I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” Turn your attention to the humble woman whom God chose to help Elisha and the outcome of her obedience and trust.

1 Kings 17:8-16

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’ So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ But she said, ‘As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’ Elijah said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.’ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Reflect on the Story of the Widow
Consider the story of the widow of Zarephath and ask yourself:
- What are God’s invitations in this passage?
- What does God promise in this passage?
- With what or whom do you identify in the story?

Reflect on Your Story
Recall a time when you were aware of God specifically directing or calling you to do something:
- What was that call and how did you hear it? (e.g. through prayer, people, events)
- Did you pray about the call or seek understanding for what you were being asked to do? If so, how did you pray?
- Was there anything that you needed to give up or sacrifice in order to answer God’s call or do as directed?
- Did you struggle with obeying? If so, what barriers did you face? How did you pray for peace and agreement to answer what God was calling you to do?
- Were you able to accept that call? If so, what was the result? Did it surprise you?
- What sustains in your prayers?
- What does your experience reveal about your understanding of God?

Conclude with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.

*Break into Our Parched Lives*
by Joanna Udal, from Khartoum, Sudan

Living God,
We long for your presence
As for water in a dry and thirsty land.
Come to us in our hour of need;
Break into our parched lives;
Inundate our hearts with fresh streams of living water.
Let us drink deeply and never be thirsty
Except to know you fully as we are known,
In Jesus Christ, the living spring.

7. Prayers of Intercession: The Canaanite Woman

God’s Abundant Provision for Us and Others through Prayers of Intercession

A Meditation on Matthew 15:21-19

This Bible study and exploration of prayer based on the story of the Canaanite woman is set as a meditation to be done individually or as a group.

Relax and settle into the presence of God and imagine God’s loving grace resting upon you.

Breathe, and remember that you depend on God for each breath.

Ask for the gift of memory and the invitation to be open to the indwelling of God’s spirit.

Read aloud Matthew 15:21-29

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.’ 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.

The Meditation

Imagine yourself sitting next to the Canaanite woman in the story. She is a friend. You are in a busy place with people coming and going with the din of conversations all around you. You become aware that your friend is excited, and she stands expectantly and then moves forward and shouts, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” What is her expression at this very moment? Have you experienced a time when you felt like there was no one to whom to turn?

Jesus first rebuffs your friend. How do you feel when Jesus ignores your friend and the disciples urge him to send the two of you away—are you surprised, confused, or angry? Have you ever felt Jesus has turned away from you?

Turn now to see how your friend will respond to Jesus. Watch, stand tall and hear the words of your friend as she continues to entreat Jesus to show mercy. Does your friend’s persistence cause you to think of a prayer request for which you have given up?
Jesus then turns to you both and says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Feel the joy and thanksgiving that you and the Canaanite women experience at Jesus’ words. Recall a time in which you were filled with joy when a prayer was answered.

Moving slowly to the present, what people and situations are you praying for each day? Silently say their names to Jesus.

Breathe in these reassuring words, “The LORD is near to all them that call on him, to all that call on him in truth.” (Psalms 145: 18) Now consider this direction, “Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Write down your thoughts, feelings and insights gained in this practice. When ready, share them with one another. As a group, what have you learned about prayer through this exercise? (Note: The meditation format is modeled after a meditation by Julia McCray Goldsmith. Working Group Head for Discipleship Ministries / Ministry Development Officer for the Diocese of California)

Conclude with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.

To Save Us from Poverty
By Mugisa Isingoma, from Diocese of Boga, Democratic Republic of Congo

Lord, you who are above all things,
you who know us more than we know ourselves,merciful Father, nothing is impossible in you.

We women are created in your image.
You have given us everything
so that we may live in peace and security;
you have given us nourishment.

Forgive us Lord.

Lord, Jesus,
you who did not behold your own glory,
you descended to save us
from the poverty before us.

Lord, plead for our cause, the cause of our children.
Through us, Lord, change the face of the world.

