

# Catholics and Mennonites join together for centering prayer group

BY MICHELLE DONAGHEY

SOUTH BEND — “It was a thrilling journey of coming together, as Pope John XXIII said, for we started with what unites us, not with what divides us,” said Jay Freel Landry of the centering prayer group that recently met every Thursday night in six churches — three Catholic and three Mennonite.

“Healing Through the Journey of Centering Prayer” brought South Bend and Elkhart area Catholics and Mennonites together for fellowship and prayer. They met this summer in churches in South Bend and Elkhart.

The ecumenical group began meeting after Landry made the suggestion at a local Bridgefolk gathering held at Kern Road Mennonite Church in April of 2005. Bridgefolk is a national movement that has Catholics and Mennonites praying together (see box). Three Catholic and three Mennonite churches participated including Little Flower, Kern Road Mennonite and St. Pius X.

“I was planning on doing something with our catechuminate in terms of prayer, which we try to do each summer at Little Flower, and I was aware of the *St. Anthony Messenger* tapes by Father Keating and Father Rohr on ‘Healing Our Violence Through the Journey of Centering Prayer,’” Landry told *Today's Catholic*. “Thus at this Catholic-Mennonite gathering at Kern Road, I suggested we do this together along with as many Catholic and Mennonite churches who might be interested.”

Landry learned that Marlene Kropf, worship minister for Mennonite Church USA and teacher at the AMBS seminary in Elkhart, might be a good person to contact to form such a group.

“I was thrilled to join in this experiment. In my mind, there could be no better way to come together than to begin praying together,” said Kropf who helped organize the Mennonite church gatherings.

She noted that “one of the good things that came out of this experience was becoming friends and realizing how

many interests and visions we have in common. Though we come from very different traditions, our vision for the church and for spiritual growth and renewal is remarkably similar.

“Certainly the best thing that happened is that more than 100 Catholics and Mennonites who knew very little about each other before this summer came together to learn and practice centering prayer and to join together to heal some of the violence in the world,” said Kropf. “We discovered we are fellow pilgrims on the same journey of faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and to Christ’s way of peace in the world.”



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Sharing cookies during the fellowship time were, from left, Elaine Cotherman and Jay Freel Landry of Little Flower Parish and Carol Nickel, a Mennonite and member of Southside Fellowship in Elkhart.

## What is centering prayer about?

Landry says that not all Catholics know about centering prayer. He explained that with centering prayer, a contemplative form of prayer, the focus is on God and being with God.

Landry said, “You are invited to relax, close your eyes, sit up in a chair or on the floor and choose a word or a phrase that speak to you of intimacy with God like ‘Father,’ ‘Mother,’ ‘Lord God,’ ‘Spirit,’ ‘Jesus,’ ‘Savior,’ ‘Redeemer,’ etc. You could also choose the Jesus prayer: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ You are

envelop the person praying. We can just sit there and do nothing and focus on God, and God loves us, as a parent loves a child simply because the child exists. That is the idea of centering prayer — to be in communion with our loving God. It can then translate to the rest of our lives when we are not living or thinking as God calls us to live and think, meaning, when we get distracted from living as a disciple of Christ, we can return to communion with God by a word or through prayer.”

## Lives changed

“Centering prayer can become a discipline for our lives. It can shape us and how we live,” Landry said.

Kropf agreed: “I was moved by the number of people who told of the ways their lives are being changed by the practice of centering prayer — an increased

ability to forgive, a growing desire to be merciful, more boldness to challenge violent words and actions, a deeper sense of being loved by God and more.”

During each session, day, morning and evening sessions were offered. “We would give two to three ways to do centering prayer and then pray in this manner for 15-20 minutes. We then brought people out of the prayer through a Taize or other chant and invited them to describe, not evaluate, what they experience with a partner. Then we followed with group sharing and invited everyone to try this prayer at home daily,” Landry said.

invited to focus on your breathing by saying that silently to yourself as you breathe in and out. Some people responded they get distracted, which is pretty normal. We then invited them to gently return to their word for God. Others claim nothing happens while they do this, which is exactly what you are looking for in this — for nothing to happen.

“The idea is to let go of everything in our hearts and minds for 15-20 minutes and simply focus on being in the presence of God, which can be quite healing,” Landry said.

He added that centering prayer “allows for God’s presence to

for so many folks talked about getting to know Christians from another tradition,” Landry added.

Some say it made a great difference in their lives and many spoke of the prayer experience as being powerful. One of the best things that came out of it was that many Catholics said that they had never met a Mennonite in their lives and how great it was to do just that amidst prayer and fellowship.

“I would say this was a great experience of ecumenism, that is, getting to know and growing close to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ with whom we do not share a formal communion. Yet there is much we have to share in prayer, fellowship, outreach and hope — for we all believe and seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Ecumenism, in the words of Abbot John Klassen of St. John’s Abbey, is the heart of the Gospel. It is not an ‘add on.’ Becoming one church or one communion is what Jesus and the Second Vatican Council call us to seek,” Landry said.

While the Mennonite-Catholic group has finished meeting, a centering prayer support group is now set up to meet monthly at Little Flower Parish. Inspired by the sessions at AMBS, Kropf is initiating a centering prayer gathering on Tuesday mornings from 7:30 to 8 a.m. which are “open to anyone who wants to come.

“I have seen how fruitful this way of praying is in transforming people from the inside out, and I want our students to experience such transformation. Centering prayer heals our violence from within and thus contributes to the healing of the world’s violence. I can’t think of a more needed practice in our day,” Kropf added.

“This was a wonderful success

## Sharing brings joy

“In the ice cream social that concluded each evening session, I saw increasing joy each time we met in the connections that were made,” Kropf said.



## Bridgefolk

Bridgefolk is a movement of sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Catholics who come together to celebrate each other’s traditions, explore each other’s practices and honor each other’s contribution to the mission of Christ’s church. Together we seek better ways to embody a commitment to both traditions. We seek to make Anabaptist-Mennonite practices of discipleship, peaceableness and lay participation more accessible to Roman Catholics, and to bring the spiritual, liturgical and sacramental practices of the Catholic tradition to Anabaptists.