In this conference, as we explore deeper aspects to our life of prayer, we are reminded of our particular attraction as Companions to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is at the center of the dance of prayer for which we long. He is the one and no other, at the beginning of this journey upon which we embark anew, and He meets us at the edges and end of all things. He is the choreographer and partner in our dance, whether a dance of joy and laughter or a dance of healing and transformation of our sorrow or pain.

He is the good that exists in all systems of thought and faith, the source of the holy in all pathways of struggle, of men and women, down through the ages, to find and follow God. He is the Lord of all realms of spiritual and physical existence. He not only bestows upon us the Flame-dancing Spirit, he is the Flame-dancing Spirit.

Sydney Carter wrote the familiar “Lord of the Dance” lyrics in 1963 which acclaim Christ as the center of the Dance, placing Him at the dawn of creation. This same Lord is also the incarnate one, born in a flesh and blood body at a particular place, Bethlehem. Carter, who describes himself as a Christian, writes that he was attracted to the Hindu God Shiva, the Dancing God of Creation. Some of the nature of Christ has often been seen in Shiva, most especially the Nata raj form of Shiva, who in this form of Hinduism dances the universe into being. Carter describes Christ in the the first verse and chorus of the song as the Lord of the Dance.

Lord of the Dance  (Sydney Carter)

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

Dance then wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance said He.
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance said He.
These words are echoed in scripture. In Genesis 1 it is written: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And in John 1:2-3: “He was in the Beginning with God, all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”

We worship and pray to an incarnate Lord whose presence we see in all of creation. Scientists have been able to see, in very recent years, back to the very origins of what we know of our created order.

![Image of the universe](image)

Our universe commenced with what is known as a Big Bang in which matter flew out from a tiny form hurling flecks of subatomic particles into an expanding space.

We celebrate the hand of God in these beginnings: “At your command all things came to be, the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns the planets in their courses and this fragile earth out island home. By your will they were created and have their being” (Book of Common Prayer Eucharistic Prayer C)

Jim Thompson, in his book “The Physics of Genesis,” calls us to examine the events evident in science with those in the creation stories of Genesis not as reconciled facts, because they are not, and not as in opposition, because they are not. Rather, profound truth exists as readily in myth as in the material world. God in Christ is author of the truth of both. We make peace with the mystical and the material. And the spiritual infuses both. Our walk of faith lets these realities be woven into profound truth. And so
the Big Bang and the science of the universe does not conflict with the creation of light in Genesis on the fourth day.

In this picture we see the patterns made in the formation of the universe including what is known as an accelerating pattern of creation, an expansion in which the universe is forming that is characteristic of our present times.

Note the afterglow light pattern at the beginning of time. Created before visible light.

“And God said let there be light. And there was light and God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.” And in John 1:4-5: “In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Although we know that the light referred to is a supernatural comfort, the referral to Christ as the light by John has a more powerful implication than the created physical light. We are however blessed with an array of physical representations of the very real manifestation of light in creation which also contains and reflects the Creator.

Below we see a Hubble picture of the Dawn of Time Stars, which tumbled across the
universe in huge numbers. Later in the process the sophistication of matter increases and there are fewer but more complex formations.

Again, the light shines in the darkness:

Hubble: Light and Darkness
the emergence of light occurred early in the formation of the universe and the earliest light patterns have recently been mapped by the Planck telescope.

Research from the Planck satellite and telescope gives us the most accurate and detailed map of light as radiation found after the Big Bang. This particular early light still exists but unseen as a cosmic backdrop of microwave lengths. It is everywhere in the universe surrounding everything. The variations in color on this mapping represent slight differences in temperature of the particles. If it were sound it might be a harmonizing hum.

“For you alone are God living and true, dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and forever. Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and filled them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.” (Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer D).

The planets came to be created, the solar systems and patterns of orbits were established allowing for our home on earth.
Here we see our fragile place in the universe with our moon. The “unwearied sun” is at the center of our orbit. The circling orbits depicted suggest to us that dance is a constructing element of our environment, that there is dance in space.

Small galaxies dance around larger galaxies.
This Hubble picture shows twin galaxies dancing joined together by an arm of stars. The gravity of the stars pulling in the arm maintains the dance.

We can see that dancing with God connotes an invitation to prayer that is already occurring in the created order. It will be a dance in the physical sense celebrating the incarnation and certainly in the spiritual realm which permeates and transcends. We can see with our eyes of faith the Dancing presence of God in his creation. We can see that we worship a triune God who took on real flesh and blood. We worship a powerful God who anoints us with his Holy Spirit to accomplish our unique dance to heal and transform the whole created order.

