



Psalms Retreats Invite Vulnerability, Build Hope and Trust

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9/2023

When a congregation in Long Beach, California, designed a psalms retreat as part of a worship renewal grant, they had no idea how it would grow and blossom. Engaging with psalms of confession, praise and thanksgiving, lament, and hope and trust has helped hundreds of Christians develop a new language of prayer.

Every week, Christians around the world participate in communal worship. Yet many feel a disconnect between the worship service and their inner brokenness. They wonder whether anyone sitting nearby carries such grief, guilt, pain, or sorrow. Maybe fellow worshipers feel a different disconnect, because they don't have the language to express their very specific reasons for praise, hope, and trust.

As part of a 2010 [Calvin Institute of Christian Worship grant](#), Grace Church Long Beach (then Grace Brethren) in California organized a psalms retreat for staff and congregants. The results moved them to offer not only annual Grace LB psalms retreats but also retreats for area pastors. Participants have adapted the psalms retreat concept to other church, university, and seminary settings.

"Before that initial grant, we realized that our prayer language was, in general, narrow or one-dimensional," says [Beth Balmer](#), one of Grace LB's three lead pastors. "Yet the emotions and language in the psalms are very broad and deep. These retreats have given our congregation a new language for personal and corporate prayer."

Articulating difficult emotions

Balmer was on the worship grant team but missed the first psalms retreat "due to being heavily pregnant." She attended as a leader for the second psalms retreat and has helped lead most retreats since.

"Our church hadn't historically had retreats, so this psalms retreat was a new idea for us," she explains. "The retreats follow a basic structure with room for the Holy Spirit to work. We take about thirty-five people,

including retreat leaders, to a spectacularly beautiful place from Friday dinner through Sunday lunch. We focus on four prayer themes—confession, praise and thanksgiving, lament, and hope and trust.”

Each section includes a short teaching, listening to several psalms on the same theme, writing prompts to prepare people to write personal psalms or prayers on the given theme, opportunities to share psalms with the group, and worship elements such as worship songs and prayers or liturgical responses from the [Divine Office](#) (fixed-hour prayer).

“We ask people not to sit at the same table twice during meals,” Balmer says. “People have honest conversations, like ‘Tell me more about that lament you shared.’ They discover that the grief they’d carried in secret—maybe over pregnancy loss, a child’s death, or church conflicts—was something that others had experienced too. People connect at a psalms retreat in ways they hadn’t connected in ten years of sitting next to each other in pews.”

Leaders follow up with participants so they can make the next retreat even better. “We all keep learning together,” Balmer adds. “We’ve realized that writing honest psalms puts you in a place of needing to consider ‘What is my physical response beyond crying out to God about homelessness, gun violence, pastoral burnout, or international conflict zones?’”

Modeling vulnerability

[Cory Willson](#) was an elder at Grace LB while earning his doctorate at Fuller Seminary. He served on the grant team with Balmer and grant project director Jessica Garcia, who was Balmer’s intern at the time. “Our whole grant project focused on how the psalms can help us as a church to form our prayer and worship life,” he says. “I helped create the teaching content for the first psalms retreat and helped lead it with two pastors. Each year we’d bring on another pastor or leader so they could learn the content.”

Willson has participated in at least ten psalms retreats since then, even after moving to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to teach at Calvin Theological Seminary. He pegs fifteen to twenty-five participants as “the sweet spot” for psalms retreats and thinks Grace LB is wise to take no more than thirty-five people on their retreats. “If you go above (that), it gets really hard to manage group dynamics and allow time for everyone to process,” he says.

“Retreat participants change through experiential prayer,” Willson explains. “The short teachings unleash them to be with a psalm, resonate with the psalm, and return to the group with their own psalm or prayer. I love how Keith Douds puts it: ‘As the psalms resonate in us and we speak to each other, we become psalms to each other.’”

Douds, a psychologist and Grace LB member, has served as a sort of master of ceremonies for every psalms retreat. “Keith and I roomed together that first year,” Willson says. “He really pushed me to model how to enter into the psalms with vulnerability. He’s taught us all to sit with people in sorrow and lament without trying to fix the situation or pushing them to move on too quickly.”

Shifting worship culture

For the four Sundays after each annual spring psalms retreat, Balmer invites participants to share a psalm or prayer they wrote. Often those are then used in Sunday services as a call to worship or a psalm of praise. “By now the vast majority of the congregation has been through a psalms retreat. Hearing someone else’s psalm prompts them to think about writing another psalm of their own,” Balmer says. “Using participants’

words in worship models being OK with honest and authentic language within the guardrails of what's appropriate for corporate worship. This faithful repetition of psalm themes helps us learn how to write and rewrite prayers and keeps us from only using rote language. So, if there's been a mass shooting—and that seems to have become a weekly event in the US—our congregation is not thrown off by anger and frustration in prayers that echo the psalmists' question of 'How long, Lord?'"

