



## *The Spiritual Disciplines of Prayer and Fasting*

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## Prayer and Fasting



Patricia  
Burdette

Cover: *The ordination of Juanita and Eligio Nuñez in 2008.* (See story p. 6).

Courtesy photo


All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Many years ago, I was able to fast from food fairly regularly. One lesson I learned early on as I began to practice fasting was that it is nearly impossible to do it successfully without being bathed in prayer—mine and others'. Now that I am older, I find that even with prayer, it is difficult to fast from food for long periods of time like I did when I was younger, but praying for those who are able to fast in this way is always possible. Now, I tend to practice other kinds of fasts that work better with my lifestyle and provide me with more meaningful time with God. For fasting in and of itself serves no purpose—we fast as a way to set aside additional time to be with God. Lately, I have been taking a “computer fast” by staying off my computer entirely on Saturday and Sunday. This fast also requires prayer, and staying off the computer provides extra time for me to pray as well.

For many Mennonites and Christians of other denominations, fasting is a foreign concept; however, it has a long history in Christian practice. It is possible to fast from food, from certain types of food, from specific meals, or from specific activities. Often someone who is fasting will substitute another activity for the one they are eliminating such as taking a walk to spend time in prayer, meditating, or rising earlier than usual to have more time for prayer in place of spending time eating or watching TV. However a person fasts, if done with a prayerful attitude, it seems to draw us closer to God. As the season of Lent approaches, you may wish to consider a fast of some kind to help you spiritually prepare for Easter.

In this issue of *timbrel*, Charlotte Hardt tells the story of her own first attempts at fasting and the benefit she received from it. Juanita Nuñez shares her persistent prayer for her husband's conversion, while Rachel Siemens shares how her prayer life has developed through various stages of her life. Gail Shetler and Rhoda Keener tell stories of listening for God's voice—an important part of our prayer life, too.

### Sister Question for May–June

In preparation for the next issue of *timbrel*, which will focus on Loving Our Bodies, Loving Ourselves, consider: **What has helped me love and accept myself as God created me?** Send your response to <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>. 

*timbrel* is the official publication of Mennonite Women USA, a ministry of Mennonite Church USA. *timbrel* provides a place for women to share diverse perspectives and stories and express our prophetic voice as we seek to follow Christ.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the official position of Mennonite Women USA or the board for Mennonite Women USA.

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**Gail A. Shetler**, Goshen, Indiana, attends Silverwood Mennonite Church and is a recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, earning a Master of Arts in Christian Formation with an emphasis on teaching the Bible. Gail is a stay-at-home mom to three teenage children.

**Rachel Siemens**, Wadsworth, Ohio, is pastor of First Mennonite Church. Before being called to ministry, Rachel spent a decade working in the financial services industry. A native of Winnipeg, she has found that while Ohio does not have as many ice rinks as Manitoba, it does have many affordable and challenging golf courses.



# Fasting?

by *Charlotte Hardt*

*“We could all fast with you before your conference call in support and solidarity with you,” offered Pastor Femi (Olufemi Fatuumbi).*

The newly appointed Racial Healing Task Group had been meeting with the Intercultural Relations Reference Committee (IRRC) in Kansas City. We had gathered for the first time that morning, and our small task group was struggling with how to approach what seemed to be the overwhelming nature of our assigned task: to work with the “dominant culture” of the Mennonite Church to move toward racial healing. After much discussion about how we should even begin, one of our members finally declared, “God is NOT overwhelmed by our charge.” With that “Aha” moment, we decided that our work needed to be solidly grounded in scripture

*I took the elevator up to my room to be by myself for awhile. The silence seemed so wonderful that I decided not to go back down for dinner. As I prayed and tried to center myself, I found myself not even thinking about food.*

and prayer so that we could be guided by the Holy Spirit.

That afternoon we went to the IRRC for advice and counsel, and it was their suggestion that we consider fasting and prayer as we approached our task. To the members of the task group—all Anglos—the idea of fasting was foreign. Few of us had ever tried—I certainly hadn’t. Several of our racial/ethnic brothers and sisters told us how fasting was a regular pattern of behavior for them, especially when they had serious weighty issues to discern.

We spent a few minutes talking about what it meant to fast and how it could be for a few days, just a day, or even for a period of hours. It could be no food, just liquids, just juices and other liquids, or just water. It sounded like there were no hard and fast rules or prescriptions about how it should be done. Before we left

Kansas City, plans were made for our first conference call. The IRRC agreed to fast and to pray with us before and during the call.