God is again continuing to create the patterns of dance even in the cosmos, the planets and stars. The orbits in our solar system with its eight planets follow an elliptical pattern around the Sun. Venus exhibits a more complex pentagonal pattern which creates a unique movement with the Earth or the other planets in the system. Eight Earth orbits equal 13 Venus orbits and another five Earth Venus apogee moments (highest altitude in an elliptical orbit.) The rhythm created is the same rhythm used in the tango. (P.A. Semi, “Orbital Resonance and the Solar Cycles” and astronomy.com).
These two pictures show the intricate patterns of dance that exist in the creation. They show that some patterns of beauty are made by their orbits over specified lengths of time.
“And then God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27). “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” “Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself, and when we had fallen into sin and became subject to evil and death, you in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.” (Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer A). And this reconciling act of sacrifice by a flesh and blood Lord compels us, sweeps us off our feet, stuns us still. Consider being reminded by this song by Michael Card, sharing with us the events in a historical time and in a space on Earth, the physical, mystical and mysterious acts of God.

_This Must Be the Lamb_  (Michael Card)

On a gray April morning as a chilly wind blew  
A thousand dark promises were about to come true  
As Satan stood trembling knowing now he had lost  
As the Lamb took his first step on the way to the cross

This must be the Lamb  
The fulfillment of all God has spoken  
This must be the Lamb  
Not a single bone will be broken  
Like a sheep to the slaughter so silently still  
This must be the Lamb

They mocked his true calling and laughed at his fate  
So glad to see the gentle one consumed by their hate  
Unaware of the wind and the darkening sky  
So blind to the fact that it was God limping by.

This must be the Lamb  
The fulfillment of all God has spoken  
This must be the lamb  
Not a single bone will be broken  
Like a sheep to the slaughter so silently still  
This must be the Lamb

The poor women weeping at what seemed a great loss  
Trembling in fear at the foot of the cross
Tormented by memories that came like a flood  
Unaware that their pardon must be bought with his blood.

This must be the Lamb  
The fulfillment of all God has spoken  
This must be the Lamb  
Not a single bone will be broken  
Like a sheep to the slaughter so silently still  
This must be the Lamb.

The following poem I wrote and entitled it:

_Told Them What?_  (Lynne Nelson)

The first day of the week Mary ran....  
And then Peter and John ran too,  
In grief and tears  
Disbelief and fears,

The earth danced beneath their feet  
Would have told them if they could hear,  
And the wind in their hair  
And the birds in the air.

Romans 8 tells us in verses 19 and 22 that “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing (manifestation) of the sons and daughters of God . . . The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we await the adoption as sons and daughters for the redemption of our bodies.”

We are enjoined in the midst of this eager longing that we ourselves share with one another and the created order to grow into a life of prayer and informed action that participate in the transformation and healing, the redemption of all things. Our calls are unique to each one. God in Christ himself invites us to the dance of prayer.

As we know there are many forms of prayer and many diverse persons engaged in prayer. We are called to express our unique calls in the midst of this prayer, this dance.

We notice that many of our traditional saints were and are engaged in what we know as contemplative prayer and dance at the center of our connection to God. This prayer form, Centering Prayer, calls us to a deepening experience of God for which we also were created. “You made all things and filled them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.” (Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic
Prayer D)  Many of these saints will tell you that they also had a depth of experience in the specific work they were called to. Many of our well-known saints are depicted in pictures and icons with symbols of their work, talents or call.

Julian of Norwich: Her writing displayed
Brother Lawrence: “The Lord walks among the pots and pans.”
Hildegard looking heavenward holding her quill pen implies prayer informing her writing.

John of the Cross holding a pen and *Dark Night of the Soul*
I traveled with my husband and another couple, dear and long-time friends, on a road trip through Scotland and Ireland two summers ago. We drove up along the coast of Ireland and stopped in small towns and stayed at bed-and-breakfast inns. The whole country is filled with achingly beautiful music. You seem to hear the sound of fiddling everywhere. One evening we were in a small pub. It was packed with people in a way uncomfortable for most Americans. And so this is how I came so close to the performers. There were three of them, two older men and a younger man. The older men treated the younger one with subtle deference and I was curious about this since clearly they, by virtue of their age, had to have been at this longer. The younger one, whose name I think was Fergus, was introduced as one of the star fiddlers of Ireland. He did not portray himself as a star such as we know in the States. He was simply dressed in a plaid
shirt and jeans. His shoes seemed worn and scuffed. He was not a handsome man. His demeanor did not shout “Look at me” But when he played . . . and with the applause he was startled back from where he had gone. I have thought of him for these two years, and in preparation for this conference wrote the following tribute.

Where Did the Fiddler Go?  (Lynne Nelson)

Where did the Fiddler go
Wielding his master bow
Face and fiddle all aglow
Beneath the stars of Ireland.

Did he close his eyes that night
To better see the journey right
To open them with holy sight
To dance in jubilation?

Did he transverse some inner space
To find himself in such a place
As those bestowed profoundest grace
To dance in contemplation?

