

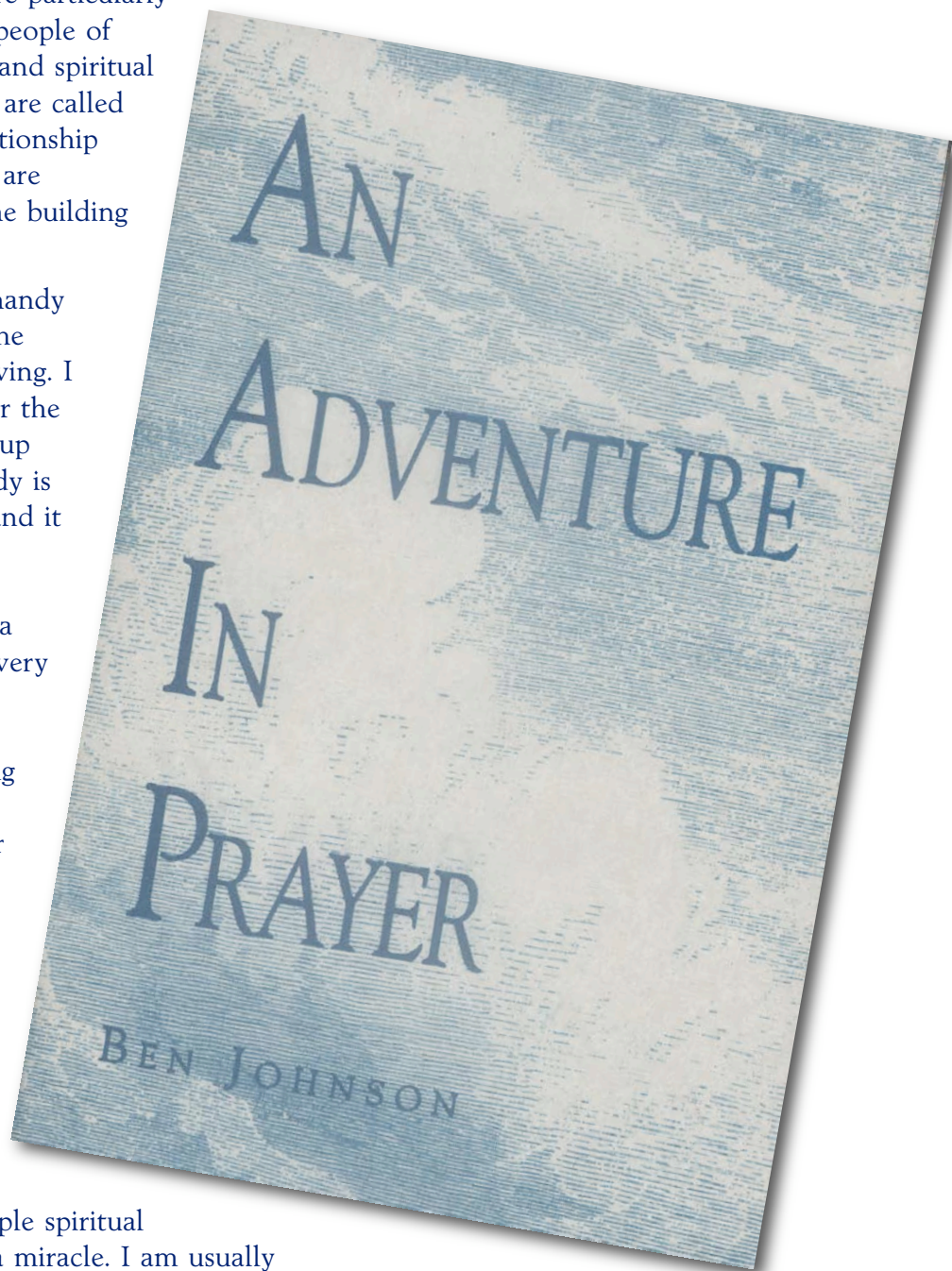
Inner Space: An Adventure in Prayer for Advent

Heather Vais

As a minister, I am often asked to lead studies and small groups at various times throughout the church year. Lent and Advent are particularly important times of the year for people of God to engage in self-reflection and spiritual deepening. As God's people, we are called to grow more deeply in our relationship with Christ, and in so doing we are strengthened for ministry and the building of community.

