

Rev. Alanna C. Sullivan  
Morning Prayers  
September 9, 2019

I began working as the Ministry Fellow at the Memorial Church in August of 2013. I arrived on campus the same day as First Years moving into the Yard. One of my first tasks as Ministry Fellow was to invite and schedule speakers for Morning Prayers. I knew little about this daily morning ritual beyond the fact that it was one of Harvard's earliest traditions dating back to 1638. I had not attended a service, but I knew it was beloved and revered-- and rumored to have changed little since its inception.

The invitations begin, "[the] longevity [of Morning Prayers] testifies to the lasting value of a dedicated space for the Harvard community to gather on a daily basis to reflect on our shared humanity... Morning Prayers seeks to open up a space for us to explore the qualitative aspects of our lives that often transcend the accepted formats and disciplinary boundaries of the academy. You are free to explore and share any experience that has shaped your understanding of yourself and/or your world. Nothing is too trivial. Nothing is too profound."

This invitation expressed a trust that each person has a meaningful story or message to share. It encouraged reflection and vulnerability. It is rare to be invited to share without objective, it is even rarer to be invited to share matters of the heart.

My intrigue only heightened when I experience worship firsthand. How did this tradition come to pass and how has endured for so long? Here are a few interesting snippets from my research about Morning Prayers:

Morning Prayers were not always communal worship. It was first conducted in tutors' residences at 6am. In addition to mandatory morning services, students also attend daily evening services and lengthy services on Sundays.

In the summer of 1780 President Samuel Langdon resigned from the position after students petitioned the Corporation for his dismissal. Among cited reasons for his dismissal were long prayers and tiresome sermons. The service kept firm time-keeping even then!

The year of 1886 brought a lot of change with the appointment of Francis Greenwood Peabody as University Preacher and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals. Peabody is perhaps best known for introducing the study of social ethics to Harvard Divinity School and to Harvard College. Peabody also started a campaign to end mandatory chapel participation for students. He believed students had a right to choose. Critics contested that Peabody displaced what, in their view, was the rightful center of university life and forever altered what constituted a Harvard education.

Harvard became the only university to have voluntary worship and when the decision was made the President of Yale exclaimed, "Ah! Godless Harvard!"

At the same time, a new order of worship was written by President Charles Eliot on the back of an envelope, and it remains the order of worship that still stands today. It is amusing that this enduring order of worship was crafted in so flippant a manner.

In 1950s, Radcliffe women were allowed to join Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel instead of remaining in the Sanctuary and invited to join the University Choir. Faculty and members of the wider Harvard community were invited to offer Morning Prayers addresses for the first time.

These are just a few moments in the history of Morning Prayers. From my research, I learned that this hallowed tradition has endured because it has adapted over time to continue speaking to the relevant spiritual needs and yearnings of a changing Harvard community. In fact, one way to be true to the tradition is to let it change. It has already been changing, and to do it always the same way would not be true to the tradition. For tradition is so not so much a repetition, but more so an inheritance that one uses and builds upon.

The particulars of the service may have altered, but the heart of this beloved daily ritual stay true. Francis Greenwood Peabody once said in his own address at Morning Prayers: “The morning is the time to stamp the day with a specific intention and to determine what mark it shall bear.”

*Let us pray God, let us hold steadfast to what is good and be open to follow where the Spirit is calling us to be today. Amen.*