

INTRODUCTION

“I think our lives are saying that we need some sacred spaces and sacred things in them. We need some things that are as mysterious as the Mystery itself.”

—ROBERT BENSON

Living Prayer

IN 1990 MY PARENTS went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic, returning with a number of gifts for me. I loved each of them. But about three or four months later, my mom came to me with a little box in her hand. She explained that she had purchased one other gift for me on the trip, though she felt unsure I would like it and so had delayed giving it to me. Tentatively, she offered the box. Inside was a circle of ten wooden, hand-carved beads with a cross. I recognized that this was a kind of mini-rosary.

I found the gift surprising on two fronts. First, my family was not Catholic. At the time we were Presbyterian

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and, like all good Calvinists, we had no stained-glass windows in our church, no icons on our walls, and certainly no rosaries in our hands. As a result, my mother's choosing to give me a rosary did take me aback, though only to a degree. By high school I had developed a passion for the church, and I had recently graduated from college with a major in religion. My mother's gift acknowledged what was important to me.

The second surprise came in my reaction to the beads. They captivated me. I sat for the longest time, fingering the beads, studying their shapes, marveling at the craftsmanship and the beauty of the design. As I did, I felt a great sense of *awe* deep within me to this small set of beads. No other word could describe my response. What touched me most was the thought that people used these beads to pray to God. As I held the beads, I realized that people all around the world were using similar beads to connect with the Divine. I felt a strong link to God and to them—a moment of surprising communion. Suffice it to say, I was smitten with this gift.

I don't remember whether I talked much about that first rosary or not, but somehow my mom got the message that with this little rosary she had hit pay dirt in terms of gift ideas for me. From that time on she brought back rosaries from her travels. Soon, other friends and

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family did the same. Over time I have gathered rosaries from all over the world: Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Italy, Spain, Israel, France, England, Hungary, Ireland, and the United States. I have a rosary blessed by the pope as well as a rosary blessed in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. As my rosary collection grew I began to develop an interest in other items that people use to pray to God: icons, *retablos* (Latin American devotional paintings), prayer ropes, *milagros* (religious folk charms), and holding crosses. I added those to my collection as well.

While I enjoyed displaying these items and talking with others about them, I didn't use them to pray. Truthfully, I wasn't praying much at all. Even though I went on to receive a master of theological studies degree, marry a United Methodist minister, and remain involved in the church, I didn't have a prayer life to speak of. I struggled with prayer. I felt awkward. I never knew what words to say and thought surely God had better things to do than listen to me prattle on about whatever. I wonder now if I had amassed this collection of prayer tools in the hopes of living vicariously through these objects and the prayers of those who used them.

That all changed in July 2009 when I experienced a slightly quirky calling to make rosaries. For the next few days I pondered the experience. I even Googled "how to

make a rosary.” But mostly I wondered if God had *really* called me down this path. It seemed pretty peculiar. But I couldn’t explain away the fact that this experience of call had named my passion for prayer tools and invited me to act on this. This call came despite the fact that I hadn’t paid much attention to prayer tools in a while. I was kept busy raising a son, planning Sunday school studies, and working as a nonprofit consultant. So I kept the experience to myself and continued to ponder and research.

A few days later I came across a website that talked about Anglican prayer beads: in effect, prayer beads for Protestants. I had never heard of them. That’s when I understood the purpose of my calling. I was not being called to make Catholic rosaries. I was being called to make and share these “Protestant” prayer beads.

Since then I have made, sold, or given away more than four thousand sets of prayer beads. I started a blog and began writing devotions for prayer beads and relating their history. That led to public-speaking opportunities and leading retreats and workshops on prayer beads—which led to the writing of this book.

Response from the public has been fantastic and humbling. People can’t get enough of the prayer beads. They purchase a set for themselves, then come back to buy multiple sets as gifts for others. They come to me with stories—

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wonderful testimonies—of how the prayer beads have enhanced their relationship with God. The prayer beads have taken on a life of their own. Clearly people hunger for new (and ancient) ways of connecting with God.

Meanwhile, I began using the beads in prayer. I started tentatively, holding the beads one at a time and offering up particular prayer requests and events for which I was thankful. Gaining confidence, I experimented with ways of using the beads to praise, to confess, to intercede, and to offer thanks. Eventually, I practiced listening with the beads. Over time, I realized I had become comfortable with prayer. Odds are this was the real purpose of my calling—and the real gift of the prayer beads.

