

The Priesthood of All Believers and Centring Prayer: Towards a Contemplative Evangelism

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Abstract

This article argues that Centring Prayer helps mitigate the individualism often associated with the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (priesthood) by rebalancing personal devotion with the believer's call to mediate God to others. It also proposes that Centring Prayer offers a promising point of evangelistic connection with New Age practitioners in Estonia. To establish the negative effect of individualism on priesthood, this article traces the historical and biblical development of the doctrine, and critiques nineteenth- and twentieth-century shifts that overemphasised personal spirituality at the expense of community. It then introduces Centring Prayer as capable of strengthening the communal dimensions of priesthood and serving as a point of connection with New Age adherents in Estonia. To assess the viability of applying Centring Prayer evangelistically, the article proposes a four-week convergent mixed-methods study examining Centring Prayer's impact on community formation among Christians and New Age practitioners, positioning the practice as a promising model for evangelism.

Keywords

Centring Prayer/Centering Prayer; priesthood of all believers; individualism; Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary; New Age spirituality; evangelism

Introduction

This article contends that Centring Prayer¹ offers a practical corrective to the individualism that often taints the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (henceforth, priesthood) by restoring the balance between personal devotion and communal vocation, and that it has the potential to provide a strategic evangelistic bridge for engaging

¹ For clarity, a note that the British spelling of this practice is used throughout the article and indicates the equivalent 'Centering Prayer' in American usage.

those with a New Age spirituality. Priesthood teaches that every baptised believer possesses personal access to God and shares the responsibility of mediating God's presence to others. This article suggests Centring Prayer as a practical tool for overcoming the individualism often attached to priesthood by briefly tracing its development from Martin Luther to early Baptists, reviewing its biblical foundations, and locating its syncretism with individualism in the United States of America. The article then discusses the rarity of Centring Prayer among Baptists before introducing it as a means to bridge the personal and communal elements of priesthood and as an innovative outreach model, with specific reference to those drawn to New Age movements in Estonia. Through historical analysis, biblical reflection, and practical evaluation, this article seeks to illuminate the relevance of Centring Prayer for renewing the priestly vocation of all believers today.

Motivation for This Article

I have two motivations for writing this article. First, I believe Centring Prayer can help resolve the problem of individualism often attached to priesthood by increasing one's intimacy with God in a way that stirs compassion for others. Second, when I presented an earlier version of this research at the 2024 Free Church DNA conference in Tallinn, Estonia, a local seminary student mentioned the growing presence of New Age religion in the area and asked how to introduce Centring Prayer while maintaining a definite focus on Christ. I felt compelled to investigate whether this distinctly Christian form of meditation could connect the church and unbelievers in the area. I discovered that Centring Prayer had the potential to prepare believers to mediate God's presence to lonely New Age practitioners whose religion has no fellowship component.² Although the practice occurs within one's own interior space, engaging it alongside others and asking them to describe their experience can provide a sense of community while the practice

² Lea Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia: Modern Self-Understanding in a Flood of Esotericism', in *Old Religion, New Spirituality: Implications of Secularisation and Individualisation in Estonia*, ed. by Riho Altnurme (Brill, 2021), pp. 86–117 (p. 116).

itself reduces stress.³ Centring Prayer stands out as a practical prayer practice capable of mitigating individualism within the church and empowering outreach beyond its walls.

The Priesthood of All Believers Developed by Luther and Embraced by Baptists

Martin Luther developed the priesthood doctrine,⁴ and Baptists later affirmed its teaching that all Christians have personal access to God through Christ,⁵ along with the responsibility to mediate God's presence to the world.⁶ Luther formulated this doctrine to reclaim the biblical assertion that access to God belongs to all believers (Heb 4:14–16; 5:10), not just the clergy.⁷ As members of the royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), Christians share in the work of connecting others to God.⁸ Luther challenged the hierarchical structure of the medieval church, emphasising that each member of the body could approach God directly.⁹ Early Baptists affirmed the equal standing of all believers before God and weaved Luther's egalitarian view into their church structure and governance.¹⁰

Rejecting the prevailing notion that the priesthood belonged exclusively to a clerical elite,¹¹ Luther proclaimed that all Christians share equally in the royal priesthood.¹² Luther challenged the predominant medieval Catholic view that confined the priesthood to ordained

³ Jane K. Ferguson, Eleanor W. Willemsen, and MayLynn V. Castañeto, 'Centering Prayer as a Healing Response to Everyday Stress: A Psychological and Spiritual Process', *Pastoral Psychology*, 59.3 (2010), pp. 305–329.

⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*, ed. by Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor (Crossway, 2015), p. 74.

⁵ Martin Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', in *The Harvard Classics*, trans. by R. S. Grignon, The Harvard Classics, 36 (Collier & Son, 1910), pp. 1–16 (p. 14); Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 25.

⁶ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

⁷ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', pp. 13–14.

⁸ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

⁹ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

¹⁰ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, pp. 35–39.

