

Editors' Notes

RUTHANNA B. HOOKE AND CYNTHIA BRIGGS KITTREDGE*

At a meeting of anti-apartheid activists in South Africa in the 1980s, those present were discussing the situation of activists who were currently imprisoned in government jails. At the meeting, an elderly woman asked for the names of those imprisoned, and began writing them down. The leaders of the meeting asked with some suspicion why she was writing down these names. "So that I can pray for them," she replied.

The topic of this special issue of the *Anglican Theological Review*, Anglican women and prayer, brings into the foreground an aspect of the church's life that often remains in the background. Emily Morgan, one of the founders of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross (SCHC), described "how the petitions of the faithful circle the earth, and have circled it in all ages." Although prayer encircles the earth, it is often a hidden practice, perhaps not held in as high esteem as more visible practices of the Christian faith. Moreover, this work of prayer is quite often the work of women, and for that reason too is often hidden or discounted. The purpose of this issue is to bring these hidden practices into the limelight, and to reflect upon them from various perspectives and cultural locations. The impetus of this special issue was a conference entitled "Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection," co-sponsored by the Society of the

* Ruthanna B. Hooke is Associate Professor of Homiletics at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Her publications include *Transforming Preaching* (Church Publishing, 2010), "The Personal and Its Other in the Performance of Preaching" (*Preaching and the Personal*, Wipf & Stock, 2013), and "Real Presence: Sacramental Embodiment in Preaching" (*Preaching and the Theological Imagination*, Peter Lang, 2015). An Episcopal priest, she has served parishes in Connecticut and Washington, D.C., and currently serves as affiliated clergy at Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill in Alexandria.

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge is Dean and President and Professor of New Testament at Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest and a priest in the Episcopal Church. Her recent publications include *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament* (coeditor, Fortress Press, 2014) and *A Lot of the Way Trees Were Walking: Poems from the Gospel of Mark* (Wipf & Stock, 2015). She has been a member of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross since 1992.

Companions of the Holy Cross and the Center for Anglican Communion Studies at Virginia Theological Seminary. This conference, by making visible the reality of Anglican women praying, spurred a desire to deeper reflection on these practices. In the rich collection of essays that follows, several themes emerge.

The hiddenness of women's prayer is a central theme weaving through these essays. **Fredrica Harris Thompsett**, in her article chronicling the history of SCHC, points to the relative invisibility of this organization within the Episcopal Church, despite the breadth and importance of its work. This low profile was in part due to the culture of the organization itself, which viewed its work as a sort of hidden leaven in the church's life. Likewise, **Eleanor Ruth Sanderson** uses the metaphor of weaving to describe women's prayer, and notes that weaving as a craft has often been women's work, and perhaps partly for that reason garners little attention or esteem compared to other art forms. Similarly, women's prayer is often an overlooked aspect of the church's life, disappearing alongside official and public expressions of the church's ministry.

In an arresting image, Sanderson describes a group of women in New Zealand praying for the church, while next door official leaders of the church were meeting to deliberate on the church's future. Such an image, as Sanderson notes, raises the question of what constitutes the "real church." In her research with women in Tanzania and Fiji, she notes that these women describe their own informal fellowships of prayer and support as the "real church," rather than the official and better-known organs of the church. Likewise, **Donyelle Charlotte McCray**, in her discussion of "church mothers" in African American churches, describes these women as venerated elders in their communities, possessed of authority that often surpasses that of official church leaders. As McCray points out, the church mothers' informal and charismatic authority has its roots in the history of African American enslavement in the United States, during which African American communities had to sustain themselves through informal and extraliturgical networks. The fluidity of religious life and organization in this social situation enabled the rise of "church mothers," who occupy a position in African American church life that is at once central and marginal—an expression of "real church" that co-exists with formal structures of authority.

As these examples suggest, women's vocation of prayer has often served as a powerful way for women to exercise agency and authority,

even in ecclesial institutions that have historically denied them other avenues of power. As Thompsett recalls in her history of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, Emily Morgan claimed that “the greatest power on earth is ours through the precious ministry of intercession.” For many women, especially those who are culturally marginalized, prayer has been a mode of claiming power and shaping their communities, even as that power is frequently exercised in ways that pass unnoticed by others. It is through the ministry of prayer that the SCHC, for instance, has exerted a significant influence on the history of the Episcopal Church. In **Florence May Mei Jee**’s Practicing Theology essay, the crucial threshold to cross is to claim the power to pray extemporaneously, which involves trusting that one’s own words addressed to God are worthy to be spoken and heard.