I designed this Bible study to introduce prayer beads to Christians who have no experience in using them. I focus on Protestants since we have not been taught or encouraged to use prayer beads. This study exists for the curious ones who want to know how to use beads in prayer and for the anxious ones who worry about whether it is okay to use them. It is for the experienced ones who want to learn more about their history and use and for everyone in between.

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Prayer beads are a tool for prayer. Just as a hammer and nails help us construct a house, so prayer beads help us construct a life of connection with God. The beads are not the end; they are the means to an end, which is communion with God. I want to emphasize that prayer beads are just one of many tools to assist in prayer. Not everyone needs a prayer tool. Many people feel comfortable with prayer and have developed ways of praying that work well for them. If you are among them, I invite you to continue reading to learn more about the history and use of this ancient Christian prayer practice. However, many people struggle with prayer. Their minds wander; they get bored; they wonder if they are being heard; they struggle with what to say. Prayer beads can help them develop rich lives of prayer, deepening their connection with God. This book will offer ways of doing that.

Throughout the next four weeks we will explore the history and art of using beads in prayer. The first two weeks will focus on answering two major questions: *Why* should we consider using prayer beads? Is it really okay for Protestants to use beads in prayer? Once we have addressed these questions we will spend weeks three and four considering *how* to use prayer beads. We will start by exploring various ways to use beads in prayer. In particular, we will look at ways to use the beads to help deepen

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our faith and our understanding of what we as Christians believe. Then we will consider how prayer beads can help us listen for what God has to say to us.

Each week's lesson has four components. We will begin with a Scripture Passage, which leads to the Weekly Reading. The reading will take no more than twenty to thirty minutes per week. After the reading, I provide a Prayer Bead Experience. These exercises introduce various approaches to praying with beads and the discovery of meaningful uses. If possible, practice the experiences at least once every day.

At the close of each week, I offer Reflection Questions for personal and group use. The questions will increase our understanding of the week's study and the Prayer Bead Experience.

Each of the four weeks has a theme that illustrates and underscores the purpose and benefits of prayer beads. The themes are as follows: encounter, surrender, offer, and listen. Prayer beads can help us *encounter* God in all of God's glory. When we do, we *surrender* to God's power and call to communion. Our response to the surrendering encourages us to *offer* ourselves to God, including the concerns that are on our heart. At that point, we stop to *listen* for God's response. In that moment, we hear God's word to us.

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In our busy, noisy lives we can easily miss one or more of these elements. When we do, we begin to feel lost and hopeless. We wonder where God is and whether God hears our prayers. Prayer beads can help us enter into and maintain lives of prayer that are whole and complete.

I invite you to take up your beads and join me on our journey together in prayer. When you do, I pray you will be filled with God's perfect and gracious love.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

A Note about the Beads

Prayer beads of many types exist throughout the world. For this study's purposes I will focus primarily on the Protestant prayer beads I mentioned earlier.

Protestant prayer beads are made up of a cross or other pendant and thirty-three or more beads. One large bead, called the "invitatory" bead, reminds us that God invites us to a time of prayer. We can use this bead to begin our prayer, much like churches employ a call to worship to begin a church service.

In addition to the large invitatory bead, we find four more large beads. When we splay out a set of Protestant prayer beads, these beads form the four points of a cross and thus are called "cruciform" beads. Beyond represent-

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ing the points of the cross, the number 4 reminds us of the four Gospels, the four seasons of the year, the four parts of our day (morning, afternoon, evening, and night), and the four directions (north, south, east, and west).

Between each of the cruciform beads is a set of seven smaller beads. Because a week has seven days, these beads are called “week” beads. Like the number 4, the number 7 has bountiful meaning for Christians:

The church calendar consists of seven seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time);

Genesis tells us there were seven days of Creation; on the seventh day God rested, calling us also to keep it holy;

In John’s Gospel, Jesus makes seven “I AM” statements:

1. “I AM the bread of life” (6:35, 48).
2. “I AM the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5).
3. “I AM the gate for the sheep” (10:7).
4. “I AM the good shepherd” (10:11, 14).
5. “I AM the resurrection and the life” (11:25).
6. “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6).
7. “I AM the true vine” (15:1, 5).