¹¹ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

¹² Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

individuals with exclusive authority to administer sacraments and mediate salvation,¹³ contending instead that every baptised believer, through faith in Christ, shares in the priestly vocation.¹⁴ The German reformer promoted the equality of believers, as he explained that all Christians belonged to the same estate, with the only difference being that of office or specific duties.¹⁵ No need existed for a special class of priest as Christ provided every believer with access to God¹⁶ and the duty of mediating the divine presence to others through loving service.¹⁷

Luther's understanding of Christ's dual office as both king and priest reinforced his conviction that all Christians participate in Christ's mediating work. Luther interpreted Christ's mediatorial role as encompassing royal and priestly intercession, wherein kings govern and priests offer sacrifices and prayers.¹⁸ By making Christ's cross central to his reading of Scripture, Luther emphasised that Christ fulfilled his priestly office by offering himself in sacrifice and interceding even for his adversaries.¹⁹ Christ enlists believers into the 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:9) and tasks them with the vocation of mediating his presence to the

¹³ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, pp. 74, 35. The medieval Catholic Church regarded sin as a weakness of people who needed to be strengthened by the sacraments.

¹⁴ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 74.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, 'Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate', letter, Wittenburg, Germany, 1520, Stanford University <<https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Luther-ChristianNobility.pdf>> [accessed 3 April 2026], pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14. Luther does not use the language of 'direct access to God' but states that faith 'unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband', and such intimate unity connotes and intensifies access.

¹⁷ Luther, 'Concerning Christian Liberty (1520)', p. 14.

¹⁸ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 72; Martin Luther, 'On the Freedom of a Christian', 1520, Internet History Sourcebooks Project, Fordham University <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/Luther-freedomchristian.asp>> [accessed 14 April 2026]; Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 14–16. See also Gasparo Contarini and Hubert Jedin, 'Contarini und Camaldoli', in *Archivio per la storia della piet * (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1959), II, pp. 51–117. Confusion existed within the church as seen in the account of an unnamed priest who eased Gasparo Contarini's anxious conscience in 1511 by telling him that Christ atoned for all humanity's sins — a sharp divergence from the view held by Contarini's friends who joined a hermitage in Arezzo, thinking monasticism was the only way to certain salvation.

¹⁹ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 72.

world.²⁰ The conviction that all Christians share in both the privilege of accessing God and the responsibility of divine mediation influenced the Baptist understanding of priesthood.

The Lutheran concept of the general priesthood²¹ shaped early Baptist theology, particularly its repudiation of the idea that only a clerical elite could access and mediate God's presence.²² Baptists adopted this view of priesthood about a hundred years after Luther's critique of the medieval church, claiming that the individual 'comes before God personally, directly, and voluntarily'.²³ In 1610, John Smyth, an early Baptist minister and former Anglican priest,²⁴ embraced the agency of all people to approach God on their own and likewise to resist salvation altogether.²⁵ Around the same time, Thomas Helwys authored a confession with similar statements, underscoring the individual's responsibility to choose eternal life or death,²⁶ and thus, along with Smyth, democratising the prevailing medieval notion of priesthood.

The voluntary membership and congregational autonomy that define Baptist church structure reflect Luther's emphasis on the believer's unmediated access to God within the Free Church tradition.²⁷ Walter Shurden underscored the freedom of local churches when he stated that Baptists historically affirm the independence of the local church to 'determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, [and] to ordain who they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female'.²⁸ In Baptist practice, church membership is

²⁰ Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 73; Martin Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', trans. by W. A. Lambert, rev. by Harold J. Grimm, in *Luther's Works, Volume 31: The Career of the Reformer I*, ed. by Harold J. Grimm (Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31, p. 354. Luther believed that Christ fulfilled the sacrificial function of priesthood and negated the need for its continuance.

²¹ Luther, 'Open Letter to the Christian Nobility', p. 2.

²² Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 25.

²³ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 25.

²⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (HarperOne, 2010), p. 195.

²⁵ John Smyth, 'Corde Credimus', cited in William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Mercer University Press, 2004), p. 16.

²⁶ Thomas Helwys, 'Synopsis Fidei', cited in Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*, p. 17.

²⁷ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, pp. 35–39.

²⁸ Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 33.

voluntary and based on the belief that following Christ remains a personal decision, and that the church ought to consist solely of those who have made that commitment.²⁹ When a church comprises itself of people with direct access to God, the Baptist conviction is that God is in its midst and that the church has the duty and right for full autonomy in running itself under the headship of Christ.³⁰

Biblical Foundations for the Priesthood of All Believers

A biblical overview of priesthood supports Luther's claim that all believers have personal access to God and the duty of mediating God's presence to others. Three biblical tenets affirm priesthood: God authored the priesthood role and chose his people to embody it;³¹ Old Testament priests modelled Israel's collective priestly role;³² and Christ extended this calling to his followers, commissioning them to mediate his presence to the world.³³

The identity of the ancient Hebrews as a kingdom of priests came solely from God's efforts and design. From the beginning, God established the Garden of Eden as a prototypical temple³⁴ and entrusted Adam with priestly duties to 'cultivate and keep' it (Gen 2:15). When paired, these two Hebrew terms characterise Israel's service to God and the liturgical duties of the Levitical priesthood within the tabernacle (Num 3:7–8, 8:25–26, 18:5–6; 1 Chron 23:32; Ezek 44:14).³⁵ Later in the Pentateuch, God emphasises his role in preserving the Hebrew people as he confers onto them their priestly identity, reminding his children

²⁹ T. Furman Hewitt, 'The Church', in *A Baptist's Theology*, ed. by Wayne R. Stacy (Smyth & Helwys, 1999), pp. 113–132 (p. 119); Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 36.

