

## GROUP PRAYER PATTERNS

Virgil Warren, PhD

Prayers may be spontaneous or planned, vocal or silent, informal or formal depending on the setting and the desired impact. Group prayer corporately acknowledges our creaturely dependence on God and our fundamental orientation toward him. Group prayer may take various forms but any form we choose needs to evoke an I-You experience with God. Prayer should be sincere and "real," and therefore should avoid deadness born of unnatural formalism, perfunctory language full of clichés and trite expressions, vain repetitions, and the like.

### 1. directed or guided prayer ("bidding")

As the congregation enters a time of prayer, the leader indicates that he will mention different topics as time goes by. Then the audience can pray silently about them. A scripture passage can serve as a kernel around which to develop such a prayer time; 1 Corinthians **13** might be an example.

The weakness of this practice comes from the leader's repeated interruptions to specify the next topic. That can be frustrating and can contribute an artificial feel to the experience. Leaders must also make sure not to take a lot of time saying several sentences at a time in order to explain the prayer need and all its ramifications. The event ends up being more a series of descriptions by the leader than a prayer experience for the membership.

### 2. "blab" prayer

Everyone in the audience is encouraged by the leader to pray aloud at the same time. This is the kind of prayer that occurs at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The obvious disadvantage is distracting the people around you, but it does have the advantage of audible prayer. We may not naturally talk to ourselves silently. Language is normally spoken. When we talk "out loud," we can concentrate better and the experience seems more real.

### 3. concert of prayer

A whole service is dedicated to prayer. During the time a number of specific formats are used to fill out the service. This is akin to a "prayer vigil," except that the latter usually indicates a meeting to pray about one pressing problem.

### 4. prompted prayers

As worshipers enter the service they receive notes with prayer needs written on separate pieces of paper. Each individual thinks about that particular matter and prays audibly or silently about it at the prayer time during the service. Prayer concerns can be listed in a service leaflet and handled in the service itself. Keeping the leaflet allows people to remind themselves later during the week what to pray for. Prayer requests may be called for "from the floor."

### 5. led prayer

One person leads in prayer and the others say "Amen" (1 Corinthians 14:16). The prayer may be prepared for by singing a "prayer hymn," by asking for prayer requests, by standing, *etc.* In this format it is best to check with the people beforehand so they can prepare their minds to lead the assembly meaningfully in the prayer.

### 6. read prayers (see also #13)

The congregation reads together a prayer that is projected onto a screen or printed and distributed. Perhaps the leader can use a read prayer that he or someone else has composed. There are in fact books of prayers available for purchase: John Baillie's *Prayer* and *The Chapel Prayer Book*; Harry Emerson Fosdick's *The Meaning of Prayer*; Toyozo W. Nakarai's *An Elder's Public Prayer*. Even though such prayers may not be read word for word in a service, reading them helps us get away from static expression.

The disadvantage here is that it detracts from the sense of realism in prayer as interpersonal communication. We seldom read to each other when we communicate verbally. Reading to a listener we cannot see tends to change prayer into meditation or learning. The use of read prayers may indicate too great of a concern for "proper wording."

### 7. recited prayers

The whole congregations recites together a memorized prayer like the Model Prayer. In some churches the pastoral prayer frequently leads into the Model Prayer. As the leader ends his spontaneous prayer, he may move into the recited prayer by a transition statement: "*We come to you, Father, in prayer even as our Lord Jesus taught us, saying, 'Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed . . . .'*"

Recited prayers are more easily expressions of our own thoughts and feelings than read prayers tend to be, but recitation can occur with little conscious awareness of content. Since we do not speak to each other in memorized "pieces," it takes concentration to make a "piece" into a prayer.

### 8. requests for prayer

The one leading the service asks for praises and prayer needs and then he or someone he appoints prays for each concern mentioned, several people pray for different items, etc. Various ones in the group may be asked to volunteer to pray for the different voiced concerns.

Making people aware of prayer concerns can be done by posting them on a bulletin board in the foyer, listing them in the service leaflet, including them in the mid-week reminder the church mails out.