You love us, Lord;
Help us. In the name of Jesus, Amen

Source: Lifting Women’s Voices, Prayers to Change the World, p. 87. Used with permission.
8. Blessings: Mary and Elizabeth

Lectio Divina (Holy Reading) of Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1: 39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

Read
- Take a moment of silence to move inward in preparation for the reading.
- Have one member read the text aloud.
- As you listen to the sacred text, allow yourself to focus meditatively on evocative words, images, phrase, etc. that speak to you.
- Name those words, phrases and images.
- Allow for several minutes of silence after the reading of the text.

Meditate
- Have another member read the text aloud a second time.
- This is a time to ruminate and reflect on the words that have been spoken to us.
- Share aloud with one another what the voice of God is saying to you in this text.

Pray
- After your conversation and sharing, have another group member read the text a third time.
- Allow for silence after the reading of the text. Let the words settle in more deeply and notice the prayers that emerge.
- You are encouraged to offer an expression of prayer in response to what has been shared and read.

Contemplate
- If time allows, have a group member read the text a final time aloud.
- A period of silence follows and remains throughout this stage.
- In this silence, rest in the love of God. This final part is a time to surrender self and be in the presence of a mystical union with the Divine.

The silence may be concluded with a communal prayer – such as The Lord’s Prayer.
After this practice of lectio divina, your group might reflect about beliefs about and practices of prayer. We begin with quotes about prayer to prompt your imaginings.

“Churches are good for prayer, but so are garages and cars and mountains and showers and dance floors.” Ann Lamott

“Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts.” Mother Theresa

“If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.” Meister Eckhart

**Reflect on what you learned**
- How do you pray?
- For what do you pray?
- What image comes to mind when you pray?
- What is the nature of the God to whom you pray?

(Note: This exercise is based on directions for *lectio divina* prepared by Sissie Wile for a retreat in Pennsylvania).

**Conclude with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing.**

*Gift of Life*
By Nina Vest Salmon, from Lynchburg, VA, USA

Loving God,
We thank you for the gift of life;
Grant us a lifetime of opportunities.
Help us to help ourselves that we may find
Clean water and nourishment
Freedom from oppression
The ability to give and sustain life
Resources to keep our bodies and minds healthy
Respect for our Mother Earth
and awareness of our place in the world that embraces us.
Help us to know that God’s gift to the world, His son,
Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray,
Is the gift of Life.

*Source: Lifting Women’s Voices, Prayers to Change the World, p. 47. Used with permission.*
9. How Is Culture Embedded in Prayer and How Is Prayer Embedded in Culture?

The Cultural Contexts of Women’s Prayers throughout the World: One Example from Africa

Our prayers and images of God are influenced by the culture in which we live. Most often we do not have an opportunity to experience the images and prayers of those from a different culture. Having information and insight about how women living in another part of the world interpret and practice their spirituality invites us to reflect on how our own culture informs our prayers. It also provides us with a rich source of new ideas to consider weaving into our understanding of who we are as sisters in Christ in the global community of women.

The text that follows is an excerpt of an essay written by Mercy Amba Oduyoye that describes the ways some African women think of God and how their images shape what they believe about their roles as women and accessing God’s presence in their lives. We have chosen this essay and the accompanying exercises to be a way to practice opening ourselves up to thinking outside of our own experiences and culture, and in doing so open our hearts and minds to embrace both the similarities and differences.

Please read the exercises that appear after the essay before reading the essay.

Africans experience God -- Nana -- as the good parent, the grandparent. Some say he is father; others say she is mother. But the sentiment is the same: Nana is the source of loving-kindness and protection.

Writing about Africa is a hazardous enterprise. One needs to draw up many parameters and make explicit the extent of the study. This becomes even more difficult considering the subject in hand. Whose experience of God are we dealing with? What is the extent of the Africa we are talking about? From the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope there have been primal religious experiences of God issuing, for instance, in the building of the pyramids and continuing to undergird the annual festivals celebrated by West Africans. There are Muslims from Cape Verde to the Red Sea and down to Dar and throughout the continent, some of them having roots going to the beginnings of Islam while others are recent converts. The same goes for Christians. Africa also hosts Hindus and Sikhs and Buddhists and many others. We, therefore, want to talk about the experience of God in a multi-religious context.

