

Fundamental Rhythms and Patterns of Congregational Life: An addendum to the “The Pastoral Rule”

[Offered to the Congregation by an Academy of Faith Class,
First Presbyterian Church, San Diego, Spring 2012, led by Elder Rick Kennedy. The class took up
topics of disciplined devotion from *The Pastoral Rule* which was produced by *Reforming
Ministry*, a work of the *PC (USA) Office of Theology and Worship*, and funded by the *Lily
Foundation*. Our pastor, Jerry Andrews, was one of the four principal writers. The boxed-in
sections below are from the *The Pastoral Rule* and the rest is derived from our class
discussions.]

Read Scripture.

1. *Select daily Scripture passages according to a plan, reading from both the Old and New Testaments.*
2. *Set aside a regular time and place to read and meditate on Scripture.*

Communication with the triune God is the first priority of a well-regulated Christian life. Such communications includes, first and foremost, reading/listening to the Bible, the whole Bible, the whole counsel of the scriptures. Our listening is founded in a desire to “trust and obey,” not simply pick-and-choose, cafeteria-style, what we like or appreciate. We read/listen in order to hear what the Lord wants us to hear.

-The earliest Christians usually read the scriptures out loud to themselves and to others.

Modern technologies offer great new opportunities for listening to the Bible being read out loud. We are excited by the variety of opportunities for listening to scriptures on our personal electronic devices and in our cars while we drive.

-Try: <http://www.biblegateway.com/> & <http://www.youversion.com/reading-plans/all>

-CDs, iphones, ipads, Kindles, and all the new communication technologies can be used by God to help us be more consistent readers/listeners of scripture.

-There are many excellent Bible resources available on-line. The “youversion” above has various plans for reading the whole Bible in one year. Jean Benthien uses one on her Kindle that gives her, every day for one year, a passage from the New Testament, Old Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs. Imagine looking back over a decade and being able to report that you have read the whole Bible ten times!

-Our denomination also has a “Lectionary” for Sunday Reading:

<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/2011-2012-presbyterian-planning-calendar-lectionar/>

-Reading aloud between husband-wife, parent-children, sick person and well, and among co-workers or friends is an excellent reading/listening experience. Some people find it helps their concentration to knit, doodle, or shut their eyes while listening with their ears. Reading aloud around the dinner table can be a wonderful family bond. The practice of shared reading of “Advent Calendars” and other season-specific readings help root us in the yearly story-cycle of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection along with the church’ history.

-Reading with co-workers at work is a good discipline. 30 minutes on Tues-Thurs mornings with co-workers reading through a lectionary has the potential to let God speak to a workplace.

-Regular Bible studies with accountability among readers is a wonderful practice. Reading on-line together as “Facebook Friends” can bring distant people together to listen to the Lord.

-Solitary, “Quiet-Times,” are an excellent discipline for those who concentrate best, scholar-fashion, with Bible-in-hand making notes in the margins. Some are “Morning scholars” and some are “Before Bed scholars.” Find a regular quiet-time for reading/listening to the Bible. Chris Sloan says her husband listens daily on the way to work and is a nicer driver when listening---who can justify road rage while listening to Jesus? Many find help being disciplined by using daily devotionals such as *Our Daily Bread* and devotional guides such as *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers or *Living the Message* by Eugene Peterson.

-Charlotte recommends the ***Lectio Divina*** programs that move more slowly through the Bible and focus more deeply on small portions of scripture. The method has four steps:

1. Read the assigned passage
2. Meditate on the passage.
3. Pray in relation to the passage.
4. Contemplate the passage more fully through the day.

-Singing the Scriptures: Many songs are derived directly from scripture. It is good practice to sing them while on a walk or cleaning the dishes.

-Find the best way that works for you. The goal is to have a fundamental rhythm of reading/hearing the Bible. Peter Winnenberg reminds us that people learn in various ways using different senses. Feel free to find a sustainable and recurring pattern of listening to God speaking through the Bible.