³⁰ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 117; Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, p. 36.

³¹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³² Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 32.

³³ Simon Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (SCM Press, 2022), pp. 36, 38; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 34A (Doubleday, 1974), p. 479.

³⁴ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblica Theology, 17 (IVP Academic, 2004), pp. 66–80; Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 28.

³⁵ Beale and Carson, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, pp. 66–67.

that he saved them from Pharaoh's military (Exod 14), sustained them (Exod 15:22–27; 16:1–21; 17:1–7), and secured victory for them over Amalek (Exod 17:8–16).³⁶ Yahweh stresses his role as the architect of the Hebrews' protection and provision with three 'I' statements: 'what *I* did to Egypt', '*I* carried you on eagles' wings', and '*[I]* brought you to myself' (Exod 19:4).³⁷ God then explained that when the people obeyed him, he would make them a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5–6) — a designation authored and upheld by God's own self.³⁸

Rather than calling the people to self-isolate from the rest of the Ancient Near Eastern world, God designated Israel as a priestly people who were to mediate God's presence to the nations. Old Testament priests mediated between Yahweh and the general population,³⁹ while serving as a 'model for Israel's self-understanding of its role among the nations'.⁴⁰ Individuals therefore not only shared the responsibility for maintaining the collective holiness of the people but also shared the responsibility for attending to the holiness of the nations.⁴¹ William Johnstone takes Israel's priestly identity to mean that God set Abraham's descendants apart to the exclusion of the other nations.⁴² Yahweh had a broader view in mind, however, as he always desired his people to mediate his presence to Gentiles (Exod 19:5–6). Even as far back as Genesis, God sought to bless all nations through Abraham's family (Gen 12:3). God did not set apart a priestly kingdom to insulate them from the world, but for that priestly kingdom to extend divine access to foreigners.⁴³

³⁶ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³⁷ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 30.

³⁸ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 31; Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, p. 37; John Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19.6*, *Journal for the Study of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 395, ed. by Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein (Continuum, 2004), pp. 70–86.

³⁹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 104.

⁴¹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 36–37.

⁴² William Johnstone, *Exodus 1–19* (Smyth & Helwys, 2014), p. 400.

⁴³ Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 37–38.

New Testament believers pushed past the barriers of ethnic exceptionalism as its members became mediators of God's presence to those inside and outside the church. Jesus's sacrifice tore the veil that had limited divine connection to the Most Holy Place⁴⁴ and blocked access to all but the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Exod 26:31–33).⁴⁵ The torn veil opened access to God for all who believed (Luke 23:44–47)⁴⁶ and God's Spirit filled the first believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:4). They immediately shared God's message with the Jewish sojourners gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:6), provided for each other's needs (Acts 2:44–45), prayed together (Acts 4:23–31), and encouraged one another (Acts 11:23, 15:32). The church spread beyond geographic boundaries, connecting people to God from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–38), the Roman military (Acts 10), Europe (Acts 16–18), Asia (Acts 13–21), and Africa (Acts 8:26–39).

American Individualism in Priesthood: A Caution for Global Christians

Modern scholarship lacks an explicit connection to the rise of individualism among European Free Church communities, while its presence among American Baptists has been well documented.⁴⁷ Isolated events point to the rise of individualism in European churches, such as the Northern European nonconformist revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that stressed personal revival,⁴⁸ but nowhere do scholars explicitly demonstrate the connection between these revivals and the prevalence of individualism among Free Church

⁴⁴ Note that the inflection of εἰρησθῆναι 'was torn' indicates a divine passive.

⁴⁵ David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 2011), pp. 927–928. Garland observes that two curtains hung in the temple separated by a cubit of space, and Scripture identifies the torn curtain as the second one that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (Heb 9:3).

⁴⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 1996), pp. 603–604.

⁴⁷ Winthrop Still Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Judson Press, 1979), p. 142.

⁴⁸ Martin Åberg, 'Liberalism and Revivalism: A Comparative Case Study of Liberal Ideology, Individualism, and Revivalism in Schleswig-Holstein and Värmland, ca. 1860–1920', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 38.2 (2013), pp. 154–179.

congregations. This section acknowledges the presence of individualism in European Christianity, but treats its simultaneous increase in the United States as a warning for global believers given the robust body of scholarship concerning the trend toward personal autonomy among American Baptists.

