

## Practical Ministry Skills:

# Revolutionary Prayer in Your Small Group



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**REVOLUTIONARY PRAYER IN YOUR SMALL GROUP**



**How to Use This Resource**

*Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.*

Prayer is a major part of every small group. Or at least it should be—when the goal of gathering together is spiritual growth and transformation, the Holy Spirit needs to be involved. And prayer before, during, and after a group gathering is a key element in that involvement.

Unfortunately, prayer has become an uncomfortable time for many small-group members. Or a boring time. Or a waste of time. That’s because many groups dig themselves into a rut during prayer time—doing the same thing week after week. At some point, sharing around the circle and praying for the person on your right just loses its meaning.

Fortunately, the resources contained in this training packet can help.

**Overview**

Andrew Wheeler’s article “Help Your Group Wake Up!” is a great introduction to the topic of revolutionary small-group prayer. It will shine the light on several important topics, including the problems with “traditional” group prayer. And “Beyond Prayer Requests” reminds us that one of the biggest keys to effective prayer (whether in groups or alone) is to be aligned with what God is doing.

**Principles of Great Group Prayer**

One of the biggest roadblocks to effective prayer in small groups is that people just don’t make prayer a priority. And this often shows itself when prayer is relegated to the back-end of a group meeting when all of the other “important” elements have had their time. That’s a mistake. “Making Prayer a Priority” and “Finding the Time to Pray” will help your group fix that mistake.

The other articles in this section provide some over-arching principles on what makes prayer in groups effective, and how you can implement those elements in your small group.

**Alternative Methods of Group Prayer**

They say that variety is the spice of life, and that is true when it comes to praying within a small group. Each of the articles in this section provides a key ingredient for your group’s prayer menu—complete with explanations and tips for implementation. Give them a try!

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at [www.SmallGroups.com](http://www.SmallGroups.com).

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**REVOLUTIONARY PRAYER IN YOUR SMALL GROUP**



**Help Your Group Wake Up!**

*Common problems and practical solutions for praying together*

By Andrew Wheeler

Our small group met monthly to pray for the persecuted church around the world and for missionaries from our church. We were all committed to God, to prayer, and to each other, and several of us were experienced pray-ers. Yet some of our prayer times—well, most of them, really—seemed to drag by.

Often my mind wandered during prayer; seldom did I feel we were connecting as a group. Although I knew God was with us, I rarely felt lifted into his presence. Many times I drove away glad we had met, but not particularly inspired. Why did our group struggle to "click" when we interceded together?

Like many small groups, we lacked effectiveness in this area because we failed to take into account two key dimensions of group prayer.

**A Balancing Act**

Group prayer—unlike private prayer—involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions. When we pray in a group, we are praying *to* God (the vertical dimension) *with* other people (the horizontal dimension). Effective group prayer requires a balance between both of these dimensions. When the horizontal isn't taken into consideration, the result tends to be long, winding prayers that diminish overall participation in the prayer time. When the vertical is lacking, prayers are often said more for the benefit of other people than for God, and can move the focus away from God rather than toward him.

Balancing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of community prayer doesn't happen automatically. However, our group has discovered some principles and practices that can help. Let's look at the horizontal aspect first.

**All Together Now**

Praying with people means that we pray as a team, sometimes even limiting our individual prayers for the benefit of others.

**Focus.** One way to improve a group's ability to pray as a team is to focus the topic. Prayer times in the early church often centered on a single overriding concern. Acts 1:15–26 describes a group of believers praying for God's guidance in choosing a replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot. Acts 12 shows a similar assembly praying for Peter's release from prison.

Narrowing the focus in this way allows a number of people to express to God their desires about a particular situation. When multiple subjects for prayer are opened simultaneously, participants often skip from topic to topic rather than developing a prayer together in unity and agreement.

Our group made three changes that helped us focus our prayer time. First, we limited our topic to the persecuted church. Second, instead of praying generally for countries where persecution is rampant, we now pray for specific needs in three to five countries using a recent prayer list from International Christian Concern ([www.persecution.org](http://www.persecution.org)). Finally, we changed the format of our prayer times. We used to read through all the requests on the list and then pray. Now someone reads aloud the information for the first country, and we pray about those needs. When there is a general sense that we've covered that country, we move on to the next.

This format could be adapted for nearly any prayer focus. For example, if you're praying for members' personal requests, focus on one person at a time instead of gathering everyone's requests at the beginning. You'll experience greater unity in prayer and help people remember what to pray for.