-Mindset: Whatever disciplines prove best for scripture reading, whatever fundamental rhythms and patterns are established, readers’ minds must be consciously “set” to listen with ears to hear. Readers’ minds must be set to trust and obey. Certainly there are times for furrowed brows, critical thinking, reasonable cross examination, and in-depth study, but there must be foundationally a simple willingness to be communicated to.

-Let the Bible speak for itself. The power in the Gideons who place Bibles in hotel rooms is their trust that the Bible will do its own thing.

Come to scripture ready to OBEY
 Come to scripture ready to BELIEVE
 Come to scripture ready to LISTEN
 Come to scripture ready to ACCEPT
 Come with a HUMBLENESS

-Never say to a Bible passage: "God would not do that" or "It can't mean what it says."
 To say such things is dangerous egotistical. One puts oneself above the mind of God.
 Remember Isaiah 55: "God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways are not our ways."

Prayer

1. *Select good models of prayer that help you grow in your prayer life.*
2. *Set aside a regular time and place to pray.*

Communication with the triune God is the first priority of a well-regulated Christian life. It is good to pray to Jesus, or to the Holy Spirit, or to the Father. The Bible is a grace in which the God who is above language reaches down into words to communicate with us. This God in the Bible calls us to talk back, using our weak words, honestly and authentically from our heads and hearts. Amazingly, God wants to listen to us. God is interested in the most mundane aspects of our lives.

-**Praying the *Psalms*:** The *Psalms* give guidance and license to our prayers. They can variously be understood as prayers given in specific historical situations, by worshippers in general and by Jesus as when Jesus prayed Psalm 22 on the cross. *Psalms* such as 23 are models of always-applicable prayers. The joy, thankfulness, anguish, and even the self-righteousness evident in the *Psalms* give us evidence that God wants our authentic emotions to be expressed to him.

-**The "Lord's Prayer"** is a model prayer given to us by Jesus. It covers all the important matters.

-**Jesus' prayers in the garden and on the cross** are models of what we can and should ask for. Even the request for this cup to be avoided models and gives license for prayers of the heart. After knowing that Jesus prayed that prayer, is there anything we should not ask for with an open and humble heart?

-**ACTS:** Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. As a model each letter has a general and specific application. For example, adoration of God's goodness and adoration of a specific attribute of God; confession of our sinfulness and confession of a specific sin; thanksgiving for

blessings and thanksgiving for a specific gift; and supplication for all things to work out for the good, and supplication for a specific situation to work out for the good.

-Lists: Lists are good. Keep track of petitions and answers. **Keep a notebook, diary, or journal.** Lists of people to pray for are especially good for connecting one to God and to one's neighbors.

-Regular times and places to pray: The goal is a *habit* of prayer, a *rhythm*.

First thing in the morning
 Before bedtime
 When waiting at stop lights
 When walking to work
 Before meals—even in restaurants
 Pray for church members as they walk up the aisle on communion Sundays
 Pray a blessing on a home/family when you enter or leave a house

-Singing our prayers is a great tradition of the church! As with Bible passages, singing our prayers as we clean the house or wash dishes is an excellent discipline. Sing in the car on the way to church!

-Pray without ceasing. Psalm 16:8: I have set the Lord always before me.

-Pray Away—God wants us to pray about everything and anything that is on our heart. God communicates with us—that is amazing! What is even more amazing is that God wants us to communicate back.

-Badgering and negotiating with God: Abraham and Moses negotiated with God, and God humbled himself to negotiate and relent. Jesus gives us a picture of a woman who badgers a judge

-Should we pray for a parking place or for our favorite team to win? Why not? Should we question God's judgment for allowing bad things to happen in this world? Job and Habakkuk questioned. Whatever our prayer we need first to be ready to listen, to be silent, to humbly accept not only answers, but non-answers such as what Job got in response to his questions. Remember Isaiah 55: "God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways are not our ways." We are creatures blessed merely to be listened to by the creator.

-Should we use prayer beads? Greek men stand in groups with their fingers working their prayer beads. Is this good? Why wouldn't it be? Does every prayer have to be conscious, at the forefront of our minds? Guitarists and piano players have finger memory. The fingers move without direct conscious direction. Maybe prayer beads are a rhythm of finger-prayers.

