

Pray What?  
The Experience of Extemporaneous Public Prayer  
in The United Church of Canada

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## Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0032013
Title of Research Project:	Pray What?: The Experience of Spontaneous Public Prayer
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Anne Hoganson

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 1 November 2013 to 25 March 2014

On behalf of Atlantic School of Theology's Research Ethics Board, I wish you success in your research.

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Dr. Alyda Faber  
Chair, Research Ethics Board, Atlantic School of  
Theology

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By Anne Margaret Hoganson

**Abstract:**

This qualitative research study seeks to understand the reason for an observed reluctance to pray extemporaneously in public among members of The United Church of Canada. A theological rationale for the project was developed, and relevant literature was reviewed. Using a phenomenological methodology, interviews were held with six members, including lay and clergy, of The United Church of Canada. The experiences were analyzed, and implications were considered for the spiritual life of individuals and faith communities.

**Introduction**

Many United Church people appear to be extremely reluctant to pray out loud in public. This is easily observed by asking a group, “would someone offer a prayer or blessing?” Almost inevitably there is a pause, and the quality of the pause often feels apprehensive. Some people clearly appear to be in that apprehensive space of “don’t look at me,” while others look perfectly at ease, but still not offering to pray. Parishioners, ministry students, even some clergy – in many cases, people comfortable speaking off the cuff in all manner of situations – hesitate when asked to pray extemporaneously in public. As I became aware of ‘the pause’, I began to mention it to clergy friends, fellow students, professors, lay friends; many of whom said they had either observed it but had not been

attentive to it until it was called to their attention, or revealed that they themselves had felt a reluctance to offer extemporaneous prayer in public settings.

One of the participants in this study, Regina,<sup>1</sup> described an encounter with a woman she knew quite well, but who had not been to church for a long while prior to this occasion: “I made sure to go say hello and give her a big hug and invited her back. And that is easy...but if she’d said come pray in the office with me, I would have thought oh my heavens, now what do I do?” Regina’s reaction is not unusual among United Church members.

And yet, anecdotal evidence, as well as published research and the experience of the participants in this study, suggests that praying together has great potential to enrich relationships and to animate and deepen the spiritual life of individuals and community.

So what is stopping people from praying out loud? If members of The United Church of Canada believe themselves to be children of an unconditionally loving God, and believe themselves to be loving, inclusive, accepting communities of faith, and if prayer is at the heart of the Christian faith, why is there such a tightness and restraint around extemporaneous prayer?

This research study hopes to shed some light on what is behind ‘the pause’, and hopefully help the church find ways to loosen up the prayer life of congregations and individual parishioners, and help members learn to feel comfortable praying together.

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<sup>1</sup> Names of participants have been changed to maintain anonymity.

## **Purpose and Research Question**

### *Research Question*

What is the experience of extemporaneous public prayer among members of The United Church of Canada?

### *Definitions*

- Extemporaneous: spoken without advance preparation; impromptu; unrehearsed.

Although there is a distinction between the two expressions, for the purposes of this study, extemporaneous and spontaneous were used interchangeably.

- Public prayer: for the purposes of this project, public prayer refers to prayers spoken aloud in the presence of other church members. The study is not examining prayer in the public square, but prayer within congregations or church related settings.

### *Theological Rationale*

Christians are a people of prayer. Prayer is how we connect and communicate with God, and is our deepest expression of love and compassion for one another. A life of prayer opens us to the holy mystery of God, and connects us with the source of our being. Weaving prayer into our shared lives can transform our existence, keep God at the centre of our lives, and remind us of our call to ministry and mission.

Prayer is very much about our relationship with God. Our sacred texts are laden with references to prayer. The first sign of prayer in the Bible may be when, “people began to invoke the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:26).<sup>2</sup> Chronologically, a very early

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<sup>2</sup> All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

mention of “prayer” – the Hebrew תְּפִלָּה, *tephillah* – is found in the book of Job, which “most scholars would date...between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE”.<sup>3</sup> “My prayer is pure” (Job 16:17b). Regardless of precisely when the word “prayer” was first used to describe the activity of praying, clearly the activity has been part of our faith experience for millennia. Human beings have been conversing with God for a very long time. When Moses commands the people of Israel to keep God’s decrees and commandments as the way of choosing life, he commands them not only to write their love for God on their hearts, but to recite the words and talk about them.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:4-9).

The *Shema* is a foundational prayer in Judaism; and an integral part of the teachings of Jesus<sup>4</sup> and it highlights the importance of speaking our faith in God, to God, and with one another; the importance of teaching prayer to our children. Making prayer an integral part of our lives is vital to being in relationship with God, the source of our being.

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<sup>3</sup> David J. A. Clines, “Commentary on the Book of Job,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV With the Apocrypha*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 726.

<sup>4</sup> Specific reference to the Shema: Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28.

From the beginning, the Christian church has been a community of people who pray together. Before the day of Pentecost, the apostles gathered and “were constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14) and afterward, the “three thousand” new believers all “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread *and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). The members of the early church evidently understood that prayer was an integral of fellowship and life in the community of God.

As people of the Word (wherever we fall individually on the oral, literate or post-literate spectrum) expressing our faith through prayer nourishes our spiritual well-being and expands our ability to live into the life God offers. Prayer provides a channel for God’s grace to flow in, through and among us.

In her latest book, the Rev. Gretta Vosper begins by equating prayer with an imaginary goat, to which an army regiment still - and now pointlessly - assigns a guard.<sup>5</sup> Vosper, author and minister in The United Church of Canada, seems to equate “prayer” with requests for personal favour/intervention, and thus she belittles it as empty ritual for many people. She moves away from this narrow interpretation when she speaks of her personal experience of regularly entering a reflective “space” that provides a mysteriously elusive connection that is “essential” to her being, similar to what others refer to as “prayer.”<sup>6</sup> But she goes on to say that she does not encounter this space in mainline worship services, adding “Goodness knows what might happen if we opened the portal to

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<sup>5</sup> Gretta Vosper, *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*, (HarperCollins: Kindle Edition, 2012), location 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

each heart and let its contents spill into the crowd, seeping into other hearts, intermingling everyone's sadness and triumphs - tears, laughter, hysteria."<sup>7</sup>

Goodness knows indeed. It is wonderful to imagine congregations where everyone feels comfortable letting the contents of their heart spill out through prayer, instead of being made to feel that their words are wrong or old-fashioned or expressions of empty ritual. That freedom of expression in community is what the church needs to nurture. A more positive approach to “open[ing] the portal in each heart” might involve encouragement of all expressions of prayer and a willingness to receive those prayers as genuine.<sup>8</sup>

A study recently published in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* indicates that repetition can modify the activity of the primary motor cortex.<sup>9</sup> Basically, the repetition of particular movements installs muscle memory which then enables us to perform them without thinking about the components of those movements; such as how a musician develops memory muscle from playing the same piece over and over.<sup>10</sup> Developing a habit of spoken prayer builds muscle memory; the repetition of the physical act of speaking prayer makes a difference.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nathalie Picard, Yoshiya Matsuzaka, and Peter L Strick. "Extended practice of a motor skill is associated with reduced metabolic activity in M1." *Nature Neuroscience* 16, no. 9 (2013): 1340-1347. Used by permission. Copyright Clearance Center licence no. 3343940391203.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1340.

