

Prayer on the go: A busy pastors spirituality

by [Michael L. Lindvall](#) in the [December 24, 2014](#) issue

My brother-in-law almost never goes to church, yet he's much more disciplined in his spirituality than I am. An addict nearly ten years into recovery, he begins every day with at least a half hour of reading and prayer. His copy of AA's *The Big Book* is crammed with margin notes written over the last decade. The first time I saw the book, it reminded me of my late grandfather's onionskin KJV New Testament, with a thousand little thoughts that he had lovingly penned into the margins.

If my brother-in-law and I are together, he invites me to read and pray with him in the morning. The readings from *The Big Book* and a smaller Nar-Anon volume are down-to-earth, almost gritty in their spiritual honesty. My brother-in-law's prayers are honest and true—no whisper of pretense. He never misses a morning. The practice has changed his life.

I can hardly excuse my own spiritual ill discipline by telling myself that my minister life is more demanding than his lawyer life. It's not. I've occasionally tried to rise extra early in the morning and begin every day with 30 minutes of Bible study and prayer. But my resolve is soon sunk by late nights, early meetings, plain laziness, or all three. I have finally decided that although I have the highest regard for Benedictine monks who tithe the hours, I cannot do what they do. I'm not wired for a spiritual life shaped by a segmented time of day set aside for scripture and prayer.

At the same time I've come to affirm that I do have a spiritual life. It's differently shaped, and though it appears ragged and lazy to some, it is ample and rewarding for me. Haphazard as it may be, it leads me into a life of fuller obedience to God. As it's woven into my workaday routine and not separate from it, it helps me to better live in love, justice, and compassion toward others.

I was once told that the worship leader cannot worship when he or she is leading worship. Somewhere, perhaps in seminary, I was taught that preparing to lead a Bible study or preach a sermon did not count as Bible study for the one doing the preparation. I got the impression that leading prayer at committee meetings did not count either, or any of the spiritual matters I labored at *as a minister*. This effort was

“professional” and not personal or spiritual. Realizing that this is untrue has brought me great relief and joy.

When I sit down to write a sermon on Friday morning, as is my routine, I pray before I read the passage I plan to preach about. I pray what the Reformed tradition would name a “prayer for illumination of the word.” Later, I pray at my word processor. In the early afternoon I pray as I pace my study struggling to imagine how I can tune this sermon to the ears of my congregation. I sometimes pray when the printer spits out the first draft. “Dear God, these words lie flat on paper; raise them up; transform them from ink into truth that matters.”

I pray early Sunday morning as I make final changes—nips and tucks, sanding rough dependent clauses smooth. I pray as I read the thing over and over until I know it nearly by heart and labor with doubt. “Does this *really* make sense, Lindvall?” And then, just before the choir sings the introit and I find my place in the procession, I settle for a minute in the back pew and pray yet again that the Holy Spirit may bear these mortal words of mine from lip to ear and make them something like the word of God to the congregation sitting in the pews in front of me.

These sermon-writing prayers often spill into pastoral prayers for individual members of my congregation whom I had in my imagination as I wrote, but who may or may not actually hear what I am struggling to say. Sometimes my Friday prayers become prayers of petition for the tired and empty preacher staring blankly at a blank computer monitor. Sometimes they become prayers of thanksgiving for some thought that falls into my head, some tale or wise word that threw itself across my path.

I’ve discovered that prayer imbedded into sermon preparation, prayer infused into committee work, and prayer inserted into hospital visits leads to a radically incarnational sort of prayer life—the warp of prayer woven into the weft of work, the spiritual infusing every fleshly hour of my often mundane duties as a pastor.

I’ve been relieved to find the same to be true of the study of scripture that I do in preparation for sermons and Bible studies. Every week I lead a men’s Bible study from 7:45 to 8:45—ten to 20 bankers, lawyers, and doctors, plus a former U.S. senator and a psychiatrist who’s a recognized expert on sociopathy.

I rise very early on Thursday and spend a couple of hours with the chapters we are studying that day. This is perhaps my lone act of real spiritual discipline. I begin the

class with a quick walk through the text and raise some thoughts for discussion. The discussion is stunningly rich. These men see things that I would never see. They understand things I miss. And I see things they don't. It becomes a journey into the heart of scripture that is changing all of our lives. And it's doing this even though it's a part of my job. The study of scripture as an integral, "professional and required" part of my work is one of the most transforming spiritual experiences of my personal life.

When I get out of bed in the morning, I often pray for the day ahead of me and the people I'll spend time with. At night I pray for my family and the world, though I often fall asleep before I get out the amen. If I have no words, I say the ancient Jesus Prayer over and over. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

I also tuck prayer into odd moments of the days. I often go to yoga class with my older daughter—an experience that I don't find to be exactly "spiritual," although I do like the sound of two dozen people humming "om" harmonically. I do yoga mostly to stretch old muscles that no longer much want to be stretched. But there is a lot of silence during yoga sessions, and I pray into the silence.

I also pray in taxicabs. Most trips are too bumpy and jerky to do anything on a Blackberry, so I pray, usually for the folks in my congregation, the ones I have ritually promised to "keep in my prayers." I also pray in the subway. I get queasy if I try to read, so I often pray for the strangers on the train with me. Some of them appear burdened, others seem venal, and some are clearly mad. Sometimes I imagine that one of them is praying for me.

My spiritual discipline is provisional—the best I can do, and not really very good. But it is woven into my work as a pastor and my days as a harried New Yorker. Planted firmly in the dirt of the days, it makes me a marginally better Christian and human being.