To create a handle for the subject we shall limit ourselves to the Primal Religion (designated African Religion, AR) as it has been documented by recent studies, and the new Christianity that Africa is living in our days. Geographically we shall limit ourselves to Africa south of the Sahara. The scope of the content will be guided by the experiences of God I have gathered through reading and participation in events that have afforded me the possibility of hearing Africans talk about God. I have in mind the traditional notions as captured by the early African theologians from the AR, the experience of God in South Africa in the days of the struggle against racism, and the emerging profile of God being sketched by African women through creative literature and theological reflection. But first we need to establish the nature of the reality of God in African cosmology and culture.

**Women's Experiences of God**

The South African reimaging of God revolved around ridding themselves of the patriarchal model that supports the hierarchy, domination, and sexism of their experience under apartheid. On this, the editors of *Black Theology: The South African Voice* wrote: "The symbol 'person' for God attracts both gender and color and has strong overtones of authority." "God is male" has had repercussions in Christianity that one cannot continue to uphold; therefore, "Black theology of liberation that is relevant to South Africa cannot afford to perpetuate any form of domination, not even male domination; if its liberation is not human enough to include the liberation of women, it will not be liberation." [Allan Boesak, "Coming Out of the Wilderness," in Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, eds., *The Emergent Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 25)] The constitution of the new South Africa has been true to this vision, a vision shared by many African women and articulated by women who have constituted themselves into a Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian. [Note: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians came into being on the initiative of Mercy Amba Oduyoye to enable African women to contribute to the theological literature that is being developed by Africans. Since its
inauguration in October of 1989 two pan-African books and three regional ones have been published. Papers from the August pan-African conference are being processed for publication.

Since in the Church in Africa men and the clergy presume to speak for God, and to demand the obedience of women, it is not easy to experience God as empowering and liberating when one is in the Church's ambit. Women experience God as the one who orders their subordination, who requires them to serve and never be served. God is the one who made them women, with a body deemed to be the locus of sin and impurity. God is experienced as source of women's oppression and Jesus as the author of the exclusion of women from sacramental roles in the Church. This is the God the Christian tradition wants women to love and obey.

For many women, however, this is a clear substitution of the will of God for the will of the male of the human species. Many women experience God differently and cannot allow themselves to be subjected to cultural codes that mask the image of God in women. They experience God as empowering them with a spirituality of resistance to dehumanization. The androcentric Bible and Church have not been able to warp women's direct experience of God as a loving liberator.

The experience of God is articulated by these women in terms of a theology of creation and the implications of the Christian affirmation that "God was in Christ." The Christology of African women is centered on Jesus, friend and liberator who upholds the dignity of the humanity of women. They experience God in Christ as affirming the goodness of the sexuality of women, a factor that has been a pretext in both AR and Christianity for the diminution of women, discrimination against them and their marginalization from centers of power and the ministration of sacraments. Writings of women theologians from Africa are replete with these experiences. [See Part 1 of Kanyoro and Njoroge, Groaning in Faith, for examples.]

In The Will to Arise Teresia Hinga describes an experience of God in Christ that is very real to African women. Women often describe Jesus as the friend and companion who helps them bear life's burdens. [Teresia Hinga in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, The Will to Arise (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 190-91.] There is also the prophetic Jesus who challenges oppressors and hypocrites but forgives sinners. In Jesus, women experience the God who is love. These experiences of God are affirmed by women in terms of "nevertheless." Women describe themselves as being in the image of God even if sexism denies their dignity.

In the women theologians' circle, studies of God's hospitality, African hospitality, and women in the household of God reveal women's experience of God as the Great Householder who empowers all and recognizes all as children in a parent's home and around the one table. They give expression to experiences of the God who sustains in times of dire need and who brings victory where it is least expected. They have constantly attributed all recognition and inclusiveness to the power of God which transforms human beings and human conditions. They express their experience of God in affirming cultural beliefs and practices, while they feel called by God to denounce and to deconstruct oppressive ones.

