

How to Lead the Prayers

A Training Resource for Intercessors at St Katharine's, Knockholt and St Margaret's, Halstead

Why pray at all?

- To bring our concerns to God
- To follow Jesus' example
- To draw the congregation together
- To make a response to the rest of the service
- To draw close to God ourselves
- To provide a model for prayer

What are we called to pray for?

We pray for together about things which concern the whole congregation, not simply the leader's own agenda.

- For our world *1 Timothy 2:1-2a*
- For church leaders *Colossians 4:3; Acts 13:3*
- On behalf of all *Ephesians 6:18*

Different styles of praying

We try to "lead into" the prayers so that they flow in the course of the service.

Sometimes a hymn or song leads us into prayer; sometimes a poem; sometimes as a response to the sermon...

At 10.30am there are two distinct styles of service. In the Communion service booklet we have helpful guidance to ensure that our prayers are balanced (not too church-centred and not too world-centred). This pattern need not be followed every time, but is a good checklist:

- ✓ *The Church of Christ*
- ✓ *Creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority*
- ✓ *The local community*
- ✓ *Those who suffer*
- ✓ *The communion of saints*

We then get two distinct shapes of praying:

1) The **Litany** style which usually includes a short prayer followed by a cue line followed by a response –

e.g. Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

We have found that generally it is best to use one of the following “cue and responses”:

Lord, in your mercy <i>Hear our prayer</i>	<i>at any time of year</i>
Lord, hear us <i>Lord, graciously hear us</i>	<i>at any time of year</i>
Lord, meet us in the silence <i>Give us strength and hear our prayers</i>	<i>in Advent or Lent</i>
Jesus, Lord of life, <i>In your mercy hear us</i>	<i>at Christmas or Easter</i>

Using just these few responses means that the congregation grows familiar with them and then learns the response without having to remember it in the middle of the prayers. A brand new response of more than five or six words is a struggle to remember and acts as a distraction to the prayers themselves. It is also easier for the children at a Family Service as they know the response – even children who cannot yet read will be able to join in with “Lord, in your mercy... *Hear our Prayer*”.

2) Several longer prayers each with its own “Amen”. Beware that you need to give clear cue lines so the congregation know when to say “Amen”. Ending the prayer with the words...

“through Jesus Christ our Lord...”
“in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”
“for ever and ever”

All these are likely to act as cues for the congregation – it is almost an instinctive reaction ... “for ever and ever. Amen”. Be careful of using such instinctive phrases in the middle of a prayer because someone is likely to say “Amen” as a result!

Two important facts to remember:

- At Family Services the prayers are followed immediately by the Lord’s Prayer. So please **do not** use the ending response to the prayers “Merciful Father, *accept these prayers for the sake of your Son our saviour Jesus Christ.*” This feels too much like an ending and people tend to look up thinking the prayers have finished when you should be leading them into the Lord’s Prayer.
- At Family Communion services please **do not** include the Lord’s Prayer in the time of Intercession because it comes later in the service anyway.

But where do I start?

You have been asked to lead the prayers. You have a blank sheet of paper, and an equally blank mind. Where do you start? Begin by praying yourself; ask God to guide you and to show you the concerns close to His heart.

Here are some suggestions that may also help you get started:

- You could look at the Bible readings set for the service and use them as a basis for prayer. These are available on the church website and in the Parish Magazine.
- What about a seasonal theme? Or linked in to the theme of the sermon?
- Ask the preacher if there are any specific things to prayer for.
- What is happening in the world? Listen to the news and read the papers. Remember the long-term trouble spots and those things which get forgotten about in the news.
- Read the church notice sheets or look in the calendar on our website to pray for upcoming events.
- Remember what was prayed for in recent weeks; is there anything for which you can give thanks?
- Decide on a few topics for prayer. Don't try and pray for everything – you just can't manage it.
- Think and pray about what the congregation can agree to say "Amen" to. Beware of pushing people into praying something they do not believe can happen.
- Try talking with friends from the congregation and find out what they feel we should be praying about.
- Don't forget to ask children. They are often surprisingly aware of world issues and they also feel hurt by tragedies and traumas we see and hear about.
- Remember your congregation. Are GCSEs coming up, or results due out this week? Is a new term starting or ending?
- Remember the less obvious: pray for single people as well as families; for the healthy as well as the sick; for faithful helpers often behind the scenes (cleaners, flower arrangers, musicians, etc.)

It's a good idea to:

- Keep the prayers short. Three to five minutes is usually OK.
- Be economical with words. Use as few as you need. Try writing out what you intend to say, and then use a red pencil!
- Distinguish between **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving and **S**upplication (ACTS).