The more people pray out loud, the more natural and comfortable – and right – it feels, the more likely they are to fall into prayer without thinking, and automatically respond with prayer in times of need. A community who prays together regularly, ceaselessly, lovingly, comes to know and trust that the prayers of the community surround everyone in their times of stress and pain; trust that the community holds all in prayer whether prayers are specifically requested or not. People draw strength from being held in loving prayer, and feeling loved, are brought closer to wholeness in spirit.

Many non-religious people apparently believe in the power of prayer even if, like the Rev. Vosper, they would not name it as such. Last December, social media overflowed with prayers for the people of Newtown, Connecticut. Many used terms like “power hums”, “positive energy”, and “good vibes.” I personally witnessed several (self-named) atheist acquaintances reposting a photo of a candle shining in the darkness, with the caption “Prayers for the staff and children at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.” Love for neighbour emerged as prayer. Deep in the collective memory of a non-religious community was the awareness that prayer has the power to heal hearts, to transform lives, to shine a light in the darkness.

Prayer is a way people can engage with love in the lives of those around them, whether it is lives in the local neighbourhood, or the global community. And the more love that is poured out on one another, the closer human community resembles the community envisioned by God, by Jesus, by the apostles as they carried Jesus’ mission and ministry forward into the world. A community in which all break bread together with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people...the Holy Spirit breaks in, God’s grace pours through.

If Christians know the value of prayer, and know that prayer has the power to draw everyone closer to God's community, why are people reluctant to speak in prayer? Thomas Aquinas argues that "Prayer is twofold, common and individual."<sup>11</sup> Common prayer is for the knowledge of all and should be said by the "ministers of the Church...in a loud voice."<sup>12</sup> Individual prayer does not need to be vocal, but Aquinas suggests compelling reasons for vocal individual prayer: first, in order to excite interior devotion, quoting Augustine as saying that "by means of words and other signs we arouse ourselves more effectively to an increase of holy desires;" second, praying in order to serve God not only with the mind, but with the body; third in order to express the overflowing of joy in our heart.<sup>13</sup>

There is another dimension to prayer, one that flows between Aquinas' two end points: common prayer, not for knowledge, but for unity...shared vocal prayer that permeates the membrane between individual and community, opens a space where communities can enter into conversation with God together as one. This common prayer increases the "holy desire" of the community; the desire to participate in God's work together, to embody God's compassion by becoming more deeply engaged in one another's lives through shared communal prayer.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "Twelfth Article [II-II, Q83, Art. 12]: Whether Prayer Should Be Vocal," in *Summa Theologica, Part II-II (Secunda Secundae)*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Kindle Edition, location 12641.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., location 12641.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Jürgen Moltmann describes “God as love [being] experienced in the community...through mutual acceptance and participation. ...the deeper the participation in the life of the other, the more united people...will become.”<sup>15</sup> Moltmann’s description of praying to God applies beautifully to the experience of human beings praying together. “The prayer of the friend,” he says, “is a conversation in the freedom of love, that shares and allows the other to share.”<sup>16</sup> When people share the prayers of their heart, that act of sharing draws the community into a sacred space in which all inhabit each other’s joys and sorrows; joy is magnified when many hearts celebrate and the burden of sorrow is lightened when carried by many.

The United Church of Canada believes “some are called to specific ministries of leadership”, but also that “to embody God’s love in the world, the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship of all believers.”<sup>17</sup> Prayer belongs to all, it is not a language restricted to ordained members of the body. There are times when particular knowledge and understanding of the nature of corporate prayer is necessary to ensure worship is indeed communal and not an expression of one specific individual, but this knowledge need not be restricted to the role of clergy. Nor is it in many congregations: lay led Prayers of the People are not uncommon in the United Church. However, many lay members feel ill-equipped for such a task; and even those who do feel comfortable writing and offering Prayers of the People remain distinctly uncomfortable if asked to pray “on the spot.” There seems to be a reluctance to pray from the heart. This study

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<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 158.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>17</sup> The United Church of Canada, “A Song of Faith,” (Etobicoke, ON: United Church Publishing House, 2006), 8. <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/songfaith>.

attempts to uncover the reason for that reluctance, if the reluctance is revealed in the participant's responses, of course. It may have the same psychological roots as stage fright. Or it may be a reflection of Western society's pressure to be "in control" of our feelings, to avoid being vulnerable at all costs. In both cases, the Church has a responsibility to nurture healthy relationships and sacred communities in which people feel loved and valued, and feel safe to speak to God in prayer, whether alone or in the midst of their faith community.

## ***Review of Literature***

### ***Introduction***

Certain distinctions arise in the literature on prayer: public vs personal prayer, and the form or personal experience of each.

1. The form of private prayer (six resources)
2. Personal experience of private prayer (five resources)
3. The form of public prayer (eight resources)
4. Personal experience of public prayer (five resources)

Of these resources, eleven focus on private prayer, thirteen on public; fourteen focus on form, ten on experience. So there appears to be a slight preference to talk about the form of prayer rather than people's experience, with a fairly even split between public and private prayer in the literature surveyed. There was relatively little attention paid to public prayer as a communal practice, or on the role of laity in public prayer. However, a quick search of United Church of Canada church websites turned up seven prayer workshops focussing on personal experience of prayer and three prayer writing (form) workshops. A

second search, without specifying The United Church of Canada, turned up an Anglican website devoted to prayer (workshops, personal and public prayers and other resources); plus a United Methodist prayer workshop for pastors and a United Church of Christ brochure for a leader's workshop on learning to pray. So the conversation on experience versus form may be shifting at the grassroots level, if not yet captured in the body of formal literature.

