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**RELIGION**

# Adding discipline to devotion

## Christians find new meaning, and a sacred rhythm, in the ritual of set daily prayers

By Deborah Hallman

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Growing up as a non-denominational Protestant, Esther Peters learned to pray in a fairly unstructured manner, with personal petitions making up much of her communication with God.

Although she would occasionally recite the Lord's Prayer, her words of prayer generally came from what was on her mind -- and at those times when she felt inspired to pray.

But as a student at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Peters came across new ideas about prayer that led her to incorporate more discipline into her devotional life. She now picks up a Catholic prayer book at least twice daily and recites Psalm-infused liturgies written specifically for morning and evening devotions.

"It revitalized my prayer life," said Peters, 22, an English and political science major from Villa Park, who learned about the ancient practice of fixed-hour prayers through a course she took on praying the Psalms.

Peters is among a growing group of Christians rediscovering the age-old church custom of set daily prayers as a way to add more structure to their religious practices -- and they're finding that it adds a satisfying spiritual rhythm to their days.

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The practice is not completely unfamiliar to those in liturgical denominations -- particularly Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches -- who refer to it by such terms as "the liturgy of the hours" or "keeping the offices." With historical roots dating to the Old Testament, similar rituals are part of all three Abrahamic faiths, including Judaism's Shema (twice-a-day) prayers and Islam's practice of praying five times daily toward Mecca.

In Christianity, regular recitation of Scripture brings to mind the traditions of strictly regimented monastics, along with dedicated clergy members, who start their day with prayers and continue them every three hours or so. Laypeople also have practiced fixed-hour prayer, although to varying degrees through the centuries -- and more so during holy seasons such as Lent or Advent.

But these days, fixed-hour prayer is growing "by leaps and bounds," said Scot McKnight, professor in religious studies at North Park University in Chicago and author of "Praying With the Church."

And in an unusual twist blurring denominational lines, many new adherents are evangelical Protestants -- traditionally a group with fewer scripted practices in worship.

Historically, Protestants have had a "natural itch ... every time something gets connected to a routine," McKnight said. "Everything has to be spontaneous and personal, so they're nervous about the traditional and the customary and the rhythmical."

But by removing formal terminology such as "divine offices" and emphasizing historical context, evangelicals are comfortably finding new meaning in this old practice, he said.

"When you explain it ... that this is what Jews did, this is what Jesus did, this is what the early Christians did, this is what the church has always done, people are more willing to listen to see if this maybe should be for them," McKnight said.

Erin Marshalek, 23, of Tinley Park, now a first-year student at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich., said fixed-hour prayers "tend to keep me anchored." With Old and New Testament readings as the basis for her matins, or morning, devotions and compline, or

bedtime, prayers, Marshalek said the format is comforting in how it binds her to others in the Christian community who might be saying similar prayers at the same time.

And, she said, the liturgy has given her a time-tested script to follow when her own words fail her. "It's almost like praying God's own words back to him."

This trend comes as groups of evangelical Christians revisit a number of older church practices in addition to fixed prayers, such as fasting during Lent, use of candles and icons in worship, and more regular observance of the Eucharist.

Bringing considerable interest to the prayer movement has been the publication of "The Divine Hours" prayer manual series, McKnight said.

Compiled by former Publishers Weekly religion editor Phyllis Tickle, this series -- with its first volume published in 2000 -- combines established liturgies and prayers from throughout history and updates them in modern language, organizing them by calendar year rather than church liturgical year.

Tickle, a practitioner of fixed-hour prayer for more than 30 years before "The Divine Hours" was published, said that although she has heard from people of all ages who use her guidebooks, the interest in structured prayer seems to resonate most with Christians ages 35 and younger, who are "tired unto death of formless religion. Tired unto death of religion that's all doctrine and no aesthetic, no substance, no spirituality."

Matt Tebbe, 30, a former Catholic who became an evangelical Protestant in college, began praying from "The Divine Hours" a year ago and initially found it difficult because of his lingering perceptions of liturgy as "rote, kind of dead, ritual."

He said he ultimately realized that extemporaneous prayer had its own shortcomings, and that the format of fixed-hour prayer was beneficial in taking him outside "my own feelings or my own emotions or my own thinking, to stretch me and grow me as a Christian."

Now, as an associate pastor at the evangelical Life on the Vine congregation in Long Grove, he prays four times a day -- morning, noon, evening and before bedtime -- and said the practice helps him establish a sacred rhythm throughout his day.

It's "like a pulse throughout your day," Tebbe said. "Like anything, liturgy can become dry and dead and meaningless. But it doesn't have to be. And I think there's a rediscovery of a life-giving, life-sustaining energy in liturgical things, in fixed-hour prayer."

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