### 9. sentence prayers

Short statements are made by the participants spontaneously one after another. The benefits are that many people can participate and that most people can do it. Sometimes people feel inhibited from praying aloud in a group because they doubt their ability to sustain meaningful communication for very long. Sentence prayers alleviate some of that sense of inadequacy.

#### 10. silent prayer

The leader may declare a period of time for silent prayer, which he closes with an audible prayer. The disadvantage is that most people probably do not actually pray, although more are doing it from their own hearts than would be doing so if a leader were speaking on their behalf.

#### 11. small groups

The leader asks the members of the assembly to break up into groups of three to seven and pray audibly together about the subject(s) of concern at the meeting. Mechanisms listed elsewhere can be incorporated into this group setting. If a “prayer circle” is formed and hands are held, each person signals to the next that he is “passing” without praying audibly or that he is finished. One person is asked to begin and another closes after volunteers participate spontaneously. Two or three may be asked to pray audibly or two volunteers are asked for and then the leader closes.

#### 12. spontaneous prayers

The group leader may ask one person to begin the prayer time and encourage any who desire to pray audibly to do so and he will close the prayer time. He may ask for two or three volunteers or may ask two or three named individuals to pray. He may ask for volunteers to pray specifically for each item on a list of prayer requests he first elicits from the gathering. This set of procedures does not work well if the group is very large and especially if it is outside where sound does not carry very well.

#### 13. antiphonal prayer (litany)

As with other acts of worship—singing, responsive readings, etc., prayer can be done antiphonally between leader and congregation or between various groupings of the members in the congregation. In the pattern of a litany the audience may respond repeatedly with set sentence or phrase after the fashion of Psalm **136** and **118:1-4** (“your mercy/lovingkindness endures forever”).

#### 14. sung prayer

As a modification of led prayer the congregation or one person speaking on their behalf can sing prayer. This usage would be especially helpful if the music is tastefully composed for the specific situation.

#### 15. prayer chain/”tree”

Besides these group patterns that take place when the body is assembled, there are “prayer chains” for concerns that arise while the congregation is dispersed. It is done over the telephone through a pre-arranged structure of volunteers. One person calls a small number of others asking them to join him in prayer for a given need. Each of these volunteers in turn has a standard list to call and request the same thing. In this way everyone is incorporated into the experience even though they are not physically together. The process amounts to a modified form of group prayer.

16. “around-the-clock” prayer/prayer vigil

The system is arranged on a sign-up sheet that may be laid out in fifteen-minute segments. The pressing need is then being brought continuously before God.

17. “consecrated prayer time”

The system may be established in such a way that everyone in the church, the city, across the nation, or around the world can approach God together on behalf of some universal concern.

After the prayer, a praise song or one that addresses God in the second person can be used by the leader as an addition to his prayer with congregation joining in a kind of antiphonal response like a choral response. The leader simply leads directly into the song after he finishes wording the part he wants to say.

These latter formats help establish in the people a sense of urgency and seriousness about the need they bring before the Lord, and they serve as vehicles to help communicate those feelings to God. Obviously the pattern per se is not what makes the prayer “effective” before him.

## Preparations for Prayer

### I. Scriptures Useful as Calls to Prayer

1 Samuel **12:22-32**

2 Chronicles **7:14**

Psalms **5:1-12**

**6:9**

**65:1-2**

**66:19-20**

**88:1-2**

**141:1-2**

Matthew **7:7-8**

**17:20-21**

Mark **11:22-26**

**14:38**

Luke **11:1**

1 Thessalonians **5:16-18**

Ephesians **6:18**

1 Peter **3:12**

### II. Brief statements of preparation

“Let us unite our hearts in prayer.”

“Will you join me in a spirit of prayer?”

“Let us be in prayer.” “Let us pray.”

### III. Using Music

A prayer song can be sung from the hymnal.  
 A solo can be sung by someone in the congregation.  
 The choir may sing.  
 The organist may play a brief passage that creates a contemplative atmosphere.

### IV. Reading

The worship leader may use a fitting literary piece (note Morrison's *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*).

