

Contemplative worship: It's not just a Catholic thing

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Terms like "silence and reflection," "creating space" and "getting in touch with yourself" were absent from Chad Kerr's Baptist upbringing in Georgia. But they've since become central to his ability to cope with the demands of life as a bank president, husband and father of three children under age 10.

"With all the noise we have going on in our lives, creating that space to be still before God is very important," he said.

Jim Somerville, senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Richmond, helps distribute communion during the contemplative service the church holds on Wednesday nights.

Kerr finds that space in the contemplative worship and prayer forms practiced at [Broadway Baptist Church](#) in Fort Worth, where he is a deacon and regular participant in its Wednesday vespers service.

The result has been a shift in the way Kerr understands his relationship with God.

"I have gained a new appreciation for contemplative styles," he said. "Just sitting and trying to be silent and feel and listen, as opposed to going to God with a list of things you need to pray for."

Kerr isn't alone, either as a Protestant or a Baptist, in his growing appreciation of ancient Christian spirituality.

Pastors, scholars and retreat center directors around the nation report a growing demand for services, programs and studies of contemplative

prayer and worship.

The term 'contemplative' generally denotes worship, prayer and reading that lead participants into silent, meditative forms of engaging with God.

Where experts are seeing increasing interest in those forms, which include Taize and Lectio Divina, are among traditions seldom associated with the silent prayer, candle lighting and chanting that characterize much of the contemplative movement.

'A grassroots ecumenism'

"It's going on a lot in unexpected places. I've even been in Presbyterian churches that are doing those kinds of services," said Diana Butler Bass, a scholar and teacher of religion and the author of the 2012 book [*Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*](#). "It's been making its way through Protestant churches the better part of the last decade."

Diana Butler Bass

That includes Baptist churches, too, but she added it's hard to put numbers on the movement.

It's also hard to pinpoint how or where the movement began, she said. The likely cause was a mix of former Catholics and Episcopalians joining Protestant churches, Protestant ministers experiencing contemplative services during sabbaticals and the growing popularity of individual and group retreats to monasteries and spiritual retreat centers.

"They find it moving and bring it back to their churches," she said.

"This is a very fluid area of what I call a very grassroots ecumenism," Butler Bass added.

What they all find in common is a yearning for an experience of God that

transcends rational and emotional concepts. "It's creating sacred space in which people can actually feel, touch and listen to God in their midst."

'Priesthood of all believers'

That's what Michael Sciretti's ministry at [Freemason Street Baptist Church](#) is all about.

As the spiritual formation minister at the Norfolk, Va., church, Sciretti has been introducing elements of contemplative spiritual practices throughout congregational life, from deacon's meetings to Wednesday night services.

In October, the church will launch a full-blown monthly contemplative Sunday worship service.



And yes, Sciretti said, it is a Baptist thing to do.

The direct connection established between worshipper and God in contemplative spirituality reflects the Baptist emphasis on congregational autonomy, he said.

"We talk about the 'priesthood of all believers, and this (contemplative worship) takes that seriously," he said. Such forms also "take seriously Paul's teaching that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit."

Whatever the reason, Sciretti said he's hearing of other Baptist churches, or of groups within those churches, studying or experimenting with contemplative worship and prayer.

Honoring the Sabbath

It's also biblical because it adheres to God's command to observe the Sabbath, said Linda Ashe, director of [The Well Retreat Center](#), a Catholic Church-owned get-away in Smithfield, Va.

Many Christians have forgotten what it means to set aside a day for God, as commanded in the Bible.

"It's a time when you try not to mention work, let alone do any work," Ashe said.

The contemplative prayer practices taught at the center help accomplish that—even if the practice is only for just a few minutes here and there throughout the week, she said.

Demand is way up from Baptist and other Protestant groups hungry for those experiences, Ashe said.

"It's so refreshing," she said. "It's a time when we ... get our reservoirs filled up so we can face that life we live."

'Tending the fire within'

That's why Pastor Brent Beasley introduced a Wednesday vespers service at Broadway Baptist in Fort Worth.

"I felt there was a need in the middle of the week to slow down and reflect," Beasley said. "I heard people saying, 'I need to be quiet and still.'"

The service has been well-attended and inspired him to lead a workshop on contemplative Wednesdays during the 2012 CBF Assembly in Fort Worth. It drew dozens despite its off-site location.

Such services are a practical necessity in congregations where missional and social justice ministries are the focus, as they are at Broadway, Beasley noted.

"If you are going to be out there in the world, you really need to have that time of tending the fire within," he said.