

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## A welcome book about prayer

Many books about prayer recommend methods that I've never been able to connect with, or they're based on beliefs about God that I find unbelievable. However, I've just read a book about prayer that I find a welcome exception to that pattern.



It's *In Times Like These: How We Pray* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2005), edited by Episcopal priests Malcolm Boyd and J. Jon Bruno. Boyd, author of the popular 1960s book *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?*, is a Los Angeles cathedral center's writer-in-residence. Bruno, a former law-enforcement officer, is Episcopal Bishop of Los Angeles.

The book's contributors are an unusually diverse group. They include well-known Christian authors Frederick Buechner, Martin Marty, Harvey Cox, and Phyllis Tickle. But they also include Norman Mailer, a Buddhist priest, a Jew, a female Muslim physician, a military chaplain who has recently been in Iraq, a filmmaker, a recovering meth addict, and other people from a wide variety of occupations and religious and cultural backgrounds.

## Conventional and unconventional ways

*In Times Like These* includes accounts of using traditional, formal Christian prayer methods and disciplines. However, many other books describe and advocate those, so what I like most about this book is its accounts of methods that don't always get acknowledged as prayer. A homemaker, for example, tells how cooking and working with ingredients are her prayer, and a wounded survivor of a terrorist attack tells how writing became her prayer.



I especially identify with that, because writing is my main way, too—journaling, often, but also writ-

## A revolutionary act



For me some of the most compelling statements about prayer in *In Times Like These* are those written by filmmaker Stephen Vittoria. He sees unselfish prayer as a revolutionary act demanding change. He believes that all forms of communication can be prayer if the pray-er desires change that corrects injustice, sets people free, or heals hate with love, or fear with compassion. It's the kind of change that wipes out ignorance with understanding and that ultimately, saves lives, both spiritual and physical. "In most cases," Vittoria observes, "the transformation sought through prayer requires tectonic shifts in behavior. Rarely does prayer seek to perpetuate the status quo."

## Not a humanlike sky god



For Stephen Vittoria, "the simple but always difficult task of listening is step one in prayer." It's "the declaration that what surrounds us may be at times more important than self." Step two is "the ongoing act of obliterating the idea that we need to pray to a humanlike sky god (read: Santa Claus) who sits at the right hand of a vending machine. 'Please, Lord, help me hit the home run—win the lottery—get the job—cure Gracie's cancer—kill my enemy, give me this, oh and I want that, too...' Vittoria is turned off, as I am, by how often "when it seems like a prayer is answered, we rejoice in it; when it seems like a prayer goes unanswered, we fall back on the old safety net saying: 'Gracie died of cancer; I guess it was just God's will.' "



## Blazing new paths

Vittoria urges us instead to be "prayer revolutionaries blazing new paths, finding new ways to pray in a collective manner, offering communiqués that involve equal parts of ourselves, our planet, & our Creator." He wants us to offer alternatives to "the spiritually stunted Norman Rockwell image of pleas for divine intercession—those cute kids on their knees in nightshirts looking toward the heavens, focused on our infamous sky god." Vittoria may be a bit too hard on some well-intended prayers, but pleas like his for reevaluating our prayer deserve to be taken seriously.

ing *Connections* and conversing by e-mail with kindred-spirit readers.



This book's authors refer to God in varied ways, too. Some use familiar masculine words, but one says, "I talk to God, although I don't always call Her that," and another simply reminds us that "the phenomenon that one calls God may not be named as such by another."

## Mystery and ordinariness

"Prayer, in all its complexity and simplicity," observes Malcolm Boyd in his introduction, "embraces differences and similarities, body and soul, sacred and secular, mystery and ordinariness." He tells how the question of meaning kept gnawing at his heart as a young adult. He had grown up respecting religion and superficially participating in it but distanced from it. Then for the first time he really started praying and discovered it was changing him.



"I was tearing down walls separating me from life," he explains. "I began to open up my life to God, other people, circumstances, situations, challenges, new things. It was an extraordinary feeling. Shedding my skin. Seeing with fresh eyes. Perceiving whole new worlds. I was in awe."

## Strategic penetration of culture

Boyd came to feel that "strategic, patient, unpublicized penetration of culture can be evangelism of the highest order." He found that activism in pursuit of justice was prayer. For him, that started with taking part in a civil rights Freedom Ride in the 1960s. In more recent years he experienced "an extraordinary prayer crisis" through the pain and rage that came from years of feeling that as a gay man in the ordained ministry he had to stay closeted.

Now in his eighties, Boyd says he prays far more than he used to. "In all sorts of moments, places, and ways. Proper, formal ones. Improper, informal ones. ... I try to pray positively rather than negatively, seeking wholeness over fragmentation, healing over hand-wringing." He finds, above all, that his prayer now "is one of enormous gratitude."



## Finding the divine through music

As a classical-music lover I especially connected with two professional musicians' essays in *In Times Like These*. David Avshalomov, a performer and composer, writes about not having participated much in any religion until he became an adult and started practicing Judaism. Prayer hadn't meant much to him, he says, until "eventually I realized consciously that I felt the divine through music, particularly song."



"Music," Avshalomov explains, "is my way of seeing and entering the world of humans, but it is also my way of connecting to my deepest, nonconceptual, non-verbal, nonabstract self, and from there to the divine and to the divine in others."