**Short and sweet.** Praying short prayers is another way to improve the horizontal dimension of group prayer. Our tendency, however, is to do the opposite. Long, winding prayers may be perfectly appropriate in the prayer closet, but they are seldom conducive to community prayer. Prolonged prayers often cause group members to tune out. God may have an infinite attention span, but we do not!

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Long prayers also communicate—usually unintentionally—that the prayer is not interested in the contributions of the rest of the group. Such lack of consideration discourages others from participating and destroys a sense of community.

Since our group began to concentrate on one country at a time, our individual prayers have been more brief and more targeted. When we read through the entire list of requests before praying, some members responded by covering a number of subjects in their "turn." These prayers grew long, causing people to tune out and preventing any real agreement in prayer. Our new format limits the scope of individual prayers and makes it easier for us to keep them short.

Narrowing the topic and keeping individual prayers short helps us acknowledge the horizontal dimension of community prayer. But how do we incorporate the vertical dimension?

### The Up Side

Praying to God means that we talk to him rather than addressing others in the group. We also focus on his presence and will rather than our circumstances.

**Centered on God.** First, we remember that God is our real audience. In a group, it's easy to slip into addressing other people in prayer rather than God: "Lord, may *we* be more seeker-focused, may *we* reach out to our lost neighbors, may *we* be prepared at all times to speak the gospel." This type of prayer draws the focus away from God and often leaves the group feeling preached to rather than prayed for.

Here's how we might pray for the same subject in a way that puts the attention on God: "Lord, would *you* give us a greater heart for the lost and open doors for us to share the gospel?" The distinction in wording may be subtle, but the difference in focus is clear. The second prayer clearly asks God, not the group, to act. Praying this way honors God's sovereignty and encourages group members to seek him for life-change rather than attempting to accomplish it on their own.

We can also lose sight of our real audience by offering prayers that are more descriptive than intercessory. God knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8). When we load our prayers with information aimed at group members rather than God, we accentuate the horizontal dimension of community prayer at the expense of the vertical dimension.

Our group had this problem. Because we all read the list of requests silently before we prayed, we weren't sure others had read (or remembered) the entire list. So we spent much of our prayer time reviewing the information in the lists. Now that one person reads the information and requests aloud, we know everyone is on the same page, and we can focus on interceding for God to act. The key here is to make sure the entire prayer time isn't taken up by sharing information.

**Kingdom requests.** Focusing our prayers on God involves not only whom we address, but also what we ask for. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9–10). Jesus then instructed the disciples to seek God for their daily needs, for forgiveness, and for guidance. Later, Jesus told his disciples to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [such as food and clothing] will be given to you as well" (v. 33).

It seems Jesus intended "your kingdom come, your will be done" to be the context in which all other prayers are brought to God. Often, however, our prayers are dominated by immediate concerns such as financial or medical issues. Those are valid topics for prayer, but it's possible to "seek first his kingdom" as we're praying for them. We pray for God's financial provision, but we pray also to be content with what He has given, for wisdom in financial decisions, and for a steward's heart. We pray for healing, but we pray also that God will develop Christlike character in us through our trials.

Praying this way may not come naturally at first. But as God works in our hearts, we begin to desire what he desires, and the focus of our requests shifts. We seek his bigger purposes—even as we ask him to act in the daily circumstances of our lives.

Our group continues to meet monthly to pray. Now that we've begun to incorporate these principles, we're growing in our ability to pray together well. Although we're still experimenting and tuning our approach, the unity we experience in our meetings indicates that we're on the right track.

—ANDREW WHEELER is author of [Together in Prayer](#) (IVP, 2009); this article originally appeared in the Nov/Dec 2007 issue of *Discipleship Journal*. Reprinted with permission.



## Beyond Prayer Requests

*Groups should consider whether their requests line up with what God is doing.*

By Wayne Jacobsen

You'd have thought I'd just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open. And all I'd said was, "I don't think I can pray that for you." The woman who had just asked us to pray was perhaps the most shocked of all.

My home group had just finished eating dinner, and we were sharing prayer requests. With obvious distress, Kris had told of her daughter's plan to move in with a boyfriend that weekend, and asked us to pray that God wouldn't allow it. I usually try not to take exception to people's prayer requests, but I have a low tolerance for requests I think God clearly will not answer. On this occasion, I didn't keep quiet.