### *The form of private prayer*

Johann Metz claims that “No other form of language is so free from linguistic constraints.”<sup>18</sup> In spite of this freedom from linguistic constraints, theologians and researchers generally seem to agree that prayer does need a form or shape to be effective.

Among the books with a focus on form, there is a variation in which comes first: experience or form. In their book, *Prayer and Personal Religion*, Coburn and Schmidt suggest that when our everyday language is inadequate to articulate our desires, our first step is to attend to that desire to pray, and develop an openness to the creative spirit of God in our hearts; and only then memorize Scripture, or turn to the ACTS method (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) as an aid to prayer.<sup>19</sup> Timothy K. Jones argues we learn to pray by attending to our desire for God rather than through “a class on techniques.”<sup>20</sup> Robert Benson believes it is more efficient to first learn the

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner and Johann B. Metz, *The Courage to Pray [Ermutigung zum Gebet]*, translated by Sarah O'Brien Twohig, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 13.

<sup>19</sup> John B Coburn. and Richard H. Schmidt, *Prayer and Personal Religion*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Timothy K. Jones, “What can I Say?” in *Christianity Today* 34, no. 16 (1990), 26.

richness of tradition, such as the Daily Office, and that, in turn, will free the mind from worrying about what to say and open the heart to communion with God.<sup>21</sup> Sybil MacBeth takes a very different approach to form, believing there are some who will never be comfortable articulating their prayers through words and offers an embodied prayer form involving drawing and coloring.<sup>22</sup> This is an important realization; our literate culture places great emphasis on a well-spoken articulation of our thoughts and feelings; while those less comfortable with verbal or written expression can be left on the sidelines.

### ***Personal experience of private prayer***

Ann Ulanov argues that prayer is our primal language: "primary in the sense that its speech includes...this unconscious voice that exists in us from the very beginning, from the moment of birth."<sup>23</sup> We are born speaking God's language and grow out of it as we are conditioned to "put away childish things" (1 Cor 13:11); however this leads to an inability to pray as the images begin to feel false, and prayer becomes "contaminated with the fear of being childish, unrealistic, simple-minded."<sup>24</sup> Watts et al. present a variety of perspectives on prayer, claiming that in order to regain our communion with God through prayer, we must explore it from the "perspectives of Bible, society, psychology, science, poetry, music, sexuality, and the body:" healthy prayer needs freshness and variety.<sup>25</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Benson, *In Constant Prayer*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Sybil MacBeth. *Praying in Color : Drawing a New Path to God*. (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Fraser Watts, ed., *Perspectives on Prayer*, (London: SPCK, 2001).

suggests that form and experience co-operate in a dynamic, interdependent relationship. Charles Elliot speaks of the “integration of corporate outer life and inner life”, suggesting that “when people pray together and work together to implement a small part of their prayers, they discover a level of trust, mutual respect and mutual support that did not exist before.”<sup>26</sup>

According to researchers like Ulanov, VandeCreek and O’Driscoll, few people believe themselves to be ‘good’ at praying, perhaps because assumptions are limited as to what constitutes prayer or because they feel awkward expressing what they are feeling in prayer to God.<sup>27</sup> Several theology students were the subject of a study on praying about difficult experiences: they described negative experiences using words like “stupid, guilt, anger” and were asked to pray about them: most found this extremely uncomfortable because they thought it was inappropriate to voice negative feelings in prayer and thought God might punish them as a result.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The form of public prayer***

The literature reflects a shift, during the last century, away from the assumption that only ordained clergy, with their theological and religious training, have the appropriate knowledge or authority to offer public prayer. In the early Reformation days, there was a lively lay ministry of extemporaneous prayer, which was subsequently

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Elliot, “Prayer and Society,” in *Perspectives on Prayer*, ed. Fraser Watts, (London: SPCK, 2001), 25.

<sup>27</sup> Herbert O’Driscoll, *Prayer among Friends*, (Toronto, ON: Path Books, 2008). Ulanov, *Primary Speech*. Larry VandeCreek, Mark-David Janus, James W. Pennebaker, and Bradley Binau, “Praying about Difficult Experiences as Self-Disclosure to God,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 12, no. 1 (2002): 29-39.

<sup>28</sup> VandeCreek, “Praying about Difficult Experiences,” 31.

suppressed.<sup>29</sup> For centuries (and even today in some denominations), clergy were expected to develop the spiritual gift of extempore prayer: they were expected to pray “heroically,” not descending into the language of the familiar, ground their prayers in Scripture and deliver their own prayers, not read someone else’s.<sup>30</sup> However, Old, Talling, and Whiston all maintained that clergy were not adequately prepared for public praying during their theological education.

In recent decades, more resources are aimed at teaching form and language to enable both clergy and lay persons to offer public prayers in worship. Public prayer cannot be limited to either liturgical language or spontaneous prayer; it requires a balance in order to enliven the experience on an on-going basis.<sup>31</sup> Rinker, Old, Stookey and Leonard offer practical information and/or study guides to help develop one’s own skills and/or teach others how to offer meaningful public prayer.<sup>32</sup> However, the emphasis is on how to prepare prayers, rather than on creating a communal space in which people feel free to share spontaneous prayer. The current research project will also look at the relational barriers that hold people back from praying aloud.

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<sup>29</sup> Ian Green. "New for Old? Clerical and Lay Attitudes to Domestic Prayer in Early Modern England." *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 10, no. 2 (2008): 195-222.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall P. Talling, *Extempore Prayer: Its Principles, Preparation, and Practice*. 5th ed., (Chicago, IL: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1902). Charles Whiston, *Pray: A Study of Distinctively Christian Praying*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972). Don E. Saliers, "Language in the Liturgy: Where Angels Fear to Tread." *Worship* 52, no. 6 (1978): 482-488. Hugh Oliphant Old, *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Worship*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995). Green, "New for Old?"

<sup>31</sup> Rosalind Rinker, *Teaching Conversational Prayer: A Handbook for Groups*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970). Saliers, "Language."

<sup>32</sup> Rinker, *Teaching Conversational Prayer*. Old, *Leading in Prayer*. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen!*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001). Richard Leonard, *Why Bother Praying?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013).