Despite sexism's making it difficult for women to experience God in the Church, women have nevertheless witnessed to their experience of God in Christ, the one who brings salvation. While critical of certain aspects of biblical culture, they have nevertheless testified to their experience of the liberating God of the Bible in events in their own lives. Rereading Scripture, and
especially the stories of women in the Bible, has brought God closer and enhanced the Presence around us. [Christine Landman, "A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey," in Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Groaning in Faith*, 99-111.] Women experience God as groaning with them as they participate in straining toward the birth of a new Africa free from sexism and racism, from poverty, exploitation, and violence.

All experiences of "love beyond self," all that is just and life-giving, are understood to be expressions of the presence of God. [Grace Ndyabahika, "Women's Place in Creation," in Kanyoro and Njoroge, *Groaning in Faith*, 256] All that enhances the dignity and worth of women is attributed to the presence of God. Women who take the image of God in human beings seriously see it in the faces of the starving children around them and in all those who suffer needlessly in Africa. When women live by caring, they are expressing the caring God in whose image they are created. Hopefully those who experience love and justice and compassion will realize that God is present.

MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE is a widely known African theologian, author of *Daughters of Anowa* (Orbis, 1995) and -- with Musimbi Kanyoro -- *The Will to Arise* (Orbis, 1995). This essay appeared first in a special issue on Africa in *The Way*, the English Jesuit journal of spirituality, Summer 1997. Used with permission. For the complete article please go to [www.crosscurrents.org/african.htm](http://www.crosscurrents.org/african.htm). Used with permission.]
Suggestions for using the excerpt of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s essay individually or as a group:

Prior to reading the essay, record how you would answer these questions: How is the culture in which you live reflected in your prayer? How do your prayers impact your culture? Think of some examples to support your thoughts on these two questions.

Read the essay: Due to the length of the article, we recommend reading it prior to your group’s meeting and discussion.

After reading the article:
- Has the essay changed or expanded your sense of how the culture in which you live is reflected in your prayer? How do your prayers impact your culture?
- Did examples in the article expand your understanding of the relationship between cultural context and prayer?

The Venn diagram shown on the left is one way to record ideas as group members share their discoveries of what they have in common and not in common with the African women in the article. To use a Venn diagram, use a large sheet of chart paper and draw two intersecting circles. Label the right, white circle AFRICAN WOMEN’S PRAYER PRACTICES and the left white circle MY CULTURE’S PRAYER PRACTICES and in the middle intersecting space of the two circles (in diagram it is shaded) label PRAYER PRACTICES SHARED BY BOTH CULTURES. As people share insights about what they learned from Oduyoye’s essay, record their responses in the appropriate space on the circle.

Conclude with this poem or a poem or prayer of your own choosing.

Midrash: Genesis
Lynn Dean Hunter, from Virginia Beach, USA

On the seventh day, He rested.

She swept up the scraps,
(saving those big enough to make ears or tails),
She polished the water
scrubbed the sky, and gave the birds song.
She saw that it was good.
Then she danced with the fields.
The wind, watching her, learned to comfort the grass.
Later, pools of gold and lavender appeared in the sky just where she vanished.

10. Narrative Bibliography

We offer these resources if you would like to explore prayer beyond the scope of this guide.

*An African Prayer Book*, prayers selected by Bishop Desmond Tutu. New York: Doubleday, 1995. A collection of prayers of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication as well as prayers for daily life from places throughout Africa. We are invited to pray with others. And through these prayers we learn of the particularities of the lives of people in Africa—their concerns, thanksgivings, images of God, and world views.

*Becoming Bread: Embracing the Spiritual in the Everyday*, Gunilla Norris; Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 1993 (first published in Bell Tower). Norris’s meditations and poems on making bread are nourishing. They deepen our awareness of the sacred in every moment.

*Christian Prayer for Today* by Martha L. Moore-Keish, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. Martha Moore-Keish explores core questions about prayers—Who is the God we encounter? Who are we when we pray? What is prayer?—as well as topics such as the contexts of prayer and modes of prayer. Each short chapter would provide the basis for a rich conversation exploring our personal prayer lives.

*Lifting Women’s Voices*, edited by Margaret Rose, Jenny TePaa, Jeanne Person, Abagail Nelson, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009. This book is a collection of poems and prayers written by women from all over the world about social justice concerns as they relate to women and children such as hunger, poverty health and education.