Once they all caught their breath, I explained: "I think all of us here can understand why you want God to stop her from doing that. If anyone here feels that's what God wants, you're free to pray that way. I'm wondering, however, whether asking God to override someone's ability to make moral choices isn't akin to witchcraft." I could see Kris was near seething at my bluntness, so I hurried on. "What I suggest we pray for is that God would reveal himself to your daughter. That he would let her see clearly the choice she is making. And that God will show you how to trust him and love your daughter, even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life."

I had hardly finished before Kris blurted out through tears, "That's exactly what I need."

We gathered around her to pray. Instead of praying for the situation not to take a distressing turn, we prayed for Kris. What could have been a sympathetic but shallow exercise in prayer became a marvelous discovery of how God works in difficult situations.

### Prayer Snares

At most prayer meetings a host of requests are made, then a handful of people offer quick prayers until the list is covered. Rarely do we stop to ask if a particular prayer request is in line with what God is doing. Rarely do we follow up to find out if God answered. We are often left praying a list of wishes—as though if we throw enough darts at the balloons on the wall, we're bound to hit one of them.

My young son awakened me to the folly of this. We were reading John 15 one morning for a family devotion when he suddenly blurted out, "That's not true!" I had just read the verse about God giving us whatever we ask of him. But my five-year-old was already aware that most of what we prayed for as a family didn't happen. I wondered if our prayer practices were teaching him, whether we liked it or not, that prayer is only wishful thinking.

While the exercise of prayer itself offers comfort for the moment, I'm afraid many prayer requests teach us to use God like a genie in a bottle. I don't want my son, or my brothers and sisters, to get that impression. I'm no longer comfortable praying for things that I'm not convinced are in sync with God's heart.

Here are certain types of prayer requests that reflect more our human desires than the desires of God. Do these sound familiar?

- *The trivial:* "Let's pray I can get over this cold" or "Give us a rain-free day for the church picnic." Our comfort and our plans seem important to us, but might God have something larger in mind? Might the farmers around us desperately need the rain? Our requests need to reflect things we truly expect God to do, not just our thoughtless hopes and whims. I don't want my requests to trivialize the awesome gift of prayer.
- *The self-motivated:* "My brother's unit just got called up to go to Iraq. Let's pray he won't have to go." While I can understand the emotion behind the request, it is still misplaced. If he's in the military, why

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shouldn't he go? God's purposes frequently include hardship and risk. Should we ask him to trump his purposes for our convenience?

- *The controlling:* As with Kris' request, I think we're spitting into the wind if we ask God to make other people act according to our will. He doesn't even force people to adhere to his will. Why should he make them act according to ours?
- *The manipulative:* Not all prayer requests are directed at God. We're usually more diplomatic about it than Charissa, who was only four years old, but knew what she wanted. "Jesus, would you help Bob and Laurie learn how to spank their children, so their kids won't hit me when I come over?" I'll admit it worked for Charissa, but I don't think prayer was intended to send subtle (or not so subtle) messages to the faithful.
- *The blaming:* A group in my former church was praying for an infertile woman. They thought she wasn't getting pregnant because her husband wasn't godly enough to be a good father. So they asked God to change him. She blamed him and tried to manipulate him to change, and by the time she came to see me, she was incredibly frustrated. I told her I thought they'd missed the point. None of us qualify for God's gifts. If God waited until everyone was ready to have a baby, no one would ever give birth.
- *The mass-produced:* I don't know why we think we have a better chance of getting prayers answered if more people are in on it. Like many of you, I receive prayer requests on the Internet begging me to pray for people I don't know, about needs I'm not involved in. God's answers to prayer are not based on a tally sheet. Prayer was designed for two or three faithful believers to focus on, agree, and fervently intercede, rather than enlisting large numbers of uninvolved people.

### Prayer Pointers

Prayer enables us to discover what God is doing, to trace his hand in the circumstances of our lives. Through the vital communication of prayer, he transforms us in the process. Prayer, therefore, is not so much a means of manipulating the master plan, but of being shaped by the master's hand.

Not all prayer groups are conducive to that kind of prayer. Not all requests follow that understanding. Consider five guidelines to direct your prayer times to foster a transformational, ongoing walk with God.