My first-ever experience did not go well. I had decided that I would start my fast after supper the night before the conference call and go without eating or drinking anything but water until after our call in the afternoon.

I am not a morning person. My brain and body sort of function on autopilot in the early AM. I had poured my morning orange juice and taken my first sip before I even remembered I was fasting! I found it hard to prepare breakfast and then lunch for my husband and not be able to eat with him. It was even harder to explain to him what I was trying to do when I didn't quite understand it myself. I found myself spending more time thinking about how many hours it was until suppertime and what I was going to prepare than I did praying. It was not a very worshipful experience, and I didn't think I got much from it.

Then came September, and the all-leaders meeting. Things got fairly intense during the discussions on Friday afternoon. I was biting my tongue to keep from saying something I knew I would later regret. I took the elevator up to my room to be by myself for awhile. The silence seemed so wonderful that I decided not to go back down for dinner. As I prayed and tried to center myself, I found myself not even thinking about food. Later, during evening worship, the words of Elizabeth Soto Albrecht seemed to go straight to my heart.

I didn't break my fast until the last part of the next morning when we celebrated communion. Never have I savored the tastes of the bread and juice quite so much! I realized, to my surprise, that even a short fast had been helpful to me in stepping into Christ's presence.

I was still excited when I met Pastor Femi in the lunch line and shared with him my experience. I thanked him for teaching me a very new way of being with God and how he had proven to me that even a person a few months shy of seventy years could still learn something new. His hug and big smile told me he shared my joy.

Fasting? It's a very old Christian practice that I was rather skeptical about. Now, however, it's an idea that I am eager to further explore. 📌



*Charlotte Hardt and her husband, Forrest. Char found it difficult to fast while still preparing meals for Forrest.*

# In God's hands

by *Juanita Nuñez*

*For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle, and your other animals will drink (2 Kings 3:17, NIV).*

For many years I asked the Lord that my husband would know Jesus as his one and only Savior. Time would pass and I

didn't see any interest from him with regard to an intimate relationship with Jesus. But I continued to pray, pray and pray some more.

One day I heard a sermon on Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. His army and animals of war were fatigued.

There wasn't any water to satisfy their thirst. After consulting with Elisha, the prophet of God, they received the hope they needed. The Word says, "The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was—water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water" (2 Kings 3:20, NIV). They didn't see any wind nor rain, yet the water came.

This passage inspired me and strengthened my heart. I was motivated once again, knowing even though I couldn't see any change in my husband, God was working. I could leave him in God's hands and trust God to fulfill God's holy and divine will.

On May 12, 1991, Mother's Day, my prayer was answered. My husband accepted Jesus as his Savior, and today we pastor a lovely congregation in Florida.

Each of us confronts situations where a solution seems im-



*Following 17 years of persistent prayer, Juanita and her husband, Eligio Nuñez, were ordained into Christian ministry on October 24, 2008 at Ebenezer Christian Church in Apopka, Florida. This congregation is part of the Southeast Mennonite Conference of Mennonite Church USA.*

possible. Have you asked yourself if God has really heard your prayer? Is there an answer to your problem? God doesn't always respond in the manner in which we would desire. Sometimes God takes longer than we expect. This is the reason we must continue to pray, pray, and pray some more. This is the reason we must persevere. And this is the reason we are so grateful when our prayers are answered.

God is working in our lives individually and as the body of Christ, satisfying our needs in ways we can't always see or anticipate. Maybe you have been waiting for months or years for a response from God, but many times God is working on your character. Or possibly God is allowing others to experience situations that, in the end, will create the opportunity for them to return to God and accept God's ways. In my case, I waited 14 years to receive my answer from the Lord.

I encourage you to say this prayer with me: Heavenly Father, you are our God. Help us focus our eyes on you and not the circumstances around us. Help us remember that you are working in us even though it is not clearly evident it's the work of your hands. In Jesus' name. AMEN! 🙏

# A journey with prayer

by *Rachel Siemens*

*Help! Why? Thank you! Sorry I've neglected you.*

These words describe the prayer life of my teens and early twenties. I offered these words to God. Words were the instrument of my prayers. And then one day I couldn't find the words. I did not know what words to pray. I could not find the words to express what I needed/wanted. The source of my restlessness and unsettledness was a mystery to me; how could I ask God for help when I didn't really know what I needed?

