

Protagonist Corner

O. Benjamin Sparks III
Richmond, Virginia

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure
to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

The greatest challenge to mainline Christianity is not the loss of members or the fragmenting of generations into sociological interest groups whose needs require the gospel to be adjusted or fine tuned. It is not worship wars or the exponential growth of "me-centered" mega churches. It is not the soul-withering processes that have asserted control of denominations and governing bodies that sap the life out of congregations and pastors. The challenge is simpler and deeper; it is the pearl of great price that rescues authentic faith and faithful discipleship from the dustbin of ecclesial history. It is prayer: prayer to the living God in the Spirit, prayer which is regular, disciplined, and communal. Upon such prayer hang the prayers of individual disciples and church members.

This notion has been growing in me for a number of years, but I trace its beginnings to the practice of prayer and scripture reading in my family of origin, to the prayers offered in chapel by the president and faculty of Union Seminary (now Union-PSCE), and to my membership in the Iona Community with its daily office, twice weekly Eucharist, and once weekly "Quaker service." Those experiences and training in Christian practice have now been enlarged by three trips to Africa and my observation of the extraordinary faith and prayer of a church which is poor in things and rich, oh so rich, in soul.

I believe that a sure sign of this need for prayer (for real communication with God) is worship renewal within the mainline in recent years: the introduction of Evensong, Midday Prayer, and Compline, the use of the term Eucharist for the Lord's Supper, and the incorporation of the Sanctus, Memorial Acclamation, and Great Amen into the Prayer of Thanksgiving – even in Presbyterian Churches. All of these practices link us to the holy, universal church. Further, there is the astonishing fact that in a mere four decades, Advent Wreaths are available in Baptist/Evangelical Bookstores. Five decades ago in the South, Advent was the practice of Episcopalians and Catholics. I would argue that such evidence is an indication – even a flickering – of "established" Christianity's hunger for mystery and transcendence – even hunger for God.

Experiences in Africa helped confirm my suspicion. When my wife and I first arrived in Ghana almost ten years ago for me to be attached for a month to a downtown church in Accra as a visiting associate pastor, we were met at the airport and taken to our lodgings. Immediately after we crossed the threshold, water was brought and opened and offered; then prayers of thanksgiving, welcome, and hope were offered in English which is, of course, not their native tongue. We heard prayers of shaming eloquence and sincerity. Such an occasion happily contradicts the notion that sloppy, emotional, off-the cuff prayers ("Lord, we just, I just . . .") which are so often self-centered, telling God about us and how we feel, are somehow more authentic than disciplined, articulate praying. The prayers which I hold up as examples are spoken

to God – and are not about us.

Further, in 2006, members of our congregation and I visited St. James Congregation in Malawi, which is in the Blantyre Synod of the Central Church of Africa, Presbyterian. We arrived in the dark by bus three hours late and were welcomed by nearly 100 members and elders with prayers and unaccompanied singing. Then there was a tour of the church.

As we entered the sanctuary at nearly 10:00 p.m. we heard whisperings and exclamations coming from a dimly lit balcony in the center of the building opposite the chancel – and we asked what it was. The sounds were of people at prayer (not Pentecostal but Presbyterian!). It was explained to us that people were always at prayer in that balcony, twenty-four hours a day, except for the occasions (Sunday morning, Saturday night, and Wednesday evening) when the space was used for worship. Think what might be accomplished in urban congregations all across America with such a twenty-four hour security system, and how much might be saved on monitored security systems to be channeled into mission projects.

In addition while we were in Blantyre, we discovered that on every holy occasion, year round (first in Advent, in Lent, Easter, Christmas, and perhaps in times of great need: outbreaks of violence or witchcraft) men in the congregation – led by elders – go up onto a nearby mountain and pray and fast for twenty-four to thirty-six hours. This occurs in a church of 7,500 members with one pastor and 500 elders, where the clerk of Session is a woman. This congregation is only ten years old.

What would happen to us – who are in the midst of a great spiritual revival and are mired in intractable ethical conflict – if the governing bodies of our congregations went on retreats – and threw out the consultants, extinguished power point presentations, and all those tedious, secular decision-making processes? What if we prayed and fasted for twenty-four to thirty-six hours? Such occasions would require the use of scripture and discussion, silence, liturgy and extemporaneous prayer. It would also be an opportunity for more experienced elders to train younger elders in the practices of prayer spoken directly to God. Such events might begin to break down the knee-jerk, artificial barrier between liberals and conservatives. We assume that conservatives pray and liberals do not.

What would happen to us – if a local governing body and a pastor nominating committee met for twenty-four hours before issuing a call to a new pastor? Or if a governing body, facing a vote on a controversial change of direction in a mission program, met for thirty-six hours, seeking the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit? No flip charts needed!

Six months into retirement, I have been visiting churches all over Richmond, Virginia. I have listened to announcements of compelling programs, of exciting music and art events, and of new non-traditional worship services. But there was nary a word about the practice of prayer. Who will meet the challenge?