-Praying the Creeds? Liturgical prayers? Prayer books? Rote Prayers? Why not? Mark Miner in his before-bed prayers will say the “Lord’s Prayer” and maybe the “Nicene Creed.” He is a liturgical kind-of-guy. Others may feel that praying someone else’s sentences feel fake or less personal. There is no one right way to pray.

-Wordless prayer? God does not need our words. God understands our desires and our groanings. It is good to try to use words, but it is not necessary. We understand much with our hearts rather than our minds—words are often limiting. God knows the desires of our hearts.

-Kneeling? Some of us sometimes feel the need to kneel. Some need to stand and raise our arms. Our bodies can pray even without our mouths. Kneeling or sitting or walking can be physical acts of prayer. At a communion service when we stand in our pew, make our way to the aisle, then join the procession to the table, we are walking a prayer. We pray with our feet.

-What about singing and dancing our prayers! You bet! But be prepared to be stared at in church and some people may even move further down the pew. Remember, we are Presbyterians.

-Jesus’ warning against hypocritical prayers and showy prayers? What about preaching-prayers directed at the audience rather than God? What of generic/non-Trinitarian prayers for big public/political occasions? It is not our place to judge someone else’s prayers. Give the benefit of the doubt—we are all hypocrites in our own ways.

Read theological and spiritual literature.

1. *Read the church’s theological and spiritual classics regularly.*
2. *Read slowly and deeply, differently from the way you read a newspaper or a committee report. Immerse yourself in the words, reading not only for intellectual content but also for growth in your living of the faith in prayer and action, word and deed. Reflective reading requires us to be disciplined and to set aside time and space.*

In *The Pastoral Rule* and in this *Congregational Rule*, we have a Presbyterian perspective that emphasizes reading, and by extension, education. **We expect our pastors to be readers and our pastors expect us to be well read.** It is part of the dynamism of our Presbyterian branch of the whole communion of the saints and part of our responsibility to the whole communion of the saints that we encourage and uphold Christian education and the reading of Christian literature.

Not that all Presbyterians have to know how to read! The majority of Christians in the world are not blessed with education, and many branches of Christianity emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit or the sacraments and downplay the role of education. We join hands with the whole communion of saints and all types of saints are welcome among us. However, we Presbyterians have a role within the whole communion of the saints: we have a tradition of

being readers with a role to play as scribes and scholars. Jesus said that **“every scribe [literally a grammarian, the educated bureaucrat of his day] who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household who brings out of his treasure [literally his thesaurus, his archive, his storehouse of readings] things new and old” (Matt. 13:52)**. We Presbyterians have a scribal role in the whole church catholic. We nurture well-ordered households through time with a responsibility to be conservative, bureaucratic, and bookish.

But we Presbyterians are not dusty librarians who only read books by dead people! The Christian Tradition of good literature is growing and accelerating. The Christian tradition of books is like a snowball that rolls through time getting bigger with more momentum. The leaders of the early churches rallied to the scriptures as what all, or most all, of the most respected churches were reading. Throughout church history every age has its own authors and books that became the favorites of well-respected people in well-respected churches. Throughout church history there have been lists of recommended authors and books. Cassiodorus in 6th century Italy wrote a classic book of booklists called *Divine and Human Reading*. Cassiodorus likened reading to prayer and affirmed readers as prayers—we never stop praying and we should never stop reading.

Jim Meals, Librarian of the Church: Jim lives a life devoted to Christian literature. Since the middle 1990s, Jim has been cultivating and nurturing our church’s library. He is our own Cassiodorus. He not only offers in the Assembly Room a wide variety of good books, he is also the perfect person to ask: “What do you recommend I read?” Having such a knowledgeable and disciplined librarian is a great blessing to our church!

On the other hand, **it is right and good that we as a Sunday School class offer a snapshot-list of modern authors and books that we recommend to our fellowship.** We offer each book with an eye to suspecting that they might be taken up into the snowball of tradition and someday might be rated Christian “classics.”