The priesthood doctrine shifted over time from its original emphasis on shared spiritual responsibility to a more individualistic interpretation shaped by cultural and societal influences.⁴⁹ Particularly in the context of American religious thought, forces such as the Enlightenment's view of the autonomous self and modern individualism distorted this doctrine.⁵⁰ In the twentieth century, E. Y. Mullins advanced the concept of 'soul competency' to affirm personal responsibility before God;⁵¹ later scholars interpreted his ideas in individualistic ways that often neglected the communal dimensions of Christian life.⁵² This section demonstrates how a hyper-personalised theology gradually eclipsed the original personal–communal balance of priesthood, critiques Mullins's theology, and uses the ongoing struggle of individualism in the United States as a word of caution for the global church.

Although priesthood originally emphasised equal access to God and mutual ministry,⁵³ American individualism in the 1900s partly reshaped it into a hyper-personalised faith that diminished the role of Christian community.⁵⁴ Luther posited the concept of priesthood to democratise the clericalism of the medieval church and guide Christians

⁴⁹ Dale R. South, 'Saved for God's Possession: Recovering the Gospel Among Southern Baptists by Guarding Against Its Syncretization with Autonomous Individualism' (doctoral dissertation, North Carolina, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), pp. 130–140. South traces the development of American individualism (pp. 130–139) while noting that such thinking became pervasive from the 1960s to the 1980s.

⁵⁰ Dan R. Stiver, 'A Word About ... Reframing Soul Competency in Terms of the "Capable Self" in Nussbaum, Sen, and Ricoeur', *Review & Expositor*, 114.2 (2017), pp. 146–154 (pp. 146–147).

⁵¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, ed. by C. Douglas Weaver (Mercer University Press, 2010), p. 68.

⁵² Stiver, 'Reframing Soul Competency', pp. 146–147.

⁵³ Findley B. Edge, 'Priesthood of Believers', *Review & Expositor*, 60.1 (1963), pp. 9–21 (pp. 9, 10).

⁵⁴ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

to a more egalitarian view of baptised believers.⁵⁵ Mullins defined his concept of ‘soul competency’ as the understanding that a person remains competent to ‘deal alone with God’,⁵⁶ and proposed this as a basis for Baptist polity.⁵⁷ William McNutt further individualised ‘soul competency’ by stating that a person did not need the church for grace or salvation, since ‘the individual is competent in all matters of religion’.⁵⁸ This perspective on priesthood effectively made ‘every man’s hat his own church’,⁵⁹ undermining the biblical principles of community and church discipline. While Christian tradition has always been shaped in some way by societal norms, I would contend that such a radical notion of priesthood and ‘soul competency’ tended to rely too heavily on nineteenth-century culture and not enough on biblical study.⁶⁰

Late twentieth-century scholars often criticised Mullins’s doctrine of ‘soul competency’ as excessively individualistic,⁶¹ yet such assessments lack nuance by neglecting the historical and theological context in which he wrote.⁶² The notion that Mullins became too individualistic grew as scholars considered concepts that Mullins did not write about, such as the types of community and spiritual formation necessary for believers to thrive.⁶³ Mullins likely neglected to explain such matters because they stood as part of the Baptist consensus of his day,⁶⁴ and without direct access to what comprised that consensus, there

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, ‘Open Letter to the Christian Nobility’, pp. 2–3; Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 81–83. Anizor and Voss state that Luther promoted the priesthood doctrine in order to make Scripture available to the laity and not solely to Roman Catholic clergy, since he believed that limiting access to God’s Word diminished its ability to empower the church. Printing Bibles in the vernacular in the 16th century was revolutionary and remains one of Luther’s enduring contributions.

⁵⁶ Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, p. 68; David M. Stratton, ‘E. Y. Mullins’ Neglected Theological Foundation for Church-State Separation’, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 47.2 (2012), pp. 82–91 (p. 84).

⁵⁷ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁵⁸ William Roy McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Judson Press, 1959), pp. 21–24.

⁵⁹ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁶⁰ Hudson, *Baptists in Transition*, p. 142.

⁶¹ Dan R. Stiver, ‘Reframing Soul Competency’, pp. 146–147.

⁶² Russell D. Moore and Gregory A. Thornbury, ‘The Mystery of Mullins in Contemporary Southern Baptist Historiography’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 (1999), pp. 44–57 (p. 45).

⁶³ Curtis W. Freeman, ‘E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity’, *Review & Expositor*, 96.1 (1999), pp. 23–42 (p. 34).

⁶⁴ Freeman, ‘E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity’, p. 34.

is a danger for contemporary theologians to fill in the gaps with revisionist assumptions that may not reflect Mullins's line of reasoning.⁶⁵ Mullins passed away in 1928, the same year that McNutt published his treatise on soul competency and Baptist polity. Consequently, Mullins never had the opportunity to respond to McNutt's more radical views.⁶⁶

The individualisation of priesthood that prioritises personal spirituality over communal faith persists mostly in American churches and constitutes a grave warning for the Western church as a whole.⁶⁷ In 2005, George Barna reported on the trend among North American Christians to discontinue their church attendance.⁶⁸ He stated that a significant portion of devout Christ-followers found ways to cultivate their connections to God outside the community of local churches.⁶⁹ Barna's research was conducted with individuals who saw church as expressing their commitment to converse about God while engaged in a hobby with like-minded people.⁷⁰ In 2015, Grace Davie cited a trend among British congregations that affirmed many tenets of New Age teachings, including an emphasis on a personal rather than transcendent deity as they look to 'the God within' themselves.⁷¹ The extreme individualism in churches in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Britain, serves as a cautionary note for all Western Christians.