Norm Freeman, a percussionist, says he grew up hearing little about God. He tried praying at times, but when his grandfather died after days of lengthy prayer, he was devastated and decided to



give up on praying. Mixed results from later efforts led him to think that "God was strange, elusive, sometimes undependable." Still, he found that he couldn't stay away. Years later, playing

in a performance of Handel's *Messiah* at Carnegie Hall on the day after his grandmother's funeral, he says, "The music was working on me. I remember the exact spot where God really got my attention. It was going to be OK."

Freeman explains that this wasn't a once-and-for-all experience but it set him on a radically different course. "I made a conscious decision," he writes, "to move toward God." After another especially memorable musical experience, he found that "from then on, going to Carnegie Hall was like going to church or temple. This great hall is one of those sacred spaces where you can expect to encounter the Holy. It's a fine place to pray."



## Prayers that aren't quite right?

The writers in *In Times Like This* don't all agree about what's appropriate to pray for. I identified mainly with those like Stephen Vittoria (whom I quoted on page 1) and National Public Radio com-

mentator and sportswriter Frank Deford. “Why don’t I pray as I should?,” Deford asks. “I think it’s because the way so many people pray strikes me as what I think is out of line. Benign, unintentional, but just not quite right.” Athletes’ prayers for victory especially strike him that way.



Also, Deford tells us, “as touched as I am when someone is saved from some horrible tragedy, I am still put off when the person rescued says something to the effect about how God was with them. Excuse me: God chose not to be with the other poor devils who didn’t get rescued?”

Deford gives another example of prayer that doesn’t seem quite right to him. “I become a little uneasy,” he says, “hearing ‘God Bless America,’ because I get the uncomfortable feeling that we’re asking God to concentrate on blessing us Americans, who have so much, when He should be looking out for Haiti and the Sudan instead.”



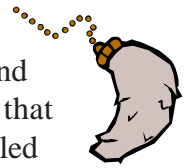
### No need too trivial?

In contrast, however, other authors of *In Times Like These* advocate the kinds of prayers that to Vitoria and Deford don’t seem based on a believable picture of God. Christian author Martin Marty, writing about the value of intercessory prayer and his belief that prayer is heightened in community, says, “No need or call of anyone present is too trivial to bring to the mind of the community en route to the mind of God.”



Several writers admit their uncertainty about whether some of their prayer requests are reasonable and likely to have any effect. Christian author Frederick Buechner, for example, says, “A great deal

of my ragged and sporadic praying has to do with the physical safety of my children and grandchildren. ... Rabbit’s foot prayers. Knocking on wood prayers. ... Is God listening, whatever that means? I hope so, pray so. More often than not, I believe so.” And Nora Gallagher tells us, “I know that some of what I do could rightly be called plea bargaining. Or a 911 call.”



Others admit wishing that answers to prayer were clearer and more recognizable. Laila Al-Marayati, a female Muslim physician, is one of those. “God does respond to our prayers,” she believes, “although sometimes I would feel better if He would just send me His advice in a letter in the mail, because I am afraid of missing His signs, wishing the answers would be easy and right in front of me.”

### Prayer isn’t just for Christians



Part of what I appreciated about this book was its inclusion of writings by non-Christians as well as Christians. It was a welcome reminder that we

Christians aren’t the only people with access to God, that our portrayals of God may not give the whole picture, and that prayer has many forms.

Frank Wismer, a military chaplain who served in Iraq, tells us it is commonplace in Iraq to see men carrying their prayer beads with them wherever they go. They pray publicly, fingering the beads, throughout the day, not just at prescribed prayer times. Seeing them, Wismer says, “It dawned on me that if I were to live as a nonanxious presence in the world, I would have to center my life in prayer.” Consequently, he began using prayer beads as a reminder



This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

and found it helped restore him to peace, sanity, and calm in the midst of chaos.

## An embrace can be a prayer

Catherine Toldi, a Buddhist priest, writes about praying for her partner when she feared he was lost on a mountain hike. She suspects that their embrace upon his return was also a form of prayer.



Although Buddhists don't orient themselves toward an external authority, Toldi explains, "there is something we can appeal to beyond the human world, even if we don't know exactly what it is. To do that

we pray for our lives, for others' lives, to the vastness of space and existence. ... Then the response comes from the whole universe. We appeal for help, and simultaneously, the universe reaches out its hand." Toldi writes "of feeling self and other dissolve into the same interconnecting web, of softening the heart, of relaxing the talons of the mind, of loosening the strands of the self-reinforcing story."

We're all part of that interconnecting web. Whatever prayer methods we use, and whatever words we use for the divine, our prayers that aim at love and justice for all people unite us.

*Barbara*



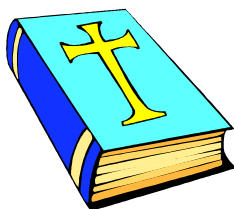
## Connections

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## A welcome book about prayer

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After [Jesus] had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.  
—Matthew 14:23



I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also.  
—1 Corinthians 14:15

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances ...  
—1 Thessalonians 5:16-17

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.  
—Ephesians 6:18

Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.



When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

—Matthew 6:5-7