God led me to the apostle Paul, to Romans 8, where we are assured that when "we do not know how to pray as we ought" the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Praise be to God!

I did not need to know the words! What a gift this was to me.

During this time I started using the Lord's Prayer as the words to my unspoken plea, allowing the Spirit to give my needs/prayer to God. I grew to trust in the Spirit praying on my behalf. I did not need to provide the words and instead used the words God provided, like the Lord's Prayer and the psalms. My role was to make the time and space for conversations with God, but I did not need to provide the words. Prayer with words—mine or another's—slowly changed to prayer without words. I would, and still do, spend time with God playing the piano, walking outside, or simply sitting, all the while trusting that the Spirit is interceding with sighs too deep for words.

Whether with or without words, my prayer conversation was still mostly one-sided: me speaking to God, expressing my needs and concerns for others to God. As I entered my thirties and embarked on my seminary journey, the nature of these prayer conversations changed. I started to listen more. Not only did I hear God speak through scripture, but I also heard God

speak through the people around me. I heard God speak through the affirmation and questions of friends. I heard God speak through the counsel and advice of friends and professors. I heard God speak in the writings of the cloud of witnesses.

Just after I decided that it was time to shift from part-time to full-time studies, time to leave my job, my family and friends to head to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, I had several moments of wondering, "What on earth am I doing?"

On one such day, I happened to be strolling through a nearby bookstore and saw a copy of Henri Nouwen's *Peacework*. I picked it up and bought it. As I read through the introduction,



*Rachel Siemens spends time with God while playing the piano.*

I looked up to God and laughed; it was about the importance of taking risks in the journey of faith. It was a message my cautious nature needed to hear: risk-taking is part of life.

While at seminary I also learned to listen to God in silence

*My conversations with God are becoming more “two-sided” as my relationship with God grows.*

in the group and individual practice of *lectio divina*, which is a prayerful way of reading/hearing scripture. My conversations with God are becoming more “two-sided” as my relationship with God grows.

As a pastor, I pray in a variety of settings—public worship, meals, at meetings, in homes, and in hospitals. Words are an important part of these prayers—so too is listening. Some gifts of prayer I have received from the congregation. The first was from an elementary student. We were preparing for worship together, and I asked her if she would like to write or find one of the prayers. She said she’d write it. Her words were honest and direct and beautiful and I realized I do not need to work for perfection, to spend the time looking for the perfect word; I simply need to pray with honesty and use the first words that come to mind.

Another gift came from a more senior member of the congregation I went to see in the emergency room. When I asked him if he would like to pray together, he replied yes. Before I had a chance to start praying, he started the Lord’s Prayer. As pastor I had frequently assumed, and been given, the role of pray-er. Incorporating the Lord’s Prayer into these private settings makes it a communal prayer—our prayer. I am grateful for the many ways in which God leads me to deepen and broaden my journey with prayer. 📖

## Resources

### Books

Bill, J. Brent. *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete P, 2008.

Foster, Richard J. *Prayers from the Heart*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.

## Women walking together

by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht



*This Bible study is an excerpt from the Bible study guide by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, **Seek Peace and Pursue It: Women, Faith, and Family Care**, which is available from Mennonite Publishing Network.*

*Seek Peace and Pursue It was developed by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite Women Canada.*

**Ruth 1:15–22:** So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you! When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth and Naomi were strengthened by facing calamities together. So too in the modern world women gain strength from other women.

Teresa shares with Alicia, “You have been a gift for me from God.” Tears of gratitude roll down her cheeks as she adds, “I admire the way you make your spiritual growth with Christ a priority.” Alicia responds in a humble voice, “I should be the one thanking *you*, for being my prayer friend and a role model for my life.” Teresa and Alicia are affirming each other’s strength as women, a strength directed at supporting the other and not criticizing.

What are your strengths? If you are studying with a small group, go around the circle and name a strength you have seen in each woman. Write the strengths others have seen in you on an index card and place it in your Bible. Read the list when you feel down and remember that God and others value you.

Human beings are relational creatures, made in the image



Elizabeth Soto  
Albrecht

of God. We need community and to live in communion with each other. The New Testament calls this *koinonia*, an integral part of the emerging churches in the book of Acts. *Koinonia* requires sharing both materially and spiritually. It means companionship among believers and union with the Holy Spirit. Just as Ruth joined in the suffering of Naomi, *koinonia* allows us to make that human connection with those who are hurting. Without the element of *koinonia* we cannot build the kin-dom of God. We need to come together in one spirit, as in one body, to live out the Word.