Snapshot (Spring 2012) of Recommended Reading to the Congregation:

Authors whose many books are all recommended:

John Stott—esp. *Basic Christianity*, various *Commentaries*

C.S. Lewis—esp. *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, *Miracles*, and *God in the Dock: Essays*

Doug Webster—esp. *Selling Jesus*, *A Passion for Christ*, *The Easy Yoke*

Philip Yancy—esp. *Soul Survivor*, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*; *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, *The Jesus I Never Knew*

Marva Dawn—esp. *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life*; *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*

Dallas Willard—esp. *The Divine Conspiracy*, *The Spirit of Discipline*

John Piper—esp. *Desiring God*

Mark Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*

Eugene Peterson—esp. *Living the Message*; *Reverse Thunder*, *A Children’s Bible (illustrated)*

Billy Graham—esp. *The Book of Prayers*

Kathleen Norris—esp. *A Cloister Walk; Amazing Grace*
 Tim Keller---esp. *A Reason for God, Generous Justice*
 Henry Nouwen
 R. C. Sproul
 Marilynne Robinson
 N.T. Wright

Conversion Accounts

Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*
 Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God*
 Anne Lamont, *Traveling Mercies*

A Specific Book Recommended:

G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*
 Ron Sider, *Rich Christian in an Age of Hunger*
 Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality; The Emotionally Healthy Church*
 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*;
 John Eldridge, *Sacred Romance* (speaks profoundly about the love of God for us)
 Calvin Miller, *The Singer, The Song, The Finale*
 Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*
 Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God*
 J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*
 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*
 Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*
 Charles Spurgeon *Lectures to My Students*
 Dinesh D'Souza , *What's So Great About Christianity*
 Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*
 A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy, The Pursuit of God*

Also Recommended:

25 Books Every Christian Should Read- includes selections from 3rd-20th century.
 Missionary Narratives, Histories of the Church, Biographies, Poetry, and Novels

Keep Sabbath

1. A regular time to rest and refresh.
2. A regular time to focus on God.

In the Bible there are different, but similar, kinds of Sabbaths. There is even a Sabbath-rest for farm land in the Old Testament. The most important Sabbaths, of course, would be God's rest on the seventh day of creation and the ultimate Sabbath rest offered by God at the end of time in the new creation. We as God's people cannot rest until we can rest in God's Sabbath. Our

various earthly Sabbath-keepings are rehearsals for our final Sabbath in God. Here on earth we need to practice regular resting so as to be ready for the great rest ahead.

Ironically, we have to work at proper resting. Jesus calls to us:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt 12:28-30)

As a church congregation we are told in *Hebrews* 4:11 “Let us make every effort to enter that rest.” Effort and rest are connected in Sabbath-keeping.

Congregational Sabbath-keeping at our particular First Presbyterian Church of San Diego accepts the easy yoke, the effort, of being a downtown church, a motley bunch of those aspiring to the ultimate Sabbath rest. To observe the procession down the aisle on a communion Sunday is to see an inkling of the wholeness of fellowship that will be in heaven. We approach being the church that Paul calls us to be when he says we must be “clothed with Christ” and that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). We approach that church called for in the New Testament that shows no favoritism, that shows no special attention to dress, the one where the poor and the rich worship together (see James 2:1-12).

So our *Congregational Rule* adds a third Sabbath-keeping to the two above:

3. *Weekly appreciation, weekly rest in, the peculiarities of our fellowship.*

-We rest in:

- Our huge and unwieldy building and problematic parking
- The diversity of our neighborhood
- The homeless people who sleep near us and enjoy our worship
- Our Ladle Fellowship and the hundred that eat with us on Sundays
- Our musicians and diverse music ministries and worship styles
- The children and youth who come to us from a wide range of situations
- The teachers, students, and student families of our City Tree Christian School
- The labor of our janitors who work hardest on Sundays
- Our excellent staff both paid and volunteer
- Our Sunday School programs for kids and adults
- Our fellowship as individuals and families, long-standing members and recent arrivals
- Fill in the blank _____

-We will shun grumbling about anything! We shall not worry about anything—as Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. We shall seek first the Kingdom of God and the Sabbath rest available to us weekly and ultimately.