



the empty bell

Gathering in Silence: What We Do

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Since the Empty Bell moved to Northampton in 2005, most of our retreats have been offered in area churches, especially Grace Episcopal Church on the Amherst Common. Small groups occasionally gather at the contemplative sanctuary at 83 Bancroft Rd. in Northampton, but because of the residential nature of the neighborhood, and because of limited parking, these events have been few in number and not open to the public.

Our goal is to begin weekly meetings in the Pioneer Valley later in 2006 or in early 2007. No matter where we gather under the umbrella of the Empty Bell, participants can expect certain things to happen. Of course, in some locations the physical environment or the physical or emotional dispositions of participants will not allow certain arrangements.

The basic elements of an Empty Bell gathering include

Silence

Scripture

Chanting

Sharing

Vocal Prayer

Here is an imaginary visit to an Empty Bell gathering:

- Meditation cushions or chairs are arranged in a slightly oblong circle, facing the center. In the center a candle burns inside a glass jar that sits atop a small altar or bench. At one end of the circle sits a temple bell. The striker for the bell lies in front of the nearest cushion where the leader sits. Incense burns. The lights in the room are turned down low. Icons, statues or wall-hangings from the Christian & Buddhist traditions are displayed.
- When worshippers enter the contemplative space, they take off their shoes. While there may be someone at the door to greet participants, the meditation room itself is silent. There may be some whispered greetings or mutual bows or hugs, but soon, worshippers who walk into the worship area find their cushion or chair, and get comfortable, relaxing their bodies and recollecting their minds and hearts.
- On each cushion, or nearby, is a booklet or a handout which contains the readings for the day from Christian scripture. Since the Empty Bell opened its doors in 1993, we have subscribed to the Roman Catholic booklet of monthly readings, "Living with Christ". Sometimes, when participants sit on their cushion, they will briefly glance at the day's readings, perhaps to find a theme, a phrase or a word that they will take into their meditation. (No one reads or writes during the meditation time itself).
- At the appointed time, the leader hits the temple bell to begin the meditation time. We sit together in silence for 20 minutes to one-half hour. At the end of the silence, the leader hits the temple bell again, usually once or three times (to symbolize the Trinity).

- Very often, at the beginning of the meditation, the leader welcomes the Holy Spirit as the ringing of the initial bell sound fades.

- During the silent time, the Empty Bell mission does not stipulate what the worshipper should do. In the past we have been fortunate to attract people who already have training in Buddhist or Christian prayer, meditation and contemplation. Occasionally, especially for the sake of newcomers, the leader shares a few words at the beginning of the meditation to help focus the minds of everyone present.

- Most participants begin the silent period with some method of relaxing and focusing their minds on the present moment--simply being on the cushion, in the room, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Some bring awareness to their breathing; some count their breaths silently; some recite a passage from scripture or say a sacred word repetitively; and some fall effortlessly into God's presence. We assume that participants already know that meditation is not the same as "monkey mind", day-dreaming, compulsive thinking, problem-solving, analyzing, visualizing pleasant alternative surroundings, inwardly complaining, writing poetry, composing music or arguing with one's partner or friend. The announcement time at the end of the service is often the time when newcomers ask for help in their meditation and prayer practice, and can arrange to get it.

- After the bell that brings the silent meditation to an end, participants pick up their scripture booklets and find the readings for the day. Sometimes, the leader says out loud the references for the readings and perhaps a another few words about the theme of the readings. The Gospel for the day is always read, and depending on time, the readings from the Hebrew scripture and the Epistles are also read. When the group is fortunate to include someone with musical training, the Responsorial Psalm is chanted.

- The scripture readings for the day are read in such a way as to include all participants. One person in the circle begins by announcing the source of the scripture passage, and then goes on to read several lines or paragraphs, and then the next person in the circle continues to read from the passage, and so on around the circle. How much a person reads is up to that person, keeping in mind that if the group is large, and if everyone is to read, each person might be limited to only a few sentences. We encourage readers to let there be a little silence between readers so that the readings can be digested.

- After the last scripture is read, the group lingers in silence for several minutes to digest the readings. Sometimes, when the group is so moved, this silence might go on for five minutes or more. Then someone--sometimes the leader--begins a sharing time that continues for another half-hour to forty-five minutes, depending on the size of the group. Guidelines for this sharing (outlined more thoroughly below) include keeping the contemplative ambience, not engaging in theoretical or theological debate, not asking for or giving advice, and observing limited cross-talk or "ping-pong" conversation. All participants are responsible for protecting the right of participation for everyone who wants to share.



- After the sharing time, the leader hits the bell again to indicate a time of group prayer. Sometimes the leader begins the prayers, but anyone may do so and everyone has the right to offer their prayers out loud. Some groups may choose to come together and to hold hands during these prayers. Some groups may choose to say a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer together as an entry into the individual prayers. There is no time limit on this prayer time, and it is usually clear to the leader when it is time to say, out loud, Amen.