### *Personal experience of public prayer*

Among the reviewed books, a handful highlighted the anxiety felt by many people when faced with the prospect of praying aloud in public.<sup>33</sup> Proctor-Smith places the burden for this on prayer itself, seeing prayer as a political act, which takes place in an arena of “interlocking oppressions and subjugations,” making it difficult and dangerous for women to pray aloud from the heart in public.<sup>34</sup> She also argues that prayer can be used as a form of social control: when God is given patriarchal values, “women's bodies are seen as violable”.<sup>35</sup> Bowman contrasts the different comfort levels in “white church tradition” with its written prayers, and the black tradition of spontaneous charismatic prayer, which “draws on shared history, oral tradition, group dynamic,” and often shares a sense that prayers are already present and waiting for the one who is to speak to step forward and receive them.<sup>36</sup> Several authors identified that having memorized prayers as a foundation mitigated, to some extent, the fear of not knowing what to say.<sup>37</sup> Jane Vennard believes that it takes a long time for a prayer ministry to grow in a congregation; for people to grow comfortable praying aloud. Patience and perseverance and openness to

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<sup>33</sup> Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *Praying with our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995. Gail E. Bowman, *Praying the Sacred in Secular Settings*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). Jane E. Vennard, *A Praying Congregation: The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Proctor-Smith, *Praying Eyes Open*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Bowman, *Praying the Sacred*.

<sup>37</sup> Bowman, *Praying the Sacred*. Vennard, *A Praying Congregation*. Alanna Mitchell, “Hardwired for Worship,” *The United Church Observer*, April 2010. <http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2010/04/hardwired/>.

new practices are needed because “becoming a praying congregation is not a linear process but a time of unfolding and deepening.”<sup>38</sup>

### ***Conclusion of Literature Review***

Although there is a wealth of literature on Christian prayer and prayer life, most of it is from traditions other than The United Church of Canada, the majority being from an Anglican, Episcopal or Roman Catholic perspective. These are traditions with a greater emphasis on set prayer, so their experience does not necessarily translate to The United Church of Canada. The literature also tends to focus on prayer for specific settings, such as worship or private devotion, rather than on the overall prayer life of a community. I believe this leaves a gap in the research. This study specifically explores the experience of United Church members in order to understand the contextual barriers around extemporaneous public prayer in our denomination.

### **Method**

This study used a phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand the essence of an experience, rather than any concrete or quantified measurement of the experience.<sup>39</sup> This approach required the researcher to suspend personal assumptions about the phenomenon in order to allow the experiences of the participants to shape the themes. The process followed was one outlined by John Creswell:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vennard, *A Praying Congregation*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 76-83.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

- Identify a phenomenon, in this case: the experience of extemporaneous public prayer.
- Bracket out the researcher’s experience. That is, identify personal experiences and partly set them aside in order to focus on the experiences of the participants.
- Collect data by interviewing people who have experienced the phenomenon.
- Analyze the data by:
  - Reducing the data to significant statements and organizing those into themes.
  - Developing a textural description of the experiences (“what was experienced”).
  - Developing a structural description (“how they experienced it in terms of context, situation).
- Convey an overall essence of the experience by combining the textural and structural descriptions

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection was through personal interviews with six participants. This small sampling was in keeping with the characteristics and expectations of qualitative research, which seeks “a complex, detailed understanding” of issues that “are difficult to capture” through statistical measures.<sup>41</sup>

Once my proposal was accepted by Atlantic School of Theology’s Research Ethics Board,<sup>42</sup> I solicited participants through the ministry personnel of three United

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<sup>41</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix A for a copy of the proposal.

Church pastoral charges in two Presbyteries, all in Nova Scotia. The participants were given my invitation to participate and all responded directly to me.<sup>43</sup> The participants included:

- Five women, one man
- Three lay members, one Candidate for Ministry (not an AST student), one retired clergy person, one active clergy person
- Ages ranged from mid 30s to their 70s or 80s
- Four lifelong members of the United Church
- Two members raised in other traditions who came to the United Church in their adulthood

One participant, Gwen, chose her own code name. For the others I used an online random name generator. Participants were: Gwen, Regina, Hugo, Iris, Loretta, and Alexandra.

I met with the participants in a location of their choosing, which was their home in most cases. I had them sign an informed consent form<sup>44</sup> before the interview began, and ensured they were comfortable with the interview being recorded for later transcription. Once we chatted for a few minutes to loosen up, I turned on the recording device and asked a predetermined series of questions, with additional probing questions as required.<sup>45</sup> My questions were informed by conversations with my research consultants,

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<sup>43</sup> See Appendix A-2.

<sup>44</sup> See Appendix A-3.

<sup>45</sup> See Appendix A-1.

Dr. Joan Campbell, and the Rev. Valerie Kingsbury. I intentionally did not ask about reluctance or anxiety around prayer in my initial questions in order to bracket out my own previous experience and to avoid contaminating the responses.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Emerging Themes**

#### ***Public Perception & Judgement***

When it comes to praying aloud, there was a huge concern around “what will people think of me?” People do not want to be seen as insincere, or as if they are praying for show. A theological bias emerged in four of the interviews. Hugo described a common reaction to the evangelical tradition:

We’re like whoa you guys pray willy nilly and that’s weird and we don’t want that, because then we’ll come off sounding like we’re charismatic or evangelical...

An aversion to being seen as one of those “charismatic or evangelical” types brings restraint and keeps people from finding their own authentic prayer voice.

Regina’s experience of extemporaneous prayer with family members in the Baptist tradition left this impression on her:

...some would just drone on and the longer they went on, the more skeptical I got. I wondered whether they just did it for show. I like to think they were sincere, but I’m not sure, there’s always that kind of doubt in your mind, that you don’t want somebody thinking that of you.

The concern over what people will think has another aspect as well. Iris told me about a time when she had prayed extemporaneously during a river side baptism in the faith community in which she had grown up:

...not everyone was praying though, I think people were self-conscious to be doing so, to be honest with you...I really do think that they feel self-conscious. What will people think of me? I never really worried about that.

However, when talking about the experience of prayer in her current United Church congregation, which she has been attending for just six months, reflecting on the times when her minister invites parishioners to help shape Prayers of the People, Iris shared this:

I must remember to speak up...I've always held back myself, because I'm new and...want people to get to know me maybe, before I take up their space or something...there's always consideration of other people, of what other people might think.

Notice the shift from “I never really worried about it” to “there’s always consideration...of what other people might think.” That shift points to a different sense of belonging in each community. It suggests a need to feel inside the circle of the community, before being comfortable enough to pray. That she held back from sharing her spoken prayers in her new congregation also ties in with the denominational aspect that arose in other interviews. The church in which she grew up – The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – had a very different prayer tradition than The United Church of Canada. People tend to want to fit in when they join new groups,

whether religious or secular, so she may have needed a better understanding of the culture of her new denomination before feeling comfortable to enter into its prayer tradition.