A responsive reading may be used from the back of the hymnal or one can be distributed or projected onto a screen.

### V. Period of meditation

#### Examples of Biblical Prayers

Exodus **33:12-13**  
 1 Samuel **2:1-10**  
 1 Kings **8:23-53** (Solomon's "Prayer of Dedication" for the temple);  
     cp. 2 Chronicles **6:14-42**  
 2 Kings **19:15-19**  
 Nehemiah **1:5-11**  
 Daniel **9:4b-19**  
 Habakkuk **3:2-19**  
 Matthew **6:9-15** (= Luke **11:2-4**; "Model Prayer")  
 Luke **1:46-55** ("Magnificat")  
     **1:68-79** ("Benedictus")  
     **2:19-32** ("Nunc dimittis")  
 John **17:1b-26** ("The Lord's High Priestly Prayer")  
 Acts **4:24-30**

#### Prayer Postures

Certain gestures may accompany group prayer depending on the setting and the expectancies of the participants. Joining hands in a circle has been a long-standing practice intended to signal the unity of the group in this act of worship. In a more recent modification of that same idea, the joined hands are raised together. Raising hands individually is done with prayer as well as other acts of worship. Kneeling has been such

a traditional posture that many sanctuaries are equipped with kneeling benches in front of the pews. Open-eyed gaze toward the sky has the effect of making prayer more natural inasmuch as it suggests looking out rather than inside, as praying with closed eyes can seem.

### Miscellaneous Comments on Prayer Practices

Humor in prayer. There has been a trend in recent years to try to be funny and joke around in public prayers. That practice seems patently tasteless if not in fact irreverent. If God were really there to the worshiper, it is doubtful that he would do such a thing. The practice seems more aimed at getting a response from peers than from God. A person wonders whether it happens with these people in their private prayers. One thing young people need to work at is their ability to feel comfortable in relationships with “superiors.” There are many techniques for trying to “dress down” someone else to their own level, and being funny with them is one such technique. This “dressing down” impulse can happen even with worship.

Preparing the prayer leader. If possible, it is helpful before the service to contact the one(s) you want to lead in prayer during the service. Some people feel uncomfortable unless they have a chance to “get their thoughts together.” Having a little time to prepare appropriate thoughts for prayer time helps avoid trite expression and general superficial offerings.

Archaic language. Older Christians who were raised on the King James and American Standard Versions tend to associate archaic language with formal, religious observance. Most of the time it comes off okay; but in being an example to the congregation, the service leader does well to speak in modern English without trying to be eloquent particularly. Creating an oratorical expectancy for public prayer works against getting typical church members to lead in public prayer. If they see prayer simply as “talking to God,” they are more likely to overcome the “stage fright” that is only complicated by oratorical expectancy in formalized prayer.

Get away from using “uh” in prayers. Some cases a person hears sound almost like a deliberate attempt at being “down to earth.” In public prayer the “uh” habit is about as distracting and inappropriate as in normal speaking situations.

Prayers do not have to be “rattled off.” Fast is not better. It would be better to speak in a relaxed way that is natural to heartfelt expression.

Jerky, sputtery expression should be avoided as much in prayer as in everyday conversation and public speaking. Jerky talk and “uhs” come from trying to talk faster than a person can think.

Public prayer is not usually the place for personal items of prayer, particularly if they are sensitive matters. Sometimes people hide behind prayer as a way in effect to “announce” something they would otherwise feel was out of place in polite or mixed company. Trying to bring these topics into the public setting may simply be an attempt to introduce them in a way that the public cannot object to. Most of the time sensitive matters should be kept within the circle where they apply and in a person’s own private relationship with God. “Telling all” is not necessarily a virtue. Religion is not an excuse for throwing away propriety.

Try to avoid “getting on” expressions or clichés. *Just* is a much overworked example. The original implication was probably that the one who was praying did not want to request something big. The expression has gotten applied to any request whatever, which makes it artificial.

Prayers do not have to long or oratorical. The point is whether they are natural to this particular setting for talking to God.