

Finding the Time to Pray

Because group members should never feel rushed or starved when it comes to prayer.

By Pat J. Sikora

Does your small group have trouble saving time for prayer? Most do. You get involved in a great discussion and suddenly it's time to leave. Or members share lengthy requests and there's no time left to pray. Or everyone becomes a junior therapist and tries to solve problems rather than praying for them. Once again, you close the meeting with a reminder to pray for those requests at home.

You'd think it would be harder to make time for prayer in the early stages of the group when people are getting acquainted and need to give more background to their requests. But I've found the opposite. Early on, people are tentative. They share a bit, see how it's accepted, then share a bit more the next week. It takes time for people to open up. But the better the group members know one and trust another, the more they share. And as members pray for a specific need, they crave more details so they can pray more effectively. When they care about the person, they want to know how this issue is affecting other parts of his or her life. So it's easy to go from conveying a need in a few sentences to becoming a storyteller.

Yes, depth is good. We want people to feel free to share their lives. We want members to care about the concerns of others. We want to be open, honest, transparent, and vulnerable. But if your group meets weekly for two hours and tries to incorporate all elements of a good small group, it's tough not to run out of time. And the part that usually gets short-changed is prayer. What are some specific ways to cope with the time crunch?

Ask for Wisdom

Let's not forget that our God is a problem-solver. James 1:5 reminds us that, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." When you're stumped about how to save time for prayer, ask God for wisdom. He'll show you creative ways to accomplish your goal. After all, no one is more interested in having your group pray than him!

Ask for Help

I always admit to the group when I'm having trouble saving time for prayer. Of course they know it's a problem. We haven't had time to pray for three weeks—or is it four? But simply speaking the need out loud helps make everyone aware of how they're contributing to the problem—or to the solution.

You don't want to stifle requests, but be honest by saying: "I'm concerned that we haven't had time for prayer in the past few weeks. Let's make an effort to get through the study and the sharing in time to allow at least ten minutes for prayer today." Members will more carefully edit their comments to the essentials, and you'll have time to pray (that week anyway).

Keep Prayer Requests Immediate

Make a ground rule to limit requests to the needs of the group members and their immediate families. During the first meeting suggest that while members may want to pray for great-aunt Martha in Cleveland, it would be helpful to share those requests outside of the regular group time. Group time should be saved for personal needs. Most people are pretty good about honoring that request. If requests start expanding over time, I'll mention it again or speak privately to a chronic abuser.

Keep Prayer Requests Pertinent

Sometimes it's appropriate to limit prayer requests even more. If your group has a specific mission (like a recovery group) you may want to limit sharing and prayer to issues related to that mission. Again, you can handle prayer for additional needs before or after the meeting or on the telephone.

Pray In Twos or Threes

Sometimes it's effective to break your group into smaller units of two or three, either before sharing prayer needs or after. Have each small group pray for their own needs, and if there's time, have the groups pray for other needs. You won't want to use this technique all the time, but it's especially useful if there are several major issues needing prayer.

“You Have One Minute”

One technique that’s unpopular but effective is to announce at the beginning of the sharing time: “You each have one minute to bring us up to date or make a new prayer request. If necessary you can add more detail as you pray and we’ll eavesdrop.”

Use this technique only when the group is cohesive and you know one another pretty well. The advantage of this approach is that it encourages people to carefully edit their sharing to the most pertinent points. The disadvantage is that it may limit someone who really needs to talk that day. But because the group is already caring for one another, it’s easy to spot such a need and agree to break the rules. This approach also frees people from the need to talk if there’s nothing new. I’ve heard people say, “No change from last week. Keep praying for my daughter. I’ll give my minute to Linda so we can get more details on her health.” Again, you don’t want to use this technique all the time, but it’s effective when you need a drastic change.

Share During Prayer Time

Sometimes our groups get into a rut where we share every detail of the need, then we turn around and pray it all back to God as if he hadn’t been listening. While I prefer to pray for someone else, if time is short we can share and pray at the same time by praying for our own need and allowing the others to eavesdrop and get caught up. Their individual prayers bring us up to date and avoid the next problem.

Nix Problem Solving

One of the tendencies of Christian groups is to turn prayer request time into a counseling session. That’s one reason we often don’t have time to pray. We’re too busy trying to solve the problem ourselves. This is truly the work of the enemy to keep us from praying! State the “no problem solving” guideline up front. Then, as soon as someone begins to offer advice, remind them that we need to pray about the problem, not solve it.

This is important for a couple of reasons. First, when we problem-solve, we’re replacing God’s perfect wisdom with our imperfect wisdom. It’s a shortcut that results in idolatry as we, in effect, make ourselves “like God.” Second, when we try to give a quick answer (even if we’re sure we know it), we’re not showing respect for the other person. We need to let people know that we have faith in them to come to good solutions on their own, with the wisdom that only God can give.

This prohibition doesn’t apply to a need that can easily be resolved within the group. If John needs a car to commute to work because his won’t run another mile and Henry happens to have a spare, of course he can offer it to John immediately, although they should work out the details after the group.

Devote an Entire Meeting To Sharing And Praying

If yours is an ongoing group, take an occasional break from the study and devote an entire meeting to worshipping, sharing, and praying. During this meeting, you can give more attention to each person and still have time for significant prayer—if you’re careful. Of course you’ll still be tempted to let a particularly needy person go on and on. Or to let everyone go on and on. Or to problem solve. Or to do anything but pray. Don’t give in to that temptation. Make it your goal to assure that prayer is the focal point of this meeting.

Pray First

You may feel a little awkward, but one way to solve the “no time to pray” problem is simply to pray first. Again, you’ll need to set some limits or you’ll spend the entire meeting sharing and praying, which will cut out other things. But if you combine this with one or more of the other ideas in this article, you’ll find that you not only have time for everything, but also that your prayer time is refreshed and renewed.

Keep a Prayer Diary

Be sure to keep a prayer diary. Include the date of the request, the requester, the request itself, and the date answered. As Ronald Klug affirms in *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal*, “This is not a way of keeping score on God; it is a method of strengthening one’s faith.” It’s exciting to look back periodically and see how many prayers God has answered. Sometimes we lose sight of his faithfulness as we add to the list of needs.

—PAT J. SIKORA is founder of [Mighty Oak Ministries](#) and author of [Why Didn’t You Warn Me? How to Deal with Challenging Group Members](#). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International