Something similar surfaced in Gwen's story as well. Gwen described herself as quick to speak up in a group when a prayer is requested...but said she felt great anxiety when asked to close her candidacy interview with prayer...she worried what her prayer would sound like in this group of mostly strangers.

The perception and concern around what others will think of spoken prayers may be, not surprisingly, closely linked to people's feeling of connectedness with those around them. Another aspect of this concern is an uncertainty regarding other people's comfort level with prayer; whether the other will even want to pray together in the first place.

Regina said:

I try to do some visiting on behalf of the church, and I'm never sure if I should be offering prayer to people or not...I'm not sure of their comfort level. I know where my comfort level is, and it isn't there.

Loretta worried about imposing on people, particularly during her time in active ministry.

If I knew it was extremely uncomfortable for people, I certainly didn't offer it again...how do you offer without it feeling like an imposition, like how do you tell a minister you don't want them to pray with you?

### ***Emotional Response***

A fear of losing emotional control was also identified. Loretta described it as a big problem for her when she was starting out in ministry:

For a long time that was one of the problems I had with extemporaneous prayer, because when I'd start, I'd want to cry because it was very emotional for me, because it just seemed so amazing that I could have this relationship...in the early days when I started praying aloud with other people, that was a real hard problem for a while.

Iris shared what would happen if she opened up to pray extemporaneously in church:

I think it would be more emotional, emotions would come out and I don't think I could control that. Even with all my years of experience, I think I would be emotional to the point of crying.

Gwen and Iris both shared stories of encounters with people speaking in tongues. Gwen's experience happened in her teen years, and she "ended up running out of that church in fear and running home." The strangeness of losing control of one's self to that extent was profoundly unsettling to her.

Hugo's theory about United Church people's reluctance to pray from the heart during worship was this:

There's something deeply Canadian about us, we freak out about that, that's like touchy feely, whoa I'm not on with that.... There's something profoundly mono-emotional sometimes about United Church worship. Where people don't want to get too excited and they don't want to get too upset...and why is that? ...why is it important for it not to get too close to my heart? Part of the United Church might be to say that for us, because of the traditions we come out of, that worship can be all cerebral.

There is a lot of truth in what Hugo said. If individuals and congregations approach worship with their minds only, their corporate prayer life is bound to be emotionally flat.

### *Expectations of Clergy*

The expectations and traditions around the role of the minister play into the dynamics of extemporaneous prayer. People perceive that the Minister is the one who is trained for this; the one who is "supposed" to pray. It is not necessarily a case of seeing it as the minister's job per se; but there is in our society a tendency to defer to the expert in the room, as if other, amateur, voices matter less.

As Regina put it:

I think we have expectations of the person standing in the pulpit...expectations that they have a real call, and part of their call is to lead us in prayer.

Loretta found that she was always the one called upon to pray, saying:

As the paid clergy person, you were “the prayer”...it was lovely and refreshing when a lay person felt comfortable to offer prayer and I loved that.” She added: “I used to find that most people probably thought that you were the one who was prepared and wouldn’t mind being put on the spot.

Hugo expressed frustration with the expectation that it is up to the minister to lead prayer:

If you come to church meetings, because you have the letter and the holy hands, they’re like Rev Anne would you lead us in prayer...and you’re like well I didn’t go to school and get ordained to lead prayer groups every day...there’s an empowerment that the church has to do. I could have a part of that prayer, but why would you leave it up to one person in a group...not everyone has to say something, but why leave it up to one person. Why is that so strange? That having a prayer group is something optional for a church, it’s crazy. You should be able to have a group of people who are praying for others, and that want to take that up as a ministry.

And there *is* an empowerment that the church has to facilitate. Because whether it comes out of a cultural tendency to defer to the expert, or is a remnant of past tradition, people do turn to the minister to offer most of the prayer. Congregations have to have the conversation; leaders need to remind people that the United Church upholds the ministry and discipleship of all believers and that our communal prayer life is enriched by many voices.

## *Changing Theology*

Amid our society's religious and theological pluralism, the waters around prayer can be very murky. Questions like: who or what are we praying to - and what exactly we are praying for – can be real barriers to people's ability to pray in any form, extemporaneous or otherwise. Four of the participants talked about how their theology has changed over the years, and that has impacted their prayer life.

Loretta, the retired clergy person, shared a particularly poignant struggle:

I've moved from having had for, all my life, a very personal relationship with God as I understood God...and now I don't understand God anymore as a being, and so it's become post-theistic and I don't know how to pray in that situation at this time...so I don't have as rich a prayer life as I used to have...I hope I will again, I don't know if I will again.

For Gwen, the impact of her changing theology on her prayer life was not around prayer in general, but specifically with spoken prayer. Her emerging sense of God's immanence has rendered her uncomfortable addressing God aloud:

When I was a child I thought God lived above the organ in church because everyone pointed up...now I see him more as the spirit living in each of us and becoming one with each of us, so...I feel more comfortable talking to him person to person, soul to soul, than actually praying out loud.

Gwen's experience in the United Church prayer is that prayer tends to be intercessory "as opposed to some of the other religions, where it's more of a chance to be

one on one with God.” Prayer is not always part of the conversation in United Church congregations, at least not in terms of talking about to whom/what are we praying, and for what purpose. If people believe the Church to be a place where God is seen mainly as a being who lives “above the organ,” they may be reluctant to voice their own prayers if their personal understanding of God is different.

In her experiences with women in healing circles, Iris found that “bringing in the feminine helped an awful lot.” Using predominately masculine or patriarchal language can be a great barrier to prayer for many women, as born out by the Proctor-Smith text. Uncomfortable or dissonant language about God, say in conversation or heard in a sermon, can be processed more readily than as is the case with prayer: “the act of praying raises the relational question with an urgency that need not apply in considerations of language or discourse about God.”<sup>46</sup>

## **Evaluation and Implications for Pastoral Theology and Ministry**

### ***Why is Extemporaneous prayer important?***

Does extemporaneous prayer matter, and if so, why? Based on the research and the experiences of the participants, extemporaneous public prayer is profoundly subversive and counter cultural. It stands in total opposition to our individualistic self-sufficient society: extemporaneous public prayer requires us to be in relationship together. It is a communal act. Praying aloud in community dislocates people from a silo mentality.

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<sup>46</sup> Proctor-Smith, *Praying Eyes Open*, 71.