How ironic that Ruth, a non-Israelite woman, played a key part in the ancestry of King David and later Jesus, the Messiah (Matthew 1:5–6). Because of her commitment and loyalty, Ruth was redeemed in history. Jesus’ teachings demonstrated the upside-down kin-dom, in which “the smallest of these will be the greatest.” There is no small act in God’s eyes and Ruth, in her stubborn clinging to Naomi, a woman who could not give her a future, was redeemed. We can name many strengths of Ruth, but the greatest was her commitment to Naomi’s God, when she declared, “your God will be my God.” Ruth saw in Naomi’s faith a God that was different from the ones she knew in Moab.

One of women’s many strengths is valuing the company of other women as we walk this journey of faith together. 📖

## PONDER

1. *What strengths did you see in your mother or another significant female in your life? How was she able to share her gifts?*
2. *List examples of gifts women use in the home, church, and workplace. How do we support one another even when our gifts and calling are different?*
3. *Reflect on the role of female friendships and mentoring relationships in your spiritual journey. How can other women help us identify and use our gifts?*

*Pray: God of all humanity, help us to recognize our beauty and our gifts, and the gifts of other women. Give us the courage to use our gifts for your service, wherever that might be. Amen.*

# Three Windows Three Women

## Prayer

*Deb Horst, 46  
Dalton, Ohio*



I have been the Executive Director of Camp Luz, Orrville, Ohio for ten years. I love camp ministry because of the powerful spiritual impact it has upon youth! However, it is highly stressful, especially during the summer. I discovered early on that the incredible opportunities to minister to and care for our staff and campers quite often came at the expense of my own spiritual health. Therefore, I need the accountability of a friend who checks in with me every week to see how God and I are doing.

Prior to summer camp 2010, I met with a mentor and asked her to hold me accountable for my summer spiritual plan, which was, every time the bell rang at camp, I would stop what I was doing to pray a breath prayer. Now, the camp bell runs the life of the camp and rings almost every 45 minutes all day long, so this plan was rather huge! I chose a different sentence prayer for each week, being inspired by a line of a song or a verse on Sunday, or by something I read in a devotional. Then during that week of camp, when the bell would ring, I would pause, take a deep breath and say my sentence with the exhale. Even if I was talking with someone, I could still perform that prayer ritual. It was challenging at first, because that bell rang so much and seemed like an interruption!

Three of my favorite breath prayers were “Interrupt me, Holy Spirit,” “Father of Love, you can have me,” and “Awaken me, Holy Spirit.” After only a couple of days I noticed a difference in myself; I was calmer and more in tune with God. Instead of just praying at my morning and evening devotional time, I prayed all day long. That spiritual discipline lasted ten weeks and profoundly impacted my prayer life; “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17, NIV) was a reality, and I discovered that physical breathing can carry spiritual oxygen for my soul. ☑

*Geneva Swartzentruber, 51  
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

As I contemplate writing about prayer I am struck by the image of puzzles, as they have been continuously covering one of my tables throughout Christmas. I've discovered that the fullness of prayer can only be achieved when I recognize all of the small pieces that shape the whole. My prayer life has broadened considerably from my days of childhood when it was all about the long, eloquent, spoken prayers of pastors.

How do I pray? I try to meditate daily, but I also run. I get some of my best nudges and inspirational ideas when I'm running. Even if my mind is blank and all I'm doing is sweating and breathing freakishly hard, I'm still celebrating my body that is made so intricately complex that every step seems a miracle. I pray when I light candles for people on my altar. The prayers are words of compassion, cries for help, and sighs of gratitude. But just the act of lighting flame to wick is holy and sacred.

My intention is to bring the light of the Divine to each situation, in particular those events and people for whom no words seem adequate. As a spiritual advisor for Hospice, I have sat with dying patients and offered the ministry of presence. The time has passed for words, and all that is required is to be fully present.

It is prayer to stop and be astounded by the incredible New Mexico sunsets. It is prayer to hold a happy, squirmy baby who has just learned how to blow raspberries. It is prayer to cook a meal for friends and have them gather around my table. It is prayer to turn to my beloved and feel a sense of deep gratitude for the grace and unconditional love that has been offered.