So music with exquisite care
Did double stops and leapt the air
And pierced the heart and kissed the ear
To heavens high ovation.

Contemplative prayer is enabled by centering methods, preparation to receive the gift. Thomas Keating tells us that we can expect at least two things from contemplative prayer of high interest to us as Companions: it deepens our relationship with the living Christ and it builds a community of faith and bonds the members together in love.

As we seek to enter the realm of Centering Prayer, most proponents tell us that we will be highly assisted by solitude and silence. I would add also humility, for even though there are proscribed methods, the fruit of these, the very experience, is a gift.

In seems that in beginning we might be assisted by taking a physical and spiritual inventory of our readiness to do so. Many people who try solitude and silence will tell you that the effort makes them sleepy. Ruth Haley Barton, in her book Invitation to Solitude and Silence, cautions us that part of the readiness for Centering Prayer is to sleep if one needs to. She notes that in our culture we tend to be often sleep deprived and moving from thing to thing on what seems like energy but is a chronic adrenalin high. When we stop and sit and try to be quiet we become aware of our exhaustion. This kind
of exhaustion needs to be first addressed prior to Centering Prayer. She counsels against
the self-judgment that we are not more spiritual and says that sometimes the most
spiritual thing to do is to get the needed rest and sleep. She reminds us how in the Book
of Kings, Elijah ran into the dessert fleeing Jezebel and asking God to just take his life.
Before he could hear God clearly in the still small voice, an angel ministered to him with
food and drink and called for him to sleep “lest the journey be too much for you.”

Sara Maitland wrote a highly recommended article in the May issue of the Christian
Century titled “The Perils of Silence.” She cautions that people might think us crazy,
selfish, or stupid and that these barbs can sink in deep if we struggle with lack of
confidence in taking the steps we commit to. She reminds us that Jesus sought times of
silence in prayer. She recommends the writings of the saints, especially Teresa of Avila,
who help us with an examination of the fruits of contemplative prayer in ourselves. The
most subtle and dangerous peril in our endeavors is pride. She prescribes a regular habit
of praise and gratitude, a good spiritual director, and a daily dose of the Desert Fathers,
who “from the broken ruins of their cells and their egos emerged with a sweet courtesy,
detached generosity, and a glorious funny, ironic, self understanding. Their gentle
holiness will keep you humble.”

Centering Prayer is the prayer at the heart, at the dance of our existence. We are directed
by most proponents to eliminate all thought. This seems to come with practice. We are
directed to move beyond the intellect to a different place in prayer. In doing this I
propose we do it with kindness to ourselves. We do not deconstruct the ego. The ego is a
good and necessary part of the personality. We will need it, along with the superego and
the intellect, to have a healthy evaluation of our experience. Likewise we cannot rid
ourselves of the id and the more we try the more it seems to grow. Sara Maitland
suggests that this is why food tastes so amazing on retreats. Thomas Keating directs us
that when thoughts come we put them aside for now. The repetition of this action will
become more efficacious.

We are to select a two syllable word to use to enter into the process of centering
ourselves. This is not written in stone, for many people like to use a short prayer and
some people just use a sound.

In all the readings and directions dealing with Centering Prayer one notices that the very
center, the place we seek to gain by this process, this walk, this dancing along the path,
has no real description. How do we know when we finally are at the dancing center?
Lots has been said on how to get there, not so much about the ends. Is it, therefore, the
rejoicing in the “splendor of the radiance” of the God in Christ and whatever that
means?
Loreena McKennitt has composed a song based upon the poem by St. John of the Cross which captures what I think is the essence of contemplation as the end result of Centering Prayer.

_The Dark Night of the Soul_  (Loreena McKennitt)

Upon a darkened night  
The flame of love was burning in my breast  
And by a lantern bright  
I fled my house while all in quiet rest

Shrouded by the night  
And by the secret stair I quickly fled  
The veil concealed my eyes  
While all within lay quiet as the dead

(Chorus)  
Oh night thou wast my guide  
Oh night more loving than the rising sun  
Oh night that joined the lover  
To the beloved one  
Transforming each of them into the other

Upon that misty night  
In secrecy, beyond such mortal sight  
Without a guide or light  
Than that which burned so deeply in my heart  
The fire t'was lead me on  
And shone more bright than of the midday sun  
To where he waited still  
It was a place where no one else could come.

Chorus

Within my pounding heart  
Which kept itself entirely for him  
He fell into his sleep  
Beneath the cedars all my love I gave  
And by the fortress walls  
The wind would brush his hair against his brow  
And with its smoothest hand  
Caresses my every sense I would allow
Chorus

I lost myself to him
And hid my face upon my lovers breast
And care and grief grew dim
As in the morning's mist became the light
There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair
There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair
There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair

AMEN: Lynne Nelson: Presenter