It's radical in the truest sense that it takes us back to our roots. Our biblical and other ancient stories are laden with prayer: prayers of praise and jubilation, of lament and sorrow, of great thanksgiving. Although scripture comes down to us in written form, it is easy to imagine many of the biblical prayers being extemporaneous in their earliest form, especially considering the prayers emerged in an oral culture.

Extemporaneous public prayer rubs up against societal pressure to be calm, cool and in control. We never know where extemporaneous prayer will lead; it has the potential to throw people right into the mess of life and to be emotionally messy together. It is true that vulnerabilities are often exposed, but in ways that bind people together, as we respond to one another's need. Praying together reminds us even more viscerally that we are not alone.

This relational power of extemporaneous prayer was evident in the experiences of five of the six participants in this study. All five strongly affirmed that it deepened their connection with other people and their community.

### ***Prayer and Connection with God***

Participants were mixed as to whether extemporaneous public prayer specifically, deepened their relationship with God. When asked if it made a difference whether prayers were extemporaneous or recited, Iris said "not to God, no" but added "but maybe for the person". Regina and Hugo felt that it didn't really matter if public prayer was extemporaneous or prepared. What matters, said Hugo, is "whether you really feel a deep connection with the Spirit when you're doing it...or you're doing it just 'cause." Regina, Hugo and Gwen all shared stories of times when they felt people were praying out of

obligation rather than as a genuine address to God. There was a concern that if people feel unprepared for extemporaneous prayer, or lack an understanding of the role of prayer in our corporate lives, they may not be entering into a conversation with the Divine but simply trying to get some words out so they can get on with what comes next.

Hugo and Regina felt that their own connection with God grew more through private prayer rather than extemporaneous public prayer. As Regina put it:

...prayer's always been kind of personal, kept inside, lot of conversations have gone on between me and the Great One, in a lot of different situations, but not so much in the open, public, spontaneous.

Hugo said he enjoyed preparing and participating in well-crafted and creative responsive liturgy. Extemporaneous prayer did not necessarily play a big role for him liturgically or publically. But he lifted up a freedom in extemporaneous private prayer that he believes does not exist with prepared prayer:

What I love about extemporaneous prayer is the gloves are off and there's no mask about the piety needing to sound good...it's like God is with me and we are conversing back and forth.

Gwen found that extemporaneous public prayer increased her sense of being part of the cosmic whole and heightened her awareness of God's transcendence, saying:

Extemporaneous prayer has connected me with something greater than myself somehow...and it's done it by making you think before you speak.

Iris spoke of her experiences with women praying extemporaneously in healing circles. She said the women longed to be reconnected with God as they opened themselves to new understandings of God's movement in their lives; as they shared their stories of abuse, they began to break down the barriers they had placed between themselves and God:

I found that very interesting, very healing, very warming, to know that women would connect with the force that created them and want to be one with that, and consciously removing the clutter between their heart and the heart of God.

### ***Future Directions***

Extemporaneous prayer appears to open a space where guards are let down, where people share from the depths of the heart; those kinds of moments resonate with people. That came through loud and clear in my interviews. We need to find ways to empower people to feel comfortable praying aloud together. Prayer writing workshops help, but there is something else needed; something besides learning the technical "how to-s" of prayer. There is work to be done around fostering a sense of trust in our communities; people clearly need to trust that they won't be judged harshly if they say something strange, or if they break down in tears. Leaders might also lift up the purpose of prayer as a practice that brings us deeper into relationship, not a weapon used to tear one another down by pointing out individual short-comings, or a conduit for sharing confidential information. Participants were nourished by experiences of prayer that affirmed the

goodness of people and focussed on their creative potential, rather than prayers that focussed on the ways humans get things wrong.

Many of the extemporaneous experiences in large groups were in contexts other than Sunday morning worship: places like camp, Youth Forum, Greenbelt, a sweat lodge ceremony. And something different happens in those spaces than happens in the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Gwen really captured the essence of that ‘something’:

Do you know what I mean by energy, that feeling where your skin’s tingling and you’re feeling caught up in the Spirit? I don’t get that a whole lot in church, and when I do it’s amazing. But I get it in camp, singing with this group, it’s like the room is charged with an electrical current and it makes you feel more able to pray.

However, it is important to be mindful that, as Hugo put it, Camp is a place where there aren’t the same barriers, it’s a different culture, it allows for all kinds of things that wouldn’t normally happen on a Sunday morning.

That is understandable, given the heightened emotion and energy that tends to accompany such gatherings. Context does matter greatly. But it is worthwhile to reflect on those experiences and ask what it is about a prayer service at camp, for example, that evokes such a powerful response? And what part(s) of that experience *can* be tried on a Sunday morning? What can we learn from these contexts that might help to break down the barriers between the people in our pews so that they are more open to one another, more willing to be vulnerable together?

Alexandra expressed a great frustration with the physical distance at which people place themselves on Sunday mornings:

It's hard to feel a closeness with ... being scattered. In fact, that's probably a number one thing that we have to get over, sitting way in the back or way off to the sides.

This is problematic in many sanctuaries: huge spaces built for much larger populations of past decades now housing fewer people, many of whom cling to 'their' pew, regardless of the distance between themselves and their neighbour. It may be that we need to start roping off the back pews in order to force a paradigm shift in seating patterns! Or we simply keep talking; explaining why it is a good idea to sit closer together: not for the preacher's sake so s/he can have better eye contact, but for the sake of the community's spiritual well-being.

Iris believes it is simply a matter of bringing people back to what comes naturally:

...talking to God is a natural thing ... bringing focus onto this natural, innate practice will almost give permission to more people to partake and not feel self-conscious.

Regina made a related point: "I think a lot of people want something but they don't know quite how to go about approaching it."

My interviews revealed a desire for prayer and the depth it adds relationships. Participants were clear that extemporaneous prayer feels more comfortable, and more natural, the more it is practiced; for many, it also required a great deal of encouragement

in order to partake themselves. If spoken prayer is not given much attention, other than the formal prayers during worship, it can be very difficult to gain that comfort level.

Hugo offered a suggestion on how a culture of extemporaneous prayer might be developed:

I think you have to be intentional as a leader. . . .not so much putting people on the spot, but thinking as I go into a group or meeting, do I know people who are more comfortable in their faith, in having that kind of vulnerability. . . .so going to that person and saying, I'm going to pray tonight, would you pray with me? So that it gets done. . . .so people think ok, I can do this. So you need people in leadership who are intentional about making it happen, opening that space, and then when it does happen, you celebrate.