Many years ago I found a very handy study booklet that I used with the congregation in which I was serving. I have used it countless times over the years for personal study and group study. It never gets old. The study is called *An Adventure in Prayer* and it was written by Ben Campbell Johnson, professor emeritus of Christian spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary. This is a very small booklet that takes participants on a 30-day journey into prayer and reflection. During the 30 days, participants are invited to follow a simple prayer pattern that was first developed by W. E. Sangster in a small book he wrote called *Teach Me to Pray*. Participants are invited to engage in prayer each morning and each evening for one month, following the prayer pattern set out in the booklet.

My first encounter with this simple spiritual discipline was nothing short of a miracle. I am usually a high energy person with a mind that is constantly



flitting from thought to thought. My experience with this prayer project changed me. I discovered that I felt more at peace through the day and I slept more soundly at night without the usual tossing and turning. Johnson said that participants would begin to see other people differently, and that was certainly my experience. I began to see others with more compassion and understanding. Others who have experienced the *Adventure in Prayer* have commented that they felt more aware of God in their lives and more connected to other people too!

I have used *An Adventure in Prayer* in congregational settings and it can be an amazing way to unite your congregation in a prayer project. Our plan was to make sure that every member of the church was included in this program. We discovered that people who don't normally engage in "Bible study" decided to try it. We also noticed that people who don't often attend church became re-engaged in the community because they felt included in an important project. One woman remarked, "*An Adventure in Prayer* reignited my faith and has made me curious about learning about God again!"

How to do this in your church:

1. **Set a Date** - Choose a month when you want to have the prayer experiment. Make sure you give yourself enough lead time to advertise.
2. **Set Meeting Times** - Select a couple of times in the week when people can meet to discuss the study for about one hour. You will want to have five meetings - the first one will be held just as the project begins, and then the remaining four at the end of each week. Because some people are available during the day and others are only available in the evening, offer a few time options for people to come to discuss the study. We let people choose between Thursdays at 10:00 a.m. or 7:00 p.m. or Sundays at 9:30 a.m. We also set up a blog for people to post daily reflections.
3. **Get the Booklet** - Copies are available from The Book Room for \$3.50 per copy which includes delivery (1-800-619-7301). Every

participant should have one. You may be able to access a fund in your church to pay for the booklets or let participants pay for the booklet themselves. Either way, make sure you have copies for every household in the congregation.

4. **Begin to Advertise** and promote *An Adventure in Prayer* in your congregation well in advance of the study. You can do it by way of your church's newsletter, in the bulletin, or in church announcement times. Once you have talked about it in church, then you may wish to send out a congregational letter inviting all members and adherents to participate in the prayer experiment. On page 1 of the booklet, Johnson issues an invitation that you could modify for your own letter. You may even want to send the booklet to every household with the letter to encourage people to participate. Even if they don't participate, it is something they may read.
5. **Be Positive** and excited about the possibility of the entire congregation doing this together. Make sure your session is on board with this and supports it with their attendance and encouragement.
6. **Kick-off Week** - Announce to the congregation the Sunday you will begin the *Adventure in Prayer*. Hold your first set of meetings prior to kick-off day to explain the booklet and explain the prayer pattern (Adoration, Thanksgiving, Dedication and Guidance). Each week afterward there are a few questions in the back of the booklet and there are sections that you can use as guides for discussion. The booklet is only 30 pages long, so it will not be difficult to break it up for the four weeks of the study.
7. **Pray for the Process** - then launch into it together and enjoy the unifying experience of community prayer!

The Rev. Heather Vais is in ministry at Thornhill Presbyterian Church and does contract work with Canadian Ministries/The Vine.