When I'm insecure, intolerant, and out of sync with my life, it is as though the pieces of the puzzle have skittered across the surface. Recognizing the varied manifestations of prayer brings the scattered and lost parts of me back to the table. Prayer grounds me and fits together the pieces of my life so that I am one step closer to wholeness. 📷



*Editor's note: This column is a forum for women to share perspectives on the current timbrel theme. It introduces women spanning their 20's-30's, 40's-50's, and 60's and above. If you are interested in writing for this column, please contact editor, Patricia Burdette, at <PattyB@MenoniteWomenUSA.org>.*

*Marilyn Lehman, 58  
Manor, Texas*



What is prayer? Petition? Praise? Spoken? Unspoken? It is, of course, all of these. And more. Yet often, when I hear people talk about prayer, I'm not sure I know what they mean. It may be that my own uneasy personal prayer journey, fraught with shifting meanings and expectations, accounts for this uncertainty.

I grew up in an Amish family. Prayer was ritualistic and regular—before and after meals, family devotions, church services—rendered in words given in prayer books and biblical texts. Then my family began attending a Mennonite church, and I was introduced to a different genre of prayer, a stream of consciousness petitioning that required a serious commitment of time. From Wednesday night prayer meetings I learned that authentic prayer required words, one's own words. Both traditions taught me that faith, in order to be genuine, required a daily prayer practice.

Paul's words to the Romans, "...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words," along with experiences in later years, called into question the verbal prayer obligation. Yet a nagging sense of guilt about praying correctly, about my personal prayer practice, persisted.

Not until my focus shifted from form to content was I able to free myself from the burden of praying properly. Moving from petition—a position of lack, to praise—recognition of abundance, opened up a space for listening to, rather than directing, the Divine. While I believe naming our deepest desires can be powerful, too often asking blinds me to the Presence already in my life.

As Meister Eckhart famously observed, if the only prayer we ever pray is to give thanks, that is enough. 🙏

***MW USA Mission  
and Vision:***

*Our mission at Mennonite Women USA is to empower women and women's groups as we nurture our life in Christ through studying the Bible, using our gifts, hearing each other, and engaging in mission and service.*

*Mennonite Women USA invites women across generations, cultures, and places to share and honor our stories, care for each other, and express our prophetic voice boldly as we seek to follow Christ.*

# Grapevine

## Ruth Lapp Guengerich to lead fourth seminar for pastors' spouses in Pittsburgh

"I have been pastoring for five years and never understood why my wife was frustrated with being the wife of a pastor. After this seminar, I now understand what she has been saying all these years," confessed a pastor who attended the seminar designed to help spouses of pastors identify troublesome issues and develop coping skills to address them. Ruth Lapp Guengerich, spouse of pastor Ron Guengerich, will co-facilitate the Pittsburgh workshop "Spouses of Pastors Provide Healing Bridges" along with Dallan Troyer, spouse of pastor Janice Troyer.

The workshop has been co-facilitated by Guengerich at the past three Mennonite Church USA Assemblies. "It is important for spouses and pastors to keep talking and listening to one another and to find ways for each of them to be supported emotionally," says Guengerich. "Part of the purpose of this seminar is to encourage pastors' spouses to meet and learn from one another and to give the spouses permission to set healthy boundaries."

Two themes Guengerich has seen throughout the years the seminar has been presented are loneliness and pain. Often the spouse of a pastor has to carry more of the responsibility at home, especially if there are children. From the results of the seminar evaluations, Guengerich says this seems to be especially true of wives of pastors with young children.

One woman acknowledged, "San Jose [MC USA Assembly workshop] changed my outlook on my husband being a pastor. You can embrace this role—his or her calling becomes yours in a way." Embracing this call is essential, but sometimes painful. Says Guengerich, "Spouses of pastors need permission to have their own lives and not be enmeshed in the pastor's life." ❏



**Ruth Lapp Guengerich** has co-facilitated workshops for spouses of pastors at the past three Mennonite Church USA Assemblies and will co-facilitate a fourth workshop in Pittsburgh. The seminars are co-sponsored by MW USA and Mennonite Men.



**The panel of presenters** at the workshop in Columbus, Ohio are (l to r) Dallan Troyer, John Weishaupt, Ruth Lapp Guengerich, and Joy Yoder.

# Across the Border

## Opening the heart

*by Mary Beyler as told to Marcella Hershberger*

“Mary has become such a great Japanese host she couldn’t let me pay for her meal at a restaurant!” exclaimed the International Ministries director after his trip to visit mission workers. I smiled, knowing how Mary treasures the friends she has met at the Japanese bath, the Curves gym, and tea ceremony lessons, a few of the places she participates in Japanese life beyond the church.