Centring Prayer as a Relatively Rare Practice Among Baptists

Although some Christian traditions have shown interest in Centring Prayer,⁷² it remains uncommon within the Baptist world. Centring Prayer emphasises interior stillness and nonverbal communion with

⁶⁵ Moore and Thornbury, 'The Mystery of Mullins', p. 45. Moore and Thornbury state, 'One thing is clear: everyone sees their own image in the mirror when they study E.Y. Mullins.'

⁶⁶ Freeman, 'E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity', p. 30.

⁶⁷ George Barna, *Revolution* (Tyndale Momentum, 2005), pp. 8, 131.

⁶⁸ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, p. 105; Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 8, 131.

⁶⁹ Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 8, 131.

⁷⁰ Barna, *Revolution*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 159.

⁷² 'Cynthia Bourgeault', Cynthia Bourgeault, n.d. <<https://www.cynthiabourgeault.org/>> [accessed 27 June 2025]; Ryan Dunn, 'Centering Prayer and Meditation', The United Methodist Church, n.d. <<https://www.umc.org/en/content/centering-prayer-and-meditation>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

God, which contrasts with the intercession historically embraced by Baptist churches.⁷³ The discussion here explores Baptists' rich history with corporate intercession, the unfamiliarity with wordless prayer, the emphasis on biblically explicit petitions, and misconceptions about mind emptying as some of the reasons Centring Prayer does not exist in the mainstream of Baptist practice.

Centring Prayer is a contemplative and wordless prayer practice in which the practitioner seeks unpressured time in God's presence. The image of a recently fed, perfectly content infant resting in its mother's arms (Ps 131:2) expresses the goal of this form of prayer. The believer comes to God without pressure to articulate words, thoughts, or hear from God, but to simply *be* with God in love. This practice works best when done in conjunction with other prayer practices or devotional Scripture reading.

Baptists have a rich history of audible corporate prayer, tied to mission and renewal. Prayer meetings have been central to the way Baptists have experienced God advancing his kingdom.⁷⁴ Jonathan Edwards noted the usefulness of corporate prayer for spiritual awakening that reaches commoners and national leaders alike,⁷⁵ inspiring William Carey and John Sutclif to hold prayer meetings to support their ministries.⁷⁶ Sutclif's prayer gatherings motivated the prayer groups that fuelled the eighteenth-century Welsh revivals⁷⁷ and led tens of thousands to Christ throughout Britain.⁷⁸

Despite the potential of Centring Prayer for individual and collective fruit, it remains virtually untouched by Baptist practice due to

⁷³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Baker Books, 1998), p. 223.

⁷⁴ Jamie Dunlop, 'Class IV: Corporate Prayer', Blog, *IX: 9Marks*, 2010 <<https://www.9marks.org/article/class-iv-corporate-prayer/>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

⁷⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *A Call to United, Extraordinary Prayer: An Humble Attempt* (Christian Focus, 2003), pp. 16–17.

⁷⁶ Joel R. Beeke, 'The History of Prayer Meetings', Christian Library, 2004 <<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/history-prayer-meetings#endnote-content-13>> [accessed 27 June 2025].

⁷⁷ Beeke, 'Prayer Meetings'.

⁷⁸ Erroll Hulse, *Give Him No Rest: A Call to Prayer for Revival* (Evangelical Press, 1991), pp. 78–79.

their communal understanding of intercession as an outworking of priesthood.⁷⁹ Likewise, misunderstandings about Centring Prayer occur within a framework of evangelical prayer practices that draw from clear biblical models of intercession involving words,⁸⁰ where Free Church theologians sometimes express concern that wordless prayer necessitates mental emptying.⁸¹ The confusion over Centring Prayer remains understandable, as most forms of meditation attempt to experience the mind without thoughts,⁸² and Christian meditation has sought to move away from that by pursuing deeper meaning from Scripture based on inquiry.⁸³ While Centring Prayer may look like meditation from other religions, it departs from them by placing the focus on being with God and connecting to God beyond the limits of human knowledge.⁸⁴ Those who engage in Centring Prayer do not seek a mental void, but a total concentration on God's presence, heightening their intimacy with the divine.⁸⁵ Rather than emptying the mind, Centring Prayer aims to deepen the practitioner's awareness *of* and union *with* God,⁸⁶ reorienting attention toward a divine encounter that transcends verbal articulation.⁸⁷

Centring Prayer Strengthens the Communal Nature of Priesthood

Although Centring Prayer begins from a position that differs from the communal understanding of priesthood, this solitary practice produces effects that extend outward beyond the individual. The communal benefits of this prayer occur as it strengthens the connection between

⁷⁹ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 128–130.

