



Shams Saad

Hearing One Another into Speech

What a Century of World Day of Prayer Can Teach Us

BY KATIE REIMER

In 2027, the World Day of Prayer—a global, ecumenical movement led by Christian women who gather in prayer every first Friday of March—will mark its centennial. In preparation for that milestone, we have spent many hours in the international office reading and organizing our archives, including past worship services, handwritten letters, annual reports, journals and old photographs.

This inspiring journey into our archives has led me to reflect on what 100 years of this prayer movement can teach us. I have noticed two patterns throughout the past century that hold valuable lessons for today.

On leadership, this movement has practiced something countercultural: collective, grassroots leadership—rising not from a single founder, but from the vision of many different women, in many different places, each following the movement of the Spirit.

On communication, this movement has emphasized both listening and speaking, across every line that usually divides us—what theologian

Nelle Morton called hearing one another into speech.* This mutual listening and speaking is, in fact, what makes collective leadership possible. Leadership doesn't rise from one voice, but from many willing to hear and be heard.

A century later, I think our world needs these two patterns more than ever.

A Movement of Many Voices

Decades before it was called World Day of Prayer, this movement had visionaries who rose as leaders from different places and denominations. Presbyterian women were there in the earliest threads we can trace through our history. In 1887, Mary Ellen James, president of the Presbyterian Woman's Executive Committee of Home Missions, helped her committee establish one of the first denominational days of prayer in the United States.

Three decades later, in January 1918, her successor, Katherine Bennett, chaired a meeting of the Council of Women for Home Missions—itsself an already ecumenical alliance of denominational mission boards—in New York City. It was here that the movement took its decisive turn toward ecumenism: the Council decided its own day of prayer could no longer stay

separate from the day observed by the Federation of Women's Foreign Mission Boards, a related but distinct ecumenical body. Within months, letters were flying between the two councils, proposing dates, weighing objections and working out compromises.

Other U.S. denominations established national and international prayer movements around the same time as the Presbyterians. Congregationalist women, such as Abbie Child of Boston, had as early as 1888 formed the World's Missionary Committee of Christian Women—the first real international network among women's mission societies. Baptist women, such as Lucy Waterbury Peabody and Helen Barrett Montgomery, organized a nationwide Jubilee of Prayer in 1910 that drew thousands of women into public leadership for the first time, filling halls that had never before heard women speak. Methodist women adopted the World Day of Prayer right away in 1927 through the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society.

No single woman founded this movement. And that, I think, is part of the leadership lesson we can learn from today. Collective leadership—leadership that rises from the grassroots, from the vision of different women in different contexts, each following the move-

ment of the Spirit—can build something far more remarkable than any one leader could build alone.

Mary Hough, chair of that first 1927 program committee, put it beautifully afterward, reflecting on the flood of unprompted reports that came back from around the world: "We have made the great new experience that we pray with, and set free the energies we need for mastering our big tasks." Not simply praying for women in faraway places—praying with them. This small shift held the seed for what this movement would become.

The first three World Day of Prayer services were written by American women. But by 1930, women organizing this movement made a conscious choice to live into the reality of praying with women from other parts of the world. In 1930, the pen passed to

Helen Kim of Korea. Her service, "That Jesus May Be Lifted Up," opened not with words but with silence—women sitting together, waiting, before a single prayer was spoken. And when the prayers came, they did not flatter anyone. They confessed "class and race discrimination." They confessed "lack of courage on moral questions." They confessed "injustice and lack of brotherliness in international and interracial relations." Three years in, this movement was already learning the power of collective, shared leadership.

Listening and Speaking

In 2007, at a World Day of Prayer International Committee (WDPIC) meeting in Toronto, the movement formally adopted nine Guiding Principles. These principles were discerned from practices that had already shaped our movement for decades.

The second Guiding Principle, "Listening and Speaking," says prayer is rooted in listening—to God, and to one another—and that in a climate of attentive listening, women find their voices and can speak from their experience.

This holds an important lesson for us today about communication.

The combination of listening and speaking—or more broadly, giving and receiving—may be the most natural and powerful practice for authentic communication. Some of us listen well, but struggle to speak up. Others speak easily, but struggle to truly listen. The invitation for all of us is to grow into a more balanced practice of both.

The World Day of Prayer movement was practicing that principle long before putting words to it, ensuring authorship of the services represented women from around the world, and their realities. In 1940, only months into World War II, the pen passed to two English sisters, Muriel and Doris Lester, who ran a community center for London's poor straight through the Blitz. In 1994, it passed to the women of Palestine, whose service followed a woman named Amal—meaning hope—as she told her



own story of displacement, of watching her brother shot, of her son's imprisonment. And just this past year, it passed to the women of Nigeria, who wrote of finding rest in God amid the exhaustion of daily life.

Different voices, different decades, different griefs—but the same discipline every single year: we take turns listening and speaking. This deepens our understanding of the world and strengthens our connection to God and each other.

A Centennial Invitation

Many Presbyterian women are already active in World Day of Prayer—some for a year, some for a decade, some for a lifetime. Wherever you are on your journey, we invite you to consider attending or organizing a World Day of Prayer service in your own community on or around March 5, 2027.

Beyond that day itself, we're also inviting the whole movement to a centennial call: "Root, Reflect, and Rise."



Root: Plant a tree in your community, a living sign that we intend to be here for another hundred years.



Reflect: Learn and write the history of World Day of Prayer in your own context.



Rise: Help us raise \$1 million for a new Young Women's Fund to support the next generation in our movement.

World Day of Prayer has always been a movement made of many voices. The collective leadership we've practiced for a hundred years has never come from one place, one denomination or one woman. Rather, women have followed the spark of the Spirit within themselves, taking the initiative in their local context. That is still the invitation, for both lessons this movement has to teach: listen first and take your turn to speak. Lead from wherever you are. Trust that somewhere in the exchange, God is hearing us all into fuller speech. 🍷

Katie Reimer serves as executive director of the World Day of Prayer International Committee.

Notes

* Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 127–128.



River of Prayer, Shams Saad

Created with the World Day of Prayer Centennial in mind, Shams wrote that the painting, "shows a river, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, peace and the continuous movement of God's presence. The river gently surrounds the women, connecting them in one body and one spirit. The colors are vibrant and diverse, echoing the richness of every nation and the beauty of unity in diversity—a visual call for justice, peace, and spiritual togetherness."



HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO

Plan a Celebration

Visit wdpic.org to learn how to organize a service and to preview materials for the WDP Centennial in 2027. Or visit wdp-usa.org to find a local service and order print resources.