

Prairie theologian: 'Just bring it'

■ **When Dr. James Nestingen** strode to the platform for the fourth time to deliver a Bible study on the Lord's Prayer, delegates stood up, cheered, clapped, whistled and stomped.

"This must be just like the classes at Luther Northwestern," Chilstrom quipped, referring to the seminary in St. Paul, Minn., where Nestingen teaches.

A rumpled-looking man with a rugged, elastic face topped by rimless spectacles and a thatch of black hair, Nestingen was the hit of the assembly.

Slouching at the lectern, one hand in his pocket and the other hand gesturing in great swoops, the 45-year-old church historian enthralled assembly-goers with homespun tales and jarred them to new insights into the prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

Nestingén, a native of North Dakota, said some delegates told him that Lutheran World Federation leader Dr. Gunnar Staalsen, a Norwegian, has "less of a Norwegian brogue than I do." His rejoinder: "The best Norwegians left early."

Clearing the channels

Christians say the Lord's Prayer without thinking, Nestingen said. But he knew one church council member who "prayed it like a B-29 taking off—all the rest of us could think about was how meaningful it was to him."

"What are we praying for here?" Nestingen asked of each petition. "When we

say 'holy be your name,' we are praying that God's name will work among us the way it was meant to work among us ... that his name will disclose God to us."

Nestingén recalled how his father and grandfather used to travel to national church conventions, crossing the North Dakota prairie by train. His first childish question on their return was all one word: "Whadyabringme?"

In the Lord's Prayer, he said, Christians ask the same question: "'What's in it for me?' God is not put off by this question and will break through the world's noise to clear the channels."

Nestingén recalled an old sandlot baseball catcher in Saskatchewan. The man eventually quit giving hand signals to a wild pitcher. Instead, he'd yell, "Just bring it! Bring it!" Nestingen said: Christians are asking God "to *just bring it*—bring your word in such a way that we may be revived and strengthened."

The catcher's words became an assembly catch-phrase. At one session a row of delegates rose to greet the professor holding huge cards spelling "BRING IT."

A sampling of his reflections:

■ **Thy kingdom come:** "We ought to get a sense that there's something dangerous about praying [these words]. There's a connotation of power here. A kingdom is a place where a king rules, and there is power afoot when a king begins to rule."

Nestingén recalled that in his child-

hood, when his father hitched up his pants, got an earnest look in his eye and used the words, "kingdom work," family members knew "we'd better get involved."

When people discover themselves in bondage to other powers, they pray, "Take hold of my heart in such a way that all other domineering forces in my life might be contained. ... Then I know I will be free."

■ **Thy will be done:** "My will be done—isn't that the secret prayer of the old Adam, the old Eve within us? As [cartoon figure] Pogo says, 'We have met the enemy and it is us.' ... But as God hinders and defeats the will of the devil, the world and the sinful self, God's will is done among us."

■ **Forgive us our trespasses.** "We know more about Peter's betrayal than we do about whole years in Jesus' life. The church knew the story of Peter's betrayal in detail because Peter himself confessed."

"We are a people known by our confessions. ... We confess sometimes because of a deep sense of guilt. God loves sinners and is very good at forgiving."

■ **Lead us not into temptation:** "Basically we've got a fighting chance" with temptations "that announce themselves." More treacherous are the unannounced ones that come silently "on little cat feet."

In praying "Do not put us to the test, [we say to God], 'If you turn your back on us, we are dead ducks.'"

■ **Deliver us from evil:** "When the New Testament speaks of resurrection, it speaks of a cosmic shift of power. ... [Christ] has taken hold of the power centers. ... [But] there is mopping up to be done and conflict to face this side of the resurrection. ... We see temptation and the reality of evil ... So we pray 'Deliver us from evil.' And God says, 'Why, sure.'"

Prayers asked

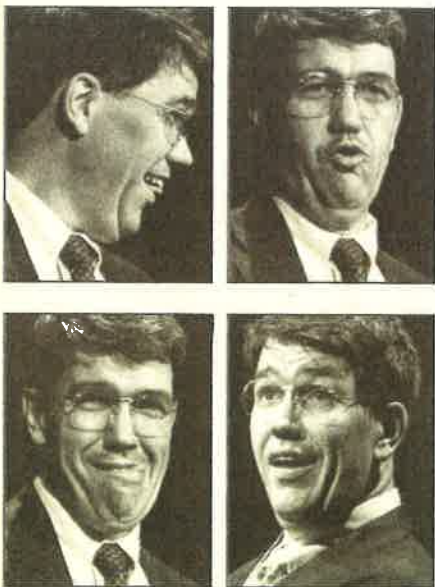
■ **In other actions** the assembly:

■ Asked for prayers for those in El Salvador, especially during the period of negotiations for peace.

■ Adopted a call to action against poverty, especially as it affects women and children.

■ Opposed further U.S. housing loan guarantees to Israel until it halts expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories.

■ Approved a revised chapter of the ELCA constitution outlining church disciplinary procedures.



THE MANY moods of James Nestingen's malleable face held a rapt audience.