Extemporaneous prayer holds a power to bind people into deeper relationships. It might take long time to grow a community in which people feel free and safe to share the prayers of their hearts out loud, but from the experiences shared by these wise participants, it surely is worth the effort. Sharing the prayers of our hearts together in community is one of the ways in which we can participate deeply in one other's lives, and that brings us closer to the kind of interpenetrating relationship of love into which God calls us.

The experiences shared by the participants in this study revealed many barriers to extemporaneous public prayer, including: fear of what others will think or of how God might respond, particular expectations of who is supposed to offer spoken prayer in faith

communities, anxiety around losing control of emotions, discomfort with the unexpected, physical spaces that inhibit intimacy, uncertainty regarding the purpose of prayer, and questions about the nature and/or existence of God. Some of these barriers are internal, while others are more contextual. With so many barriers in place, it is astonishing that people dare to risk sharing the prayers of their hearts at all! It is an indication of how deeply prayer sustains our spiritual lives and a manifestation of the human thirst to connect with something greater than ourselves.

The study also revealed the transformative potential of prayer. Participants shared that having to pray extemporaneously meant they had to be more attentive to their personal beliefs. As Gwen said, it makes her think before she speaks. Prayer necessitates an inward reflection on the images and metaphors that shape an understanding of the Divine in order to articulate them in a way that captures the essence of that understanding. This combination of reflection (inward) and action (praying aloud – outward) leads people to a deeper awareness of their own relationship with God, their understanding of how God works in the world and in human lives, and also serves as a catalyst to redefine the relationship as their theology changes throughout their lives. It might be helpful for spiritual leaders to offer prayer workshops that explore the synergy of vocal prayer and theology. Holding sessions over a period of time would create a space for parishioners to reflect on their prayer expression and their own theology, and notice the responsiveness of one to the other.

Many spiritual leaders might also feel a need for more education and training in how to foster an active public prayer life in their congregations. I concur with Old, Talling, and Whiston that clergy are not adequately prepared for public praying during

their theological education. The art of prayer, so to speak, has not played a significant role in my own theological education. The forms and purposes of prayer were well covered in worship courses and students are encouraged to explore and develop a range of spiritual practices, but otherwise there was little attention paid to prayer, even though it is such an integral part of our Christian community, and will be a vital part of vocational ministry.

Providing spiritual leadership through a ministry of extemporaneous public prayer is fertile soil in which the Church can help members grow in their faith, and deepen their connections with one another. This prayer leadership needs to be intentional, as Hugo stressed. It needs to be persistent. It needs to be part of the conversation of the community; congregations need to talk about the creative potential of praying. Belittling expressions of prayer that do not conform to one particular concept is not conducive to the development of an active prayer life in community. Sharing fears and concerns, sharing different understandings of what prayer means to each person and to the community, is a powerful step toward creating a space in which extemporaneous public prayer can blossom. It is evident from the research that extemporaneous public prayer strengthens relational bonds, which in turn brings us closer to the community of God.

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## Appendix A – REB Submission

**Date submitted:** October 15, 2013

**Name of Student Investigator:** Anne Hoganson

**Title of Research Project:**

What is the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public like for members of The United Church of Canada?

### Summary of Proposed Research

<b>Description</b>
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In recent years, there has been considerable attention to the development of personal spiritual practices within the United Church. Workshops and online retreats abound, as do books and articles. There is an increasing volume of liturgical resources available, from full liturgies for weekly and special occasion services to collections of written prayer. However, there has not been the same attention paid to the practice and habit of extemporaneous public prayer. The United Church lifts up the ministry of the laity as being an integral and highly valued part of the spiritual life of the church (“A Song of Faith”, 2006, p. 8). But the church may not be adequately equipping or preparing people for the types of ministry they are being asked to offer. There is a gap in learning opportunities for United Church members to both learn how to pray extemporaneously, and learn to create and share written prayers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests a strong reluctance in most lay people when asked to pray extemporaneously in church (or other settings). Anecdotal evidence also reveals that a reluctance to pray extemporaneously exists in some clergy as well. Whether or not the reluctance to pray is anxiety based, or rooted in another cause, it is important to determine if/how is it affecting the spiritual lives of United Church members and congregations. The Church may be doing its members a disservice by ignoring spiritual potential of extemporaneous prayer. Will the Church lose its faith language as members are able to become more and more reliant on the abundance of resources created by ‘specialists’, instead of being encouraged to loosen and strengthen their own prayer muscle? Does praying in someone else’s written words leave as much room for God to enter? This study seeks to uncover if this anecdotal evidence of fear and anxiety around extemporaneous public prayer is born out in fact. The research project also seeks to flesh out the reason(s) for any discomfort, so that our local congregations, and perhaps the wider Church, can find ways to address it. Given that the Christian life is grounded in prayer, the prayers of all need to be nurtured in order that the spiritual life of congregations will not wither and die; those members with the gift of extemporaneous prayer need to be equipped and prepared to share their gifts with the whole body.

<b>Proposed Research Field Sites</b>
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I propose to interview four lay members (or adherents) and two clergy from three different United Church congregations within Halifax and/or Truro Presbyteries. Ideally the congregations will differ in size (family-size, pastoral size, and program size), and demographic populations (rural, suburban, urban).

### **Principle Research Consultants**

I will consult with Dr. Joan Campbell (AST Faculty). I will also consult with the Rev. Valerie Kingsbury (Lead Minister, First United Church, Truro; Chair, Truro Presbytery), who has extensive experience in congregational ministry, and other settings where prayer is incorporated (e.g. facilitating retreats, leading study groups, chairing meetings). Finally, I will consult with other ministry personnel on an informal basis.

### **Methodology**

Based on my understanding of qualitative research design (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), my research project is best suited to a phenomenological approach. I will collect data from adult participants during interviews, in which I anticipate taking audio recordings (for later transcription) and written field notes. (See Appendix A: Proposed Questions.)

I hope to recruit four lay persons and two clergy, ideally both men and women, who have offered spoken extemporaneous prayer in public. Ideally participants will represent congregations of differing sizes (family-size, pastoral size, and program size), and demographic populations (rural, suburban, urban).

I will contact several congregations (through their clergy) in Halifax and Truro Presbyteries with an invitation to participate in my research. I will choose participants from the responses. (See Appendix B: Invitation to Participate.)

I will conduct the interviews in a space comfortable for the participants, ideally a room in their home church. I will ensure we are not alone in the building during the interview period by scheduling the interviews during office hours of staff and/or during other activities when the church is open. I will provide them with an Informed Consent (See Appendix C) to read and sign, and leave a copy for them. I will thank each participant at the interview.