Mary Beyler went to Japan in 1974. How does a blue-eyed American math teacher, who thinks in logical and linear fashion, carry the label “Christian missionary” and hope to enter Japanese culture? A culture with vastly different ways of perceiving the world, different ways of physically moving in space, and many different, unwritten rules for behaving and being in relationships and society? If you are Mary in Japan, you embark on an amazing journey of transformation by registering for tea ceremony lessons!

Mary learned that it is out of the heart, not the head, that she can best minister in Japan. She shares, “It was through tea ceremony that I first learned how to slow down and begin dealing with the compulsive busyness, perfectionism and competitiveness of my life, and through tea ceremony I received training in appropriate ways of doing ministry in Japan.” Mary continues, “Tea ceremony has given me an appreciation for the Japanese arts, an understanding of polite language, close friends, graceful manners, and new ways of relating and being. Tea ceremony has profoundly affected my orientation and also my ministry—culturally, socially and spiritually.”

Tea ceremony is a ritualized way of serving and drinking tea. Like other Japanese arts, such as calligraphy, archery, or flower arranging, it is learned through regular practice in a master-disciple relationship that is a lifetime endeavor. It is not only about the skills learned, but about the process, the relationships, the transformations along the way. Even reaching the highest level does

# Across the Ocean

not mean one has “arrived,” for even the teacher has a teacher.

The “Way of Tea” must be learned by the whole body, not just the head, and it cannot be rushed. Mary says that tea ceremony saved her from burning out in her hectic schedule of ministry and remains a significant part of her spiritual pilgrimage. Tea ceremony creates a space outside of time: “Watches are removed. The motions of the ceremony can neither be speeded up nor slowed down. Here, instead of rush, instead of the panic of time flying by with never enough of it to do things right, there is enough time. Each moment is savored—the interval to settle one’s posture and spirit at the start of the ceremony, the pause as the silk cloth is folded while purifying the utensils, the waiting to let the water drops drip from the bamboo dipper.”

Mary discovered that in the controlled environment of the tea ceremony, as her body eventually learned the proper movements, her mind and heart were freed to do other things, sometimes meditating, sometimes conversing with teachers and fellow students. In this context, Mary was accepted and could fit in, despite her blue eyes, being and sharing who she was. Within tea ceremony, worldly rank disappears. Relationships can be formed there that would not happen in other contexts. Students take turns serving as the host or being a guest, and bonds of friendship and caring are formed. Individual agenda is put aside and harmony within the group is practiced.

Tea ceremony relationships have become a metaphor for what kind of church leader it is appropriate for Mary to be in Japan. At church, as in tea ceremony, Mary is sometimes guest and sometimes host.

In tea ceremony, Mary feels the most Japanese she can feel. That transformed identity emerges when she insists on paying for her American director’s meal. It also carries seeds of transformation for others. These long-tended seeds sprout when Mary goes to the Japanese bath and a long-time female friend finally asks, “Would it be alright if I visited your church?” 📷



*Mary Beyler at tea ceremony in Japan.*

*Courtesy photo*

# Prayer: a discipline

*Gail A. Shetler*

“So have you thought about going to seminary?” There was the question again. To be truthful, the only time I had thought about going to seminary was when someone would ask me, “Have you thought about going to seminary?”

I had a lot of excuses why that wasn't for me. My grandfather was a pastor who wore a plain coat, and I'm sure he would not have liked it. And anyway, seminary students were completely unreasonable. My husband and I had attended a church where many seminary students were also attending. As far as I was concerned, these people lived in la-la land. They did not live in the real world. They were not me. I could not imagine going to school with them. And besides, I already had a calling. God had called me to be a lay leader in my church and to be a fulltime mom to my three children.

But here the question was again, “Have you thought about going to seminary?” My congregation was in the midst of a study, both at home and at worship, about the nature and character of God. The study for that day was “God Is My Banner”—God being the one we follow, just as an ancient army would follow the banner carrier into battle. The scripture was about Gideon.

For my prayer focus I was to ask God to show me where God wanted me to join in God's activity. I'm not a person who relies on my feelings to guide my way. I don't want to “feel” that something is right. I need facts. God knows that about my character, so I played Gideon and asked God to show me. Here was my fleece: I wanted my parents to ask me about going to seminary. They also had some interesting experiences with seminary people, and I knew if they asked me it had to be from God.