The essays in this volume also point to the subversiveness of women’s prayer. Often taking place outside the bounds of traditional liturgies and sanctioned public prayers, women’s prayer becomes a way of resisting oppression, as **Gcebile Gina** argues, and of reshaping social reality. In this sense there is an intrinsic connection between prayer and social action; **Marilyn McCord Adams** describes how prayer both awakens compassion for others, and builds up courage to confront evil. The connection between prayer and social action is also repeatedly borne out in the history of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. As Morgan describes this link, the Companions are to address the social needs of the day, “first by prayer and then by battle.” The practice of intercessory prayer incited SCHC members to compassion and outrage over injustice, moving them out of the positions of privilege that many of them occupied in order to act on behalf of the oppressed. Prayer had to come first, so that their hearts could be stirred to action; moreover, prayer itself functioned for them as a form of powerful social critique. Gcebile Gina argues, conversely, that social activism is itself a form of prayer; she writes of the political activism of women in South Africa as “a spiritual protest march in prayer against violence and against the ‘God’ who ordains it.”

Prayer becomes a means of resisting oppression and seeking wholeness in private devotional practices as well. This becomes especially evident in **Ellen Clark-King**’s essay on the prayer lives of transgender women. She notes that prayer was often a lifeline for these women, assuring them of their belovedness even in the midst of their feelings of shame and confusion as they struggled to come to terms with their identity. At the same time, Clark-King observes that it was

as these women claimed and lived into their transgender identities that their prayer lives became more authentic. The integration and wholeness of their lives led to a deeper sense of closeness with God, and a deeper certainty of being loved by God. As this research indicates, prayer is an embodied practice, inextricably linked to women's lives and bodily experience. McCord Adams makes a similar point in arguing that prayer is the "lifeline of theology"; it is in prayer that the reality of God is experienced and is known in our bodily experience, and it is this knowledge that provides the raw material out of which theological reflection emerges. From her perspective in the Benedictine solitary life, **Eric Fairbrother** describes the formational process through which prayer becomes an embodied reality, in spite of all that distracts and estranges people from the present and from intimate relationship with God. Perhaps the embodied nature of prayer is experienced in a particularly powerful way by women, in that it is through prayer that women ground themselves in a relationship with God and thus reclaim a bodily wholeness and integrity that is too often denied them in the cultures in which they live.

For women to claim and inhabit practices of prayer also means to widen and even to transform what counts as prayer, as well as to broaden the images of the God to whom prayer is addressed. Gcebile Gina, for instance, argues that since patriarchal images of God serve to reinforce women's oppression, for women to pray for an end to this oppression entails praying for the death of the "God" who ordains it. In **K. Jeanne Person's** review article on recent books by Episcopal women, each of the volumes she reviews seeks to broaden definitions and practices of prayer. Lauren Winner expands the images used to refer to God in prayer. Barbara Brown Taylor challenges the predisposition in Christian thought and practice toward imagining God as light, and instead makes an investigation of how God is known in darkness. Diana Butler Bass argues for a widening of the scope of places in which we can meet God, going beyond the liturgies of the church into the neighborhoods and ecosystems in which we live. Art-making, too, can be a mode of prayer, as Cynthia Kittredge's poem cycle on Mark's Gospel demonstrates. Likewise, in her art review article **Margaret Adams Parker** points out that "visual prayer" encompasses not only the prayer that art-making itself is, but also the experience of viewing art, a form of prayer that is as readily discounted as the practices of women at prayer.

In each of these arguments for broadening what counts as prayer, there is a certain risk involved, the same risk Jee is mindful of in her

essay on extemporaneous prayer. What does it mean for women to pray in unsanctioned ways, ways dictated by their own relationship with God more than by the institutions and traditions of which they are a part? As McCord Adams notes, the knowledge derived from prayer can be dismissed as “incurably subjective,” or, as Toni Morrison describes it, as “discredited knowledge,” and this is perhaps especially true of prayer practices that depart from institutional norms. Fairbrother speaks of the colonialist prejudices in the New Zealand context that can alienate women from the truth of their own experience. However, as all of these essays demonstrate, it is the practice of prayer itself, in its many permutations, that emboldens the women who practice it to claim a true and empowering knowledge of God.

A primary purpose of the 2014 conference “Anglican Women at Prayer” was to bring women together in community across differences of culture, race, and social location. By doing so, the conference illustrated a theme that is woven through several of the essays in this issue, which is that prayer is a powerful source of community and solidarity among women, a way in which “bonds of affection” are woven. Sanderson describes how prayer united her with those she visits in Fiji and in Tanzania. Gcebile Gina describes how prayer, and social activism conceived as prayer, united black and white South African women in a common fight against oppression. Likewise, prayer became a vehicle and motivating source of connection between the women of SCHC and those to whom they sought to minister.

Just as the conference did, these essays testify to prayer as a source of community within the church itself, a testimony that is particularly valuable in our current ecclesial moment. This volume as a whole tells a story of the Anglican Communion that is more diverse, alive, and hopeful than the more widely public story of conflict and schism. Like the ministry of the *Anglican Theological Review* itself, this volume witnesses to faithful theological reflection and practice across diverse cultures and contexts. The hidden, subversive force of the prayer of Anglican women weaves bonds of affection that connect these diverse contexts, and suggest ways that many voices can continue to be in dialogue both with each other, and with the God who is the source and end of our prayer.