The number 7 shows up often in the book of Revelation, including John’s note that his letter is addressed to

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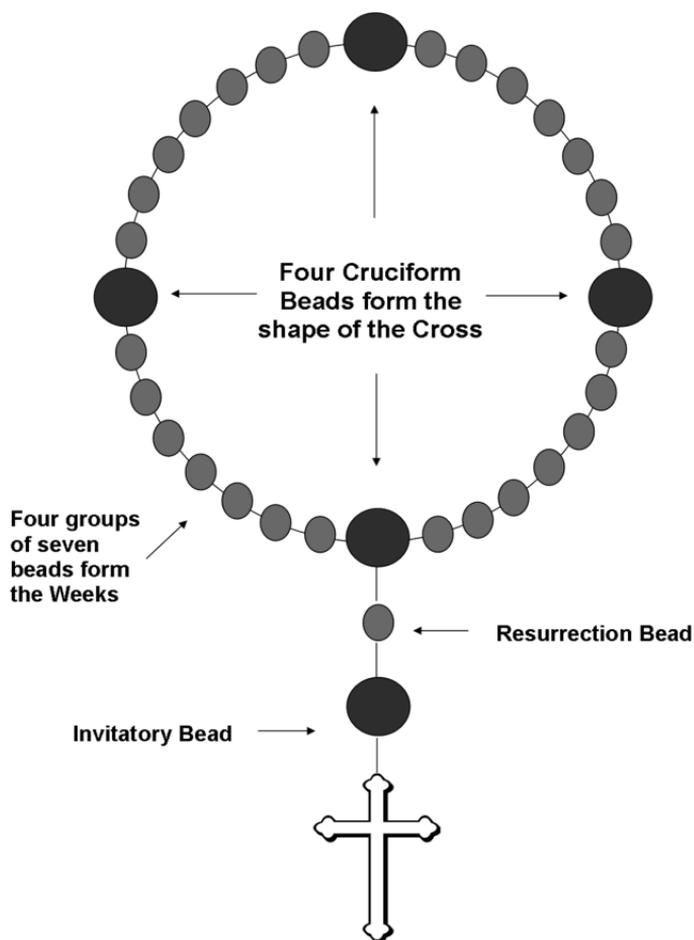
the “seven churches” (1:4); and both Jews and Christians believe the number 7 symbolizes spiritual perfection.

When we add together the one invitational bead, the four cruciform beads, and the twenty-eight week beads we get a total of thirty-three beads. The group that developed this format (page 47) appreciated this number since it represented Jesus’ life on earth for thirty-three years.

For the first year, I chose to use that number of beads. However, over time I began to desire some representation of the fact that Christ still lives today, particularly since the Resurrection is the hallmark of the Christian faith. So, I added one more bead, positioning it between the invitational bead and the bottom cruciform bead. I call it the “resurrection” bead and use it in my prayers to focus on Christ’s gift to us of eternal life. Adding this bead makes the total number of beads thirty-four. However, I still tell people that Protestant prayer beads are comprised of thirty-three beads, which represent Jesus’ life and ministry on earth—plus one bead to represent his resurrection.

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The format looks like this:



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I want to emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to make your prayer beads. This study will focus on the Protestant prayer bead format of thirty-four beads; however, you may design your own format as I did and modify the Prayer Bead Experiences accordingly. Since this is your prayer tool, it should be meaningful for you and for your time with the Lord.

This study assumes that you have a set of prayer beads. You can complete the study without a set, but you will miss out on the Prayer Bead Experiences and the intent of this study, which is to lead you through an exploration of the use of the beads in prayer. You can purchase a set of Protestant prayer beads. Resources (page 105) lists many websites where you can do this.

However, I strongly encourage you to begin by making your *own* set for two reasons. First, the process of making your own set of prayer beads can be an avenue to connect with God. The very act of choosing your beads—the size, the color, the texture—inspires you to think about this tool you will use to encounter the Divine. You might choose colors that have meaning or carry memories for you. You could incorporate beads from a family heirloom or a souvenir from a special trip. Once you have chosen

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your beads, you will begin to string them together on the wire or thread. As you do, reflect on the ways God connects us together for a higher purpose, just as the beads are strung together to form a complete set of prayer beads. Once you have finished, these beads will have additional meaning for you given that you have made them for the purpose of communing with God.

The second reason is that the process affords an uplifting group activity and serves to introduce the study. The field testers enjoyed the camaraderie, the interaction, the collective creative process, and the shared excitement about this new way of praying. So, while I can't mandate that you make your own prayer beads, whether individually or as a group, I can strongly encourage you to make this a part of your study. Add an extra week to this study and use the first meeting to let the group members make their own beads.

I have included instructions (page 89) in the back of the book, along with suggestions for where to purchase materials. My company, Prayerworks Studio, also offers prayer bead kits, which include all the necessary materials to make a set of prayer beads. I have also uploaded a video tutorial to guide you in making your own set at <http://abeadnaprayer.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/video-howto-make-prayer-beads/>.