⁸⁰ Anizor and Voss, *Representing Christ*, pp. 128–130.

⁸¹ Peter DeHaan, 'The Dangers of Centering Prayer', Peter DeHaan, Pursuing Biblical Christianity, 7 November 2021 <<https://www.peterdehaan.com/christianity/centering-prayer/>> [accessed 26 June 2025].

⁸² Kevin Sharpe, *Centering Prayer: Healing Our God Wound* (Imagine That!, 2024), p. 22.

⁸³ Sharpe, *Centering Prayer*, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Sharpe, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 24–25.

⁸⁵ Lukas Vischer, *Intercession* (World Council of Churches, 1980), pp. 25–27, 48–49.

⁸⁶ Anonymous, *The Book of Privy Counseling in The Cloud of Unknowing: And The Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. by William Johnston (Image, 2014), pp. 137–138.

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, ed. by Sarah Coakley (Liturgical Press, 2018), p. 101; David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God* (Sounds True, 2017), pp. 56–57.

the personal piety and communal responsibility that is intrinsic to a healthy view of priesthood. Centring Prayer combines the private practices of solitude and silence in a way that allows God's presence to heal the heart, so the person returns to their community as a calm presence.⁸⁸ Considering the pervasiveness of social isolation,⁸⁹ and Western society's openness to meditation,⁹⁰ Centring Prayer's ability to mitigate loneliness⁹¹ makes it a useful outreach tool. In this section, I demonstrate Centring Prayer's communal benefits by setting out the steps involved in Centring Prayer, the way it benefits the community, and how its mitigation of loneliness makes it a timely evangelism resource.

The five-step Centring Prayer method recommended here is adapted from David Frenette's four-step model that readily accommodates modern schedules.⁹² First, the practitioner chooses a comfortable setting free of distractions,⁹³ sitting in a chair with their back straight, shoulders relaxed, and feet flat on the ground.⁹⁴ Second, the practitioner chooses a short prayer word that symbolises their consent to the presence of God within them and reminds them of this presence.⁹⁵ Third, the individual gently closes their eyes, takes a few deep

⁸⁸ Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (Image, 2010), pp. 122–127; Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Image, 1986), pp. 41–42.

⁸⁹ Vivek Murthy, 'Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community', Advisory (Washington, DC: Office of the US Surgeon General, 2023), pp. 12–15; Dennis Thompson, 'Loneliness Is Plaguing Americans in 2024: Poll', *U.S. News*, 2024 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2024-02-01/loneliness-is-plaguing-americans-in-2024-poll>> [accessed 7 April 2026].

⁹⁰ Ashley Ross, 'How Meditation Went Mainstream', *Time*, 2016 <<https://time.com/4246928/meditation-history-buddhism/>> [accessed 29 July 2024].

⁹¹ Nicholas DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer: A Mixed Methods Study', *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 44.44 (2024), pp. 1–16.

⁹² DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer', p. 5; Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. 6.

⁹³ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, p. 62.

⁹⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, (Shambhala Publications, 2016), p. 23.

⁹⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing: And The Book of Privy Counseling*, p. 84; Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. xxlii.

breaths, and calmly introduces their prayer word silently to God.⁹⁶ Fourth, whenever distractions arise as sensations or thoughts, the practitioner gently returns to their prayer word to softly refocus their awareness on God's presence.⁹⁷ Fifth, the practitioner keeps their eyes silently shut for a moment before gently reopening them and returning to their daily routine by praying a psalm out loud.⁹⁸

Centring Prayer balances the individual and communal aspects of priesthood by helping the believer interact with their community as a calm presence,⁹⁹ as it helps to change the way individuals relate to their thoughts.¹⁰⁰ The individual practitioner experiences formation in centring prayer as they learn to create space between themselves and their thoughts, training the practitioner to focus on God rather than negative cognitions.¹⁰¹ This contemplative prayer style teaches one to hold less emotional distress by finding contentment in God,¹⁰² and decreases the anxiety of the community when the individual practitioner remains consistently calm.¹⁰³ Centring Prayer fosters communal wellness through individual renewal.

Any discussion of the mental health benefits associated with Centring Prayer merits an acknowledgment of the nature and limitations of the cited research. While this article reports findings from empirical studies that have been conducted on Centring Prayer, any accounts of its potential therapeutic effects, such as mitigated anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation, reflect outcomes within those specific research contexts. It is important not to interpret these findings as guarantees of similar results for all practitioners, as the experiences of even a single practitioner often vary.

⁹⁶ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, pp. 25–26.

⁹⁷ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), p. 32.

⁹⁸ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, pp. 58–59.

⁹⁹ Joshua J. Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression Relapse Prevention', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51.3 (2012), pp. 908–24 (p. 921).

¹⁰⁰ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 919.

¹⁰¹ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 919.

¹⁰² Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 42.

¹⁰³ R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 38–39, 54.