As an example of how lay people at Grace LB have learned to articulate honest prayers with depth, Balmer cites a recent prayer during [Foster Care Awareness Month](#): "A guy lamented that what many foster kids experience is not the way it should be. He also praised God for providing people poised and willing to insert themselves into foster children's lives. And he prayed with hope that the multidimensional foster care system would change for the better."

Balmer says she's been surprised to discover how many people have learned to articulate the depth of emotions in the psalms. Even though participants think they can't write or aren't sure they want to share, at least 85 percent usually share in some way. "We've also learned in the retreats and corporate worship that sometimes what you have to say is exactly what someone else needs to hear. Sometimes people tell me after a retreat that they didn't say anything but felt their soul refreshed," she says.

Shaping leaders who shape entire congregations

[Eric Marsh](#) was one of Grace LB's pastors during the grant year, yet he never actually experienced a psalms retreat till years later. "Even before the psalms retreat began, Grace had played a catalytic role in inviting other churches into externally focused ministry that blessed our city. We modeled it after Tim Keller's [Hope for New York](#) movement," says Marsh, now a pastor at [Parkcrest Christian Church](#) and executive director of [Long Beach Church Collective](#) (LBCC).

"I didn't go on a psalms retreat because I was already travelling a lot, and we were in the midst of raising our family," Marsh says. "I didn't realize how powerful the psalms are till my wife and I finally went on a psalms retreat. It's really effective to get a group of people out of town for a retreat centered around Scripture. What they learn cross-pollinates across age groups and different church ministries."

Though Marsh was no longer at Grace when he went on the psalms retreat, he says he is ever grateful for Grace LB and still has many friends in the congregation, including the pastoral team. "My wife and I went on the retreat after good friends at Grace lost their son in a [Good Friday car crash](#) and another church family lost their [firefighter son, who was shot in the line of duty](#)," he says. "It was healing to write psalms of lament for our own grief and with others processing that same pain. Some of us were also dealing with survivors' guilt, as in 'Why, Lord, did two families tragically lose their sons, and yet our sons are still alive?'"

Marsh explains that his psalms retreat experience prepared him to provide pastoral care when Parkcrest's [beloved lead pastor died unexpectedly](#), leaving a widow and four young children. "That retreat was one of the formative experiences of my ministry. My theory of change is that institutions are changed by leaders who, in turn, shape whole congregations. The psalms retreat shapes the way pastors read and preach the psalms and disciple people."

Offering gifts of vulnerability and rest to others

Marsh describes how the networks formed through Grace LB, its psalm retreats, and LBCC "have built a fabric of trust in the community." In 2018, Grace LB went through a difficult phase during which a long-time pastor

resigned. Marsh helped write a letter on behalf of LBCC pastors about how important Grace's ministry was and how they'd be praying for the congregation. Soon after, several LBCC church planters lost leases to host worship services in public schools. In gratitude for the letter, Grace offered to lead a psalms retreat for pastors. When Marsh applied for a grant for [post-pandemic care for LBCC pastors](#), he says it was "a no-brainer" to include funding for seventy-five pastors to successively attend a psalms retreat led by Grace LB.

Beth Balmer now helps lead a spring psalms retreat for Grace and a fall retreat for community leaders, including pastors, elders, and Christian nonprofit organizational leaders. "We tell fall participants, 'You are here as a person, not a leader. Just come and receive.' Every time I see the Holy Spirit working through their humility and willingness to be vulnerable. It's a total blessing," she says.

The blessings of offering psalms retreat are continuing throughout the US. [Jessica Garcia](#), who directed Grace's 2010 worship grant, is now the worship arts pastor at Red Mountain Community Church in Mesa, Arizona. In 2017, she was awarded a [Calvin Institute of Christian Worship grant](#) to lead the congregation in a year of learning based in the psalms. The grant included a psalms retreat.

As part of his [missiology work at Calvin Theological Seminary](#) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Willson partners with Grand Valley State University campus ministries to deliver a competency-based theological certificate program that can be rolled into a master's of Christian leadership or MDiv degree. He recently led a psalms retreat for certificate students. "I hope to provide more ways for churches to participate in a psalms retreat through the [Institute for Mission, Church, and Culture](#)," he says.

And Keith Douds recently received an inquiry from a Christian university in California that wants their psychology graduate students to experience a psalms retreat.