A copy of the Research Report will be made available to the participants, and to members of the wider community, on request. A summary of the research will also be presented to the public during “Grad Project Week” to be held at Atlantic School of Theology in March, 2014.

### **Potential Benefits from Study**

This project will offer participants an opportunity to share, and reflect on, their experiences of extemporaneous prayer in public. I believe this reflection will help participants gain a greater awareness of their own (dis)comfort level with this type of prayer.

I also believe this research will enhance the church's understanding of how extemporaneous prayer in public is experienced by its members. Being aware of people's (dis)comfort with the type of prayer will enable congregations and Presbyteries to identify the need, if any, for training that supports members' formation as a praying people.

Developing a deeper understanding of peoples' experience of prayer, and specifically extemporaneous prayer in public, may offer insight into the ways in which this type of prayer can feed the spiritual life of the individual and the community.

#### **Potential Risks from Study**

It may be stressful for participants to reveal any anxiety they feel when praying in public. Particularly with clergy, for whom prayer is an expected and integral part of their role within the church, confessing to anxiety may trigger emotional distress, such as feeling ashamed or embarrassed. I will assure participants that their identities will be kept in strictest confidence to help alleviate any fear of public embarrassment. I will also remind them that they are free to terminate the interview at any time. Should they exhibit a need for pastoral care, I will refer them to my supervisor.

#### **Process for Obtaining Informed Consent**

**After I have identified potential participants, I will telephone or email them to ask if they are willing, in principle to participate. If their answer is affirmative, I will arrange an interview place and time. At the beginning of the meeting and before the interview begins, I will share the background of my project, answer questions they might have and ask them to sign a consent form (see Appendix C). They will be able to end the interview at any point and I will delete the recording if they decide to withdraw from the study.**

#### **Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data**

**Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:**

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants (by January 31, 2014), I will:
  - a) provide one copy for the participants
  - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
  - c) provide one copy for my supervisor (Dr. Willhauck), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations (March 11, 12, 13) and until deleted permanently from my device (no later than March 20, 2014).
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on March 25, 2014.
4. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on March 11, 12 and 13. On March 20, 2014 I will bring my recording device to my supervisor who will check to make sure all interviews have been deleted.
5. When the final Graduate Research paper is submitted to my supervisor on March 25, 2014, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
6. Dr. Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing on March 25, 2015.

**Appendix A-1: Proposed Questions**

**Appendix A-2: Invitation to Participate**

**Appendix A-3: Informed Consent**

## **APPENDIX A-1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**What is the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public like for members of The United Church of Canada?**

**Anne Hoganson  
Atlantic School of Theology  
660 Francklyn Street  
Halifax, NS B3H 3B5**

1. How have you experienced extemporaneous prayer in The United Church of Canada?
2. How do you feel when you are asked to pray extemporaneously?
3. When/where do you have the opportunity to pray extemporaneously:
  - a) in your congregation? (e.g. worship, Bible study, congregational meetings)
  - b) in other settings? (e.g. community event, nursing home)
4. How do you feel in those different contexts?
5. What role has extemporaneous prayer played in your spiritual journey?
6. Does your experience of God differ if you are praying extemporaneously or reading text? /if you are listening to prayer being offered extemporaneously or read from text?
7. In what context did you experience your deepest religious experience? Describe the kind of prayer in which you were engaged at the time.
8. Is anything missing in your prayer life? /in the Church's prayer life?

## APPENDIX A-2: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

### **What is the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public like for members of The United Church of Canada?**

**Anne Hoganson  
Atlantic School of Theology  
660 Francklyn Street  
Halifax, NS B3H 3B5**

I am student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Degree Programme at Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of the Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on the experience of extemporaneous (i.e. spoken with little or no preparation) prayer in public, and seeking to interview adult lay members (and/or adherents) and clergy of the United Church. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of this work is multi fold:

1. Examine the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public for individuals, and what has enriched or inhibited this experience.
2. Identify any need or desire for training.
3. Increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of extemporaneous prayer in public.
4. Explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. The questions and the project are designed to move to the contours of your experience as you actively speak about what it is like to be a leader. The researcher will take notes and/or audiotape the conversation.

The tapes and transcript will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April 2014.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber at [afaber@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:afaber@astheology.ns.ca), Chair, Research Ethics Board.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please contact me at (902-233-9073 or [annehoganson@gmail.com](mailto:annehoganson@gmail.com)).

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the student researcher (as above), or the principal researcher, Dr. Susan Willhauck, at (902-492-1911 or [swillhauck@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:swillhauck@astheology.ns.ca).)

With thanks,

Anne Hoganson  
Final Year Student  
M. Div. Programme (UCC)

## **APPENDIX A-3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

### **What is the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public like for members of The United Church of Canada?**

**Anne Hoganson  
Atlantic School of Theology  
660 Francklyn Street  
Halifax, NS B3H 3B5**

I am student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Degree Programme at Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of Dr. Susan Willhauck I am conducting a study on the experience of extemporaneous (i.e. spoken with little or no preparation) prayer in public, and seeking to interview adult lay members (and/or adherents) and clergy of the United Church. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of this work is multi fold:

1. Examine the experience of extemporaneous prayer in public for individuals, and what has enriched or inhibited this experience.
2. Identify any need or desire for training.
3. Increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of extemporaneous prayer in public.
4. Explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. The questions and the project are designed to move to the contours of your experience as you actively speak about what it is like to be a leader. The researcher will take notes and/or audiotape the conversation.

The tapes and transcript will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April 2014.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the bottom of this page.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined and of which I have a copy have been explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at anytime should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored

separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a time line for the storage and destruction of data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, I will:
  - a) provide one copy for the participants
  - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
  - c) provide one copy for my supervisor (Dr. Willhauck), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations (March 11, 12 and 13) and until deleted permanently from my device (no later than March 20).
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on March 25, 2014.
4. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on March 11, 12, and 13. On March 20, 2014 I will bring my recording device to my supervisor who will check to make sure all interviews have been deleted.
5. When the final Graduate Research paper is submitted to my supervisor on March 25, 2014, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
6. Dr. Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing on April 27, 2015.

If you have any questions, please contact the student researcher, Anne Hoganson, at (902-233-9073 or [annehoganson@gmail.com](mailto:annehoganson@gmail.com)) or the principal researcher, Dr. Susan Willhauck, at (902-492-1911 or [swillhauck@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:swillhauck@astheology.ns.ca).)

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber at [afaber@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:afaber@astheology.ns.ca), Chair, Research Ethics Board.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.