The Priesthood doctrine serves as a foundation for the outreach that Centring Prayer has the potential to activate due to its likely capacity for mitigating the universal experience of loneliness.¹⁰⁴ In this way, Centring Prayer promises to serve both the Christian community and offer an avenue for outreach in terms of mitigated loneliness.¹⁰⁵ In 2024, Ieva Reine and colleagues found that loneliness increased with age among senior citizens in Nordic-Baltic countries, noting that 40% of older adults aged 75 and above experienced loneliness compared to 28% of those aged 64–75.¹⁰⁶ Anja Langness and Leander Berner found that 57% of young adults in the European Union aged 18–35 felt lonely compared to 47% of people aged 36–69.¹⁰⁷ Taken together, these findings indicate that loneliness affects all adult age groups. Joshua Knabb, Kirk A. Johnson, and Nicholas DiMauro conducted separate studies that found Centring Prayer effective in mitigating loneliness among believers,¹⁰⁸ while David Frenette demonstrated its potential for outreach by noting that practitioners need not identify as Christians if they can reflect on ‘who God is for [them]’¹⁰⁹ before centring.

A key finding from the various research is that Centring Prayer prepares isolated individuals to reintegrate into a community. Increasing social contact does not necessarily negate loneliness, as people accustomed to isolation perceive threats quicker, experience greater

¹⁰⁴ Edge, ‘Priesthood of Believers’, pp. 15–16; DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁵ DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁶ Ieva Reine, Madara Mikelsona, Signe Tomosone, Helgi Guðmundsson, Andrejs Ivanovs, Halldór S. Guðmundsson, and Ilze Koroleva, ‘Unraveling the Dynamics of Loneliness in the Baltic-Nordic Region: A Comparative Analysis in the Wake of COVID-19’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12 (April 2024), pp. 1–12 (pp. 1–2, 4). Reine et al. found employment status a significant influence on individuals’ experience of loneliness, where regular work decreased the likelihood of felt isolation.

¹⁰⁷ Anja Langness and Leander Berner, ‘A Comparison of Youth Loneliness in Europe in 2024’, Bertelsmann Stiftung, n.d. <<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/next-generation-and-society/project-news/a-comparison-of-youth-loneliness-in-europe-in-2024>> [accessed 12 March 2025].

¹⁰⁸ Kirk A. Johnson, ‘Prayer: A Helpful Aid in Recovery from Depression’, *Journal of Religion & Health*, 57.6 (2018), pp. 2290–2300 (p. 2293); Knabb, ‘Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT’, pp. 918–919; DiMauro, ‘Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer’, pp. 7–9.

¹⁰⁹ Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, p. 65.

anxiety, grow suspicious of others, and become predisposed to taking offence at another person's words or actions.¹¹⁰ Fostering intrapersonal coping mechanisms decreases the negative inner effects of isolation.¹¹¹ Intrapersonal coping resources refer to positive elements in one's setting that are not directly related to relationships with other people.¹¹² Centring Prayer bolsters three intrapersonal resources: a healthy perception of self;¹¹³ satisfaction with one's walk with God;¹¹⁴ and reduced self-criticism,¹¹⁵ as the practice decreases negative thought patterns and prepares one to interact more positively with others. Cynthia Bourgeault describes the inner change that poises one to reintegrate into a community after establishing a Centring Prayer practice:

The place to look for results is in what happens after you get up from your meditation cushion. As that gentle releasing motion you've practiced in centering prayer gradually works its way into your system, most people will typically begin to notice a greater spaciousness and flexibility in their daily life, and along with this an improvement in their personal relationships.¹¹⁶

The increased spaciousness Bourgeault observes indicates a rise in contentment that makes meaningful connections more plausible.

Centring Prayer as an Outreach Model to New Age Adherents

Building on the preceding discussion of the way Centring Prayer bridges the personal and communal dimensions of priesthood, and the potential of the practice to address broader social and spiritual challenges such as

¹¹⁰ Stephanie Cacioppo, Munirah Bangee, Stephen Balogh, Carlos Cardenas-Iniguez, Pamela Qualter, and John T. Cacioppo, 'Loneliness and Implicit Attention to Social Threat: A High-Performance Electrical Neuroimaging Study', *Cognitive Neuroscience*, 7.1–4 (2016), pp. 138–159 (p. 139).

¹¹¹ Mark R. McMinn, R. Allen Lish, Pamela D. Trice, Alicia M. Root, Nicole Gilbert, and Adelene, Yap, 'Care for Pastors: Learning from Clergy and Their Spouses', *Pastoral Psychology*, 53.6 (2005), pp. 563–81 (p. 565).

¹¹² McMinn et al., 'Care for Pastors', p. 565.

¹¹³ Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p. 39.

¹¹⁵ Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', p. 921. Knabb explains how centring prayer bypasses 'verbal activity that reestablishes negative thinking patterns'.

¹¹⁶ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, p. 36.

the epidemic of loneliness, this section offers a proposal for further exploration of the way the practice might contribute to the search for meaning in increasingly secular or spiritually eclectic contexts. As societies witness a growing openness to spiritual practices¹¹⁷ alongside a decline in traditional religious affiliation,¹¹⁸ Centring Prayer may offer a unique point of connection between Christians and individuals identifying with the New Age movement, thereby extending divine access to unbelievers in a way commensurate with God's longtime purpose for his people (Gen 12:3). The following proposal outlines a study designed to investigate the potential of Centring Prayer as a shared spiritual practice capable of fostering relational depth, reducing loneliness, and cultivating fellowship across diverse belief systems.