After the study was over, I continued to use prayer as a spiritual discipline that strengthened my relationship with God. I found that I enjoyed being in the presence of God. Prayer, now, wasn't so much about asking God for things, but rather asking God, “What will you have me to do?”

When God finally answered my prayer I was (almost) ready for it. I was at family camp eating lunch with my mom when she said, “So when are you going to start seminary?” Not if, but when. I was stunned. It had been months since I asked God. Now here was God’s answer.

I went reluctantly the following spring, taking only one class. And surprise! I loved it. So once again I laid out the fleece during my daily prayer time, “God if this is really what you want me to do, I need someone to tell me in no uncertain terms.” The following day I went for my regular swim and met a friend whom I hadn’t seen for awhile. He said, “Hey, Gail. It’s good to see you. I’ve been meaning to call and tell you that I am so glad that you decided to go to seminary. That’s exactly where God wants you to be.”

Now going to seminary wasn’t all light and sunshine. There were difficult times trying to juggle family, church and studying. God also didn’t take away my calls as a mother and a lay leader. But God blessed me with what I was learning and made me a blessing to others in unexpected ways.

Prayer continues to be a place where I find that God meets me. Over the years I’ve used many different prayer practices – some with rigid rules, some more open ended. But I’ve found that prayer continues to be a spiritual discipline that helps me to be more attuned to what God is doing in the world and helps me to listen for God’s call to joyfully join God’s activity. 📖

*Gail Shetler has been secretary of the MW USA board since 2002. She will conclude her service on the board July 31, 2011.*



*Gail with her family (l to r): Anna, Lavonne, Gail, Jacob, and Byron.*

*Photo by Olan Mills*

# Dinner as discipline

by Heidi Martin



## A toast to “much” and “many” blessings

In an age of cell phones, Facebook, instant messaging, fast-food, e-mails and other convenient advances, “spiritual disciplines” seem out-of-date and old-fashioned. Well, at least, this is exactly what our enemy wants us to think.

“In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘manyness,’ he will rest satisfied.”

The above quote comes from *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard J. Foster—a book dedicated to twelve spiritual disciplines. Released in 1978, 1988 and 1998, the book is hardly old-fashioned. Instead, it continues to increase in popularity and familiarity.

Of spiritual disciplines in general, Foster writes:

“The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us....A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way

of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us....God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.”

What about the discipline of family dinner? The “muchness” and “manyness” of the typical North American life keep families from sitting together at all—much less for a meal—much, much less for a homemade meal. Because of this, mothers and fathers and children are missing out on rich blessings, physical, emotional and spiritual.

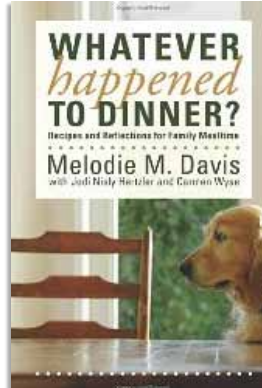
This topic is what Melodie M. Davis (pictured left) addresses in her recent book *Whatever Happened to Dinner? Recipes and Reflections for Family Mealtime*, published by Herald Press. In the preface, Davis writes, “This



book is part cookbook; part reflection on the changing role of dinner in our culture; part celebration of family and community connections and how we can foster those connections through food, traditions, and sitting down together; part realistic acceptance of how things are in our busy world and practical handles for how to cope.”

In other words, this book is a buffet of healthy options which appeals to readers with all types of preferences. A glimpse through the Contents of chapter titles is proof. “Work: The Real Enemy of Families” considers the difficulties of a busy schedule, “Getting Kids to Like Okra and Moo Goo Gai Pan” discusses picky eaters, “Eating All Day for the Price of One Grande Caffè Latte” considers the financial aspect of meals.

Each chapter offers current stories, research-based information and a Biblical perspective. Food editors Jodi Nisly Hertzler and Carmen Wyse tested and approved the recipes added at the end of each chapter.



One of my favorite quotes from the book is from Leon R. Kass, MD. He says:

“The habits of incivility, insensitivity and ingratitude learned at the family dinner table are carried out in the wider world, infecting all of American life....Self-restraint, consideration for others, politeness, fairness, generosity, tact, discernment, good taste and the art of friendly conversation—all learnable and practiced at the table—enrich and ennoble all of human life.”

Perhaps family dinners also aid in spiritual disciplines. According to Foster, prayer is learned. Often, praying for meals is where children first learn how to offer praise and gratitude.