- Use silence as a time for people to catch up with what you have prayed. Ask people to “Keep a moment of stillness”, rather than use the word “Silence”, because this can make families with young children feel awkward if the baby makes a noise in the “Silence” – “Stillness” means that quiet noise can still happen, yet we are being as quiet as we can

Try to avoid:

- Chatting to the congregation and repeating the news bulletin. Don't tell God and everyone else what we already know.
- Assuming that everyone knows something by heart.

What you pray for:

- Use a song as part of the prayers; e.g. “Make me channel of you peace”, or “Beauty for Brokenness” – ask the Choir Trainer if you can include a song...
- Pray for different groups within the life of the parish, e.g. the young people, the elderly, those who clean the church.
- Pray for the world.
- Pray for missions – for local outreach, for those living in unsympathetic homes, for your church's link missionaries, for national mission initiatives, for missionary organisations.
- Use guided silence. Good directions are important here, and visual aids may help to concentrate the mind.
- Use the architecture. With a small congregation (or with just a few chosen people – e.g. clergy and readers) have a mini procession around the church to strategic points such as the door, font, crèche, choir stalls, pulpit. Pray for who or what you associate with them, such as baptism families and children, new Christians and non-churchgoers, those who lead music or preach...
- Or use the stained glass windows if they depict suitable stories, to spark off prayers. Or use the wording of a banner as a response.
- Use prayers written by others; Mothers' Union or Sunday Club.
- Use different voices – from different people, that is! Ask a group to lead the prayers – a family, a representative from each generation, or each organisation.

When words simply will not do

There are times when words are inadequate, but space, silence and symbols can be very important. Maturity sometimes recognises that we have to start in silence before God, before progressing to “sighs and groans” (Romans 8:26).

Short biddings can be used that invite space for silence (or “stillness”)
e.g. “Let us hold before God all who are involved in...”

“Let us hold before God all rescue workers in...”

Then leaving plenty of space for silence afterwards for people to offer their own prayers. Sometimes it might help is you leave space to do something symbolic, such as lighting a candle or dropping a stone in a bowl of water. Sometimes very quiet background music may be helpful (organ or recorded).

Using a microphone

If there is a microphone, use it even if you have a loud voice. There may be an induction loop to help the hard-of-hearing. The microphone is necessary as the “pick-up” for the system.

- Stand normally – there is no need to lean into the microphone, although with a gooseneck microphone at the Lectern, point this directly at your mouth.
- Please still project your voice – imagine you are speaking to someone right at the other end of the church. The microphone should simply reinforce your voice – it will not make a whisper or quiet voice audible.
- The best advice is to act as if the microphone is not there... if you speak as if you had no amplification you will be doing fine.

Some last minute practical bits of advice:

- Remember to find out the latest news before you come to church.
- Sit at the end of a row where you can easily get to where you will be leading.
- Make sure you know where your “bit” in the service comes. Always worth checking with the Minister before hand – occasionally “extra” items are included in the service just before the Prayers.
- Allow the congregation to settle before you start speaking – this may take quite a while; watch to see when people are ready. If you ask people to sit, stand or kneel there are always two shuffles; one as they do what you have asked and another as they get comfortable. Wait until the second shuffle has died down!
- Afterwards do not rush back to your seat, pause for a moment, and then return quietly and gently.

Please note that there are several books of prayers that you are welcome to borrow when it's your turn on the rota from the back of both churches.

And finally...

- Pray **thankfully**... *1 Timothy 2:1*
- Pray **briefly**... avoid long, drawn-out details.
- Pray **clearly**... use words and ideas people will know.

- Pray **specifically**... ask God to do definite things.
- Pray **expectantly**... something's going to happen.
- Pray **humbly**... you do not have all the answers (*2 Chronicles 7:14*).
- Pray **boldly**... that is our privilege (*1 John 5:14*).

A thought to take away...



*If you end up feeling you could have done better,
then you are a normal human being.*

*The church is the family of God,
not an audience,
and will be more tolerant
(and maybe unaware) of mistakes
than you will be.*

*God honours those
who have honoured him
in their preparation
and in their heart.*

Acknowledgement

This guide was compiled by the Pastoral Team of the United Benefice of St Katharine with St Margaret, Sevenoaks, Kent (UK), © 2012, and is freely available to download from our website. Material used in this handout is based upon the Grove Booklet, "How to Lead the Prayers" (W169) by Anna de Lange and Liz Simpson, ISBN 1-85174-494-0.