

Contemplative congregation: An invitation to silence

by [Peter Traben Haas](#) in the [March 5, 2014](#) issue



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I serve as pastor for a medium-sized congregation that worships in a gorgeous, soaring mid-century sanctuary with a cream brick interior and tall, fluted windows. I call it a neighborhood cathedral. But what I love most about Westminster is not its building but the people's desire to grow spiritually. It's a congregation of openhearted friendliness.

We have lovely choirs, mission outreach ministries, and a terrific staff. We have no debt. Yet while I'm deeply grateful for our blessings, I came to Westminster looking for something more. Now the congregation has joined me in my search: we are hungry to grow deeper together in Christ and are feeding that hunger with contemplative practices.

When I came to Westminster I had already started a blog and written a book about contemplation, and I shared my interest with the pastoral search committee. For me, I said, the rediscovery and application of the wisdom of the contemplative dimension of Christianity has been a way to grow spiritually. Then I suggested that, after decades of pursuing many other goals, Westminster might be a good candidate for a congregational emphasis on contemplation.

The church called me and supports my efforts to introduce contemplative practices. I anticipated some resistance, of course, and hoped to limit grumbling and anxiety by introducing contemplative elements to the monthly session (board) meetings. Instead of starting with our normal business meeting in the conference room, we

began in the chapel with dimmed lights, the Christ candle lit in the center of the room, and the chairs arranged in a circle, so that we were all facing one another.

I led the board through several calming prayers, helping us “relax until calm” and “get into our bodies” by noticing our breath and feeling our heartbeats. Then we did *lectio divina*. Session members welcomed the change and found the 30 minutes so refreshing that some of them began to refer to the chapel time as their “spiritual spa.” One member told the group that “our worship time has transformed our meetings.” He went on to say that instead of feeling burned out after the meeting, he went home feeling renewed and encouraged by the love in the community. This was a welcome sign of growth.

In 2013 we decided to read all of the Bible during the year and to deepen our prayer life, particularly through centering prayer, a meditative prayer practice grounded in the trinitarian love of God and resourced from the depth and breadth of a contemplative Christian tradition that goes back to teachings such as Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God,” as well as Jesus’ teaching on prayer: “But whenever you pray, go into your inner room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6).

While there are many different types of meditative prayer, the unique characteristic of centering prayer is that it is a receptive, resting prayer rather than a concentrated, active prayer. The difference is this: in centering prayer when one becomes engaged or distracted by a thought, feeling, sensation, or noise, one ever so gently returns to a chosen word such as *Jesus*, *Abba*, or *love*. Thus centering prayer is not a continuous mantra prayer. After ten or 15 minutes, one begins to notice that the distractions and thoughts are less frequent; one does not return to the chosen word as often.

In other forms of meditation we focus on a word or on the silence, while in centering prayer we consent to God’s presence. Our goal is *not* to have no thoughts or to continuously say a certain word but to consent to the presence of the Spirit of God in the silence.

I was encouraged when a regular centering prayer participant told me, “this prayer and the writings of Thomas Keating have changed my life.” A member of our Lenten centering prayer class said that her daily centering prayer practice has allowed her to reduce her daily depression medicine significantly—with her psychiatrist’s

permission. Others have told me that while they value the practice, they can't stand how many thoughts run into their minds when they try to sit down and do centering prayer. One church member flat out told me, "I can't do it. It's like I'm getting pummeled with thoughts all the time." "Yes," I say, "I understand. It's like that for me too, but the value of the prayer and its effectiveness in our life can't be measured by how many thoughts we have."

In conjunction with a program to read the Bible in a year, we've welcomed a brief *lectio divina* service prior to the 9 a.m. traditional Sunday worship service. We meet in the chapel in a circle with a candle holding the center, and I read a section of the lectionary for the day. I read it slowly three or four times, providing for increasing silence and giving the participants time and space to listen deeper than the surface meaning of the text. We're listening for something more than just information; we're listening for transformation. In this way it's as if the silence helps us surrender our need to be in control of the reading and to consent to the scripture and the Holy Spirit "reading" us.

Last Lent more than a hundred people attended each week of an eight-week introduction to centering prayer. We concluded the class with a three-day centering prayer retreat held at a nearby monastery. Retreatants appreciated the silence of this post-Easter retreat and the growth and love that occurred in the time together. Encouraged by the positive feedback, we began evening and morning centering prayer groups.

Last year a Wednesday vespers service marked the conclusion of our children, youth, and adult programming. It was an extraordinary experience to sit in silence for five minutes with 50 children and youth. I was deeply encouraged as I observed them grow peaceful at the end of a busy day. You could hear a pin drop in the sanctuary—a real miracle.

This fall we have retooled the vespers service, but it still includes five to seven minutes of silence for centering prayer. Afterward I share a brief reflection based on the day's lectionary readings and conclude with contemplative communion—an acoustic style of communion accompanied by Taizé music and silence.

This year a midsummer contemplative vision weekend will feature guest speakers from Contemplative Outreach, as well as a liturgical arts and music component to draw in those who are skeptical. The weekend will help the congregation focus our

current vision process using insights and principles articulated by teachers such as Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr.

Since Sunday morning worship services are the primary time when the entire church community gathers, we use centering silence there as well. After the welcome, greeting, and announcements, but before the call to worship, I invite the congregation to take a few minutes to rest in the silence together and to ask the Holy Spirit to bless them with one thing they need through our time in worship. I can feel a collective sigh as we sink into the silence together—something, I suspect, that many have not done all week.

Others look at me as if I'm speaking a foreign language. I'll never forget the time when a mature Christian man raised his hand during a class on prayer and asked, "But pastor, how can saying nothing and sitting in silence actually be prayer?" We all had a good laugh before I launched into a passionate answer. Apparently it helped him, because he's been attending one of our groups this fall.

While these are wonderful highlights, the number of people engaged in a contemplative practice or group are actually only about 20 people out of 450 regular worship attendees. That leaves a lot of room to grow. But the seed of silence has taken root. I pray that it bears abundant fruit in our community.

As the world spins from one crisis into another, we need a daily practice that holds the center and draws us forward in love. Those who have experienced the fruits of prayer in their own life believe that meditative prayer provides just such a gentle transformation. Resting in God's love in prayer we sow the seeds of silence. When we experience the silence grow in our lives, we reap fruits of the Spirit, including love, joy, and peace.

In *The Habit of Being* Flannery O'Connor describes the world as a place "we cherish at the same time struggle to endure." Some might say that's a good description of the church. But I believe we can do better by being less. We can take a break from all our striving, sit down in the silence, and simply be with God.

Pastors are apprehensive about how to "be Christian" and "do church." I am certain that this apprehension dissipates with a twice-a-day meditative prayer practice. Our perspective on the problems significantly shifts so that we are no longer holding the center but being held. That makes all the difference.

I am certain too that Christian community can articulate its relevancy and connectivity in our time by reclaiming the wisdom of the contemplative way, held in trust by the monastic communities, and now released and available to the wider church in unprecedented ways. We can focus on growing deeper together in Christ through spiritual practices, especially meditative prayer, letting silence grow in us wherever we are.

Read the sidebar article on [resources for contemplative practice](#).