Fasting from a busy schedule in order to make family meals a priority is another form of practicing spiritual disciplines. Foster says, “Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives.” How simple it is to bring what is balanced and what is essential through the simple act of eating together.

Devour the book. Be encouraged. Chew on the ideas. Be challenged. Savor the message. Know the “muchness” and “manyness” of rich blessings from eating with family and friends several times a week. 📖

# Response to Sister Question:

**Editor's note:** Each issue, we print responses to our Sister Question. The question for **March–April** was: In what ways do I practice the

spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting?

**Marion Hostetler, Elkhart, Indiana responded:** In my daily prayers I use sources/lists such as *Mission Mosaic* and monthly *Prayer Vine*, all from Mennonite Mission Network. Eastern Mennonite Missions has monthly prayers and a yearly prayer calendar I use as well. I pray daily from my local church directory as well as from the weekly e-mail prayer concerns that are sent out. In addition I pray for family, for our government, the church, and areas of conflict around the world. In the small group I'm a part of, which meets weekly, we usually use *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, which helps us pray for a wide variety of concerns.

**June Mears Driedger, Lansing, Michigan responded:** I can be a bit of a “news junkie”—continuously needing to know what's happening around the globe, in the United States, and in my city. I need a “news” fast in which I don't watch any television news, listen to NPR, check news websites, or read the local paper. Fasting from the news unhooks me from my false notions and frees me to place my trust and confidence in God. My fast also helps me to see news events through God's eyes and ears. I fast from the news and focus instead on praying. ☑



Marion Hostetler



June M. Driedger

## Cup of Water

*Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matthew 10:42).*

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## ON THE ROAD WITH RHODA


# Open Hands

Last year as I approached my 10th anniversary of working for MW USA, I became aware of an inner restlessness clamoring for attention. I took this question to my spiritual director. What was God saying? After one session I stopped at a local Goodwill seeking something tangible to remind me of our conversation. I bought an “apple candle” and found that it burned beautifully from within, illuminating the whole candle. I often held the candle’s warmth in my hands as I prayed, without words, asking God for wisdom.

I took the candle to my next appointment and shared that I thought God was leading me to propose a job share with Ruth Lapp Guengerich. This could allow me to work fewer hours while focusing on the financial development needs of MW USA and the continued nurture of our newly birthed Sister Care seminars. We ended the session with her saying, “I encourage you to go with open hands.”

Open hands. The image stayed with me as Ruth processed this potential calling for her. I saw the open hands again when, in the Northwest, Carolyn Holderread Heggen expressed a desire to continue as a primary Sister Care presenter for several years. I knew that the three of us had worked creatively together in writing the revised Sister Care manual and that we valued a collaborative work style. Ruth decided she was open to becoming a co-executive director for MW USA, focusing on the areas of programming and administration. The MW USA board approved Carolyn in an adjunct role and Ruth in a staff position.

We’re now scheduling Sister Care seminars with Carolyn as a primary leader. Ruth and I will begin job-sharing as co-executive directors in May 2011. Join us in this column in *timbrel’s* next issue for, “Ruth and Rhoda on the Road.”

I believe we somehow stumbled into the center of God’s plan for Mennonite Women USA. By listening to my restlessness, I inadvertently, then deliberately, opened my hands to something bigger than I could have imagined. By working together enlarging our team, each bringing her unique gifts, we can experience a synergy not possible alone. Truly God can “accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20). 



*Rhoda Keener is executive director of Mennonite Women USA. Contact her at 5207 Heisey Road, Shippensburg, PA 17257-9242; 717-532-9723; <RhodaK@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>.*



*Rhoda holds the candle she lit as part of her prayer time asking God for wisdom.*

*Photo by Bob Keener*



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## New MW USA board members



*Maria Tijerina*

and teaches young adults and adult women. She and her husband Jacob have four grown children.

Nickel, Central States Representative, is a member of Tabor Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas. She is active with the worship team, Sunday school and women's group.

She is secretary at Goessel Elementary School. She and her husband, Elton, have three children and three grandchildren. 

Maria Tijerina and Denise Nickel have accepted positions as Mennonite Women USA board members. Tijerina, Iglesia Menonita Hispana Representative from Archbold, Ohio, is the secretary and treasurer of Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor (Good Shepherd Mennonite Church), Archbold, Ohio, where she helps with women's ministry



*Denise Nickel*

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