The discussion exploring the way Centring Prayer joins priesthood's individual and corporate dimensions prompts an important and unresolved question: Given the global rise in loneliness,¹¹⁹ current openness to spiritual practices,¹²⁰ and research indicating a link between reduced loneliness and Centring Prayer,¹²¹ how might the consistent practise of Centring Prayer benefit isolated individuals within the New Age movement?¹²² In places like Estonia, where the number of New Spirituality adherents has nearly equalised that of self-proclaimed Christians,¹²³ Centring Prayer may offer communal connection in a low-pressure environment, as both Christians and New Age followers

¹¹⁷ Marko Uibu, 'The Spiritual Milieu in Estonia: Challenges and Opportunities for Studying Contemporary Forms of Religion', in *Old Religion, New Spirituality: Implications of Secularisation and Individualisation in Estonia*, ed. by Riho Altnurme (Brill, 2021), pp. 118–130 (p. 121). Uibu's interviews with Estonians from 2011–2015 demonstrated an openness to spiritual practices.

¹¹⁸ Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', pp. 115–117.

¹¹⁹ GilPress, 'Loneliness Statistics Worldwide 2024', What's The Big Data, 13 May 2024 <<https://whatsthebigdata.com/loneliness-statistics/>> [accessed 7 August 2024]; Reine et al., 'Unraveling the Dynamics of Loneliness in the Baltic-Nordic Region', pp. 1–2, 4; Langness and Berner, 'A Comparison of Youth Loneliness in Europe in 2024'.

¹²⁰ Uibu, 'The Spiritual Milieu in Estonia', p. 121.

¹²¹ DiMauro, 'Mitigating Pastoral Loneliness Using Centering Prayer', pp. 7–9; Knabb, 'Centering Prayer as an Alternative to MBCT', pp. 918–919.

¹²² Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', p. 116. Altnurme indicates that, particularly in Estonia, New Age adherents lack understanding of the communal aspect of spirituality, not recognising that 'self-spirituality is collective'. This manner of isolation on a spiritual level may create a need for community that the church can fill.

¹²³ Altnurme, 'The Religious Turn in Estonia', pp. 115–116.

discuss their experiences with the practice. I suggest a study investigating this should seek to answer two questions:

- What change does Centring Prayer have, if any, on the experience of loneliness among New Age people?
- In what ways do New Age practitioners benefit from small, weekly Centring Prayer gatherings?

To address these questions, I propose a four-week convergent mixed-methods study to evenly integrate quantitative and qualitative data on the practice of Centring Prayer among Christian and New Age practitioners in Estonia's secular context.¹²⁴ In terms of approach, I recommend subjects engage in 15-minute sessions three times a week — twice individually, and once as a group. I suggest a pre-test and post-test survey to assess changes in perceived loneliness,¹²⁵ while study members maintain reflective journals to document their experiences after each session. Ideally, each group would consist of an equal number of Christians and New Age adherents, would meet in person,¹²⁶ affirm a shared belief in an accessible, transcendent divine presence, and be guided by a facilitator who cultivates a space of benevolent listening and mutual respect.¹²⁷ Such a study may reveal Centring Prayer as a subtle outreach approach that circumvents the kind of argumentation that unbelievers tend to resist.

¹²⁴ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage, 2018), p. 15.

¹²⁵ Daniel W. Russell, 'UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, Validity, and Factor Structure', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66.1 (1996), pp. 20–40 (p. 23). I recommend the third version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale since it remains conducive to balanced results.

¹²⁶ Jonathan Gruber, Eszter Hargittai, and Minh Hao Nguyen, 'The Value of Face-to-Face Communication in the Digital World: What People Miss about in-Person Interactions When Those Are Limited', *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22.3 (2022), pp. 417–435 (p. 424).

¹²⁷ Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, p. 165. Pennington's treatment of Centring Prayer keeps me optimistic about the efficacy of a centring practice among New Age practitioners, not least due to his account of teaching the practice to a Hindu monk who declared it 'the most beautiful experience I have ever had'.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Centring Prayer offers an accessible means for countering the individualism that has shaped modern interpretations of priesthood by reuniting its personal and communal dimensions and returning to the heart of the doctrine developed by Martin Luther and embraced by early Baptists. This practice also carries the potential to serve as an evangelistic link between the church and New Age practitioners in secular contexts like Estonia, thereby allowing believers to display God's heart by extending divine access to those outside the Christian faith. Although Centring Prayer initially operates on an individual level, it offers significant promise for enhancing the communal aspect of priesthood by nurturing a deeper personal connection with God that better equips believers to fulfil their priestly roles within the community and beyond. Embracing such a contemplative practice could enrich the spiritual lives of Baptists and offer a meaningful avenue for connection to those outside the faith, fostering genuine spiritual encounter and belonging.