*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C, New York: Doubleday, 2007. In this volume of a collection of Mother Teresa’s personal letters written over decades, we learn of a woman who struggled with times during which she longed for God that she felt was not present with her.

*Prayer, Finding the Heart’s True Home*, Richard J Foster, San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1992. Richard Foster writes in the introduction: “This book is written to help you explore the “many-splendred” heart of God...this book is about a love relationship with the great God of the universe. And overwhelming love invites a response. Loving is the syntax of prayer. To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers.” Foster discusses the many kinds of prayer and how they fit into our spiritual life.

*The Prayers We Breathe by the Mothers’ Union*, London: Mothers’ Union, 2003. Prayers mostly written by Mothers’ Union members that reflect their diversity of culture, language, imagery and ways of praying. Included are morning and evening prayers, and prayers for needs, relationships, death, the Church, sickness, the Mother’s Union and spirituality.
Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, Sybil MacBeth, Orleans, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2009. Sybil MacBeth models for and instructs the reader how to represent prayers in a visual, graphic form through intentional doodles and images. Paper and colored pencils or crayons become the way into different kinds of prayers. This book offers a fresh way to experience expressing your intercessions and seeking the presence of God. MacBeth says this of her work, “God has taken one of my passions—color; combined it with one of my inadequacies—drawing; added it to my antsy and improvisational personality; and given me a new way to pray.”

Reaching Out, Henri Nouwen, New York: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1975. Henri Nouwen writes of how we can reach out to ourselves, our fellow human beings and to our God. In understanding our own and others’ loneliness and desires of the heart we can enter into transforming individual and community prayer. Nouwen poses and answers this question: “If prayer, understood as an intimate relationship with God, is indeed the basis of all relationships—to ourselves as well as to others—how then can we learn to pray and really experience prayer as the axis of our existence?”

Soul Weavings: A Gathering of Women’s Prayers, edited by Lyn Klug, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996. A book of prayers by women across history and the globe. The introduction invites the reader to use the prayers as inspiration, a starting-point for personal prayers, and companions for our own lives. Prayers are by churches and women across the world.

A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary, Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB; New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988. This marvelous book, written in the Benedictine spirit, includes the author’s reflections on being constantly in relationship with God, as well as poetry, prayers, and letters that invite us to be with God always, in the most ordinary aspects of life.

WomanWord: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter, Miriam Therese Winter; New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001. This highly original celebration of women in the New Testament includes readings, psalms, liturgies, prayers, and personal reflections, many of which relate the Biblical stories to modern social justice issues, such as abuse of women and children, war, and women’s ministry.
Matthew 12: 15-28 “The Faith of a Canaanite Woman”
The Canaanite woman must have heard of the miracles that Jesus had performed, and she recognized who he was by calling him Son of David. Being ignored and turned away did not deter this woman from humbly kneeling before Jesus with her request for healing for her daughter. Her example teaches us that intercessory prayer requires patience and persistence. Her reward for not giving up was the mercy and grace that Jesus gave her and her daughter.

1 Kings 17:8-16 “The Widow of Zarephath”
The widow and her son were in a desperate situation, and she knew they would die because of lack of food. 1 Corinthians 1:27 tells us: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong,” and that is the case with the widow. The story does not report directly that the widow prayed to God, but it does tell us that she was directed by the Lord to help Elijah. It is evident that she listened to the Lord and in faith and obedience was receptive to God’s call to her. She emptied herself by giving Elijah had brought her which resulted in the abundant provision of her needs beyond what she had imagined possible.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth’s meeting shows that they are bonded not just by kinship, but also by shared trust and openness to the Holy Spirit. Through the relationship of the two mothers, their two unborn children meet, and this meeting foreshadows the role that John will play in the life of Jesus. The two parallel connections between the mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, and the unborn sons, Jesus and John, illustrate how the Holy Spirit uses relationship to elicit hope and joy. The passage confirms that both Mary and Elizabeth’s sons have divine origins and purposes. It would have surprised first century readers that the confirmation was made known through the testimonies of women and unborn children.