1. **Focus prayer on the people involved.** The temptation at "prayer-request time" is to narrow the request to action points we want God to undertake or gifts we want him to give. That misses what God considers most important. When the news arises of a brother sent to war, the opportunity for prayer is not to ask God to keep him home. That limits the scope of prayer to events, when it should be focused on people. It also limits the other pray-ers to a specific request, without offering an opportunity to discern God's heart in the matter. Instead, address the fears of his sister, the worry of his mother, and the faith of the soldier himself. We can pray that God will mold our courage and our ability to trust, that he will help us overcome fears, and that the brother will recognize God's presence. These are the evidences of God's work and the kinds of prayers he answers.

I've discovered that smaller groups give us time to process someone's struggle and help identify God's work. Even home-sized groups can be too big for this kind of prayer. I have always found it more effective to break down in groups of two or three where people really know each other and give them the time to explore the situation together.

2. **Seek God's perspective.** Most prayer requests fit what we think is best, but often run counter to what God is actually doing. I love how Peter and John responded to the Pharisee's threats that they stop proclaiming Jesus or face punishment. When they gathered later with other believers to pray, they didn't pray for what would be easiest. They could have prayed God would convert the Pharisees or wipe them from the face of the earth. But they didn't see either of those options as fitting God's design. Instead, they prayed for boldness to continue to do what God asked, even when they knew they might be beaten, imprisoned, or executed for it.

A primary step in prayer should include asking God to reveal what he is doing in the situation and pausing long enough to let him answer. Prayer should be directed by talking together to see if anyone has a specific insight about how to pray for the people involved.

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3. **Let trust, not fear, fuel your prayers.** Fear is the death of prayer because it is the opposite of trust. Most of my prayers, even well into midlife, were driven by my anxieties and fears. I remember praying through our finances, and though we had enough to supply our needs for the present, I was concerned about the long term. I trusted him enough for today, but kept praying that he would do something to take my anxiety away for tomorrow. But God didn't want me to trust in my IRA or the state lottery for security, he wanted me to trust in him.

What most enhances my relationship with Jesus is my ability to trust him, no matter what circumstance I'm in. He rarely answers prayers that ask him to fix my circumstances so that I can trust him less. His desire has always been that I would trust him more. Prayers permeated with a faith-filled security in God's love and confidence in his character will be more effective than petitions for him to appease me. When I'm fearful, I've learned to pray first for my fear and for a fuller revelation of God's love before I pray for the specific outcome I might want. When I'm praying for others, I do the same.

4. **Pray in agreement.** I learned this fascinating aspect of prayer from a group of Christians in the Australian Bush. The man leading the prayer meeting offered some unusual instructions: "Tonight as we pray, we're only going to pray for what we agree upon. If one of you feels led to pray over something, ask the group if that's something we all sense. If it is, we can pray in agreement. If not, we'll pass over it for now and move on to other requests."

I asked him later why he gave the unusual instructions. He said they had learned that praying for someone can become a subtle form of manipulation. "If a man is depressed, then others pray for him to be happy. He's pressured then to smile at the end of the prayer and say, 'Thanks. I feel better,' whether he does or not. Maybe he doesn't need to 'feel better' right now. Maybe he needs to learn to cling to God in the midst of suffering. You don't know unless you ask."

By asking permission of one another to pray in certain ways, these Australians were able to maintain a more authentic and honest form of prayer. They also had a chance to share insights and see what God might be saying. It gave them the freedom to pray with boldness when they knew that all were seeking the same thing.

5. **Follow up.** Nothing expresses our concern to someone in need more than following up with a phone call a few days later to see how they are doing and what might have happened after our prayer. I'm convinced we do too little of this because we have so little hope that our prayers will affect much. But if the goal is to zero in on what God is doing and see him accomplish his will in our circumstances, then our initial prayer only begins the process. If nothing has happened since, we can ask God for wisdom. Is he doing something else in this situation than we thought? Is he teaching us to persevere in what we started?

Staying in the process until something is resolved will not only be a blessing in that instance, but will train us for future opportunities in prayer. This invites us to make any request of God, but it does not tell us to expect him to answer them the way we want. God is not our fairy godmother who waves a magic wand to conform every circumstance to our whim. Real prayer is the process of getting involved with someone's need, praying as best we understand God's work, and then staying in the situation until we see God act.

It is a risk to pray in that expectant way, but it can lead to some incredible prayers. One of Henri Nouwen's spiritual directors once prayed over him: "May all your expectations be frustrated. May all your plans be thwarted. May all of your desires be withered into nothingness that you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit." While I don't recommend praying that for someone you don't know well, here is someone who understood God's heart in prayer.

Teaching people to move beyond their own agenda to touch the heart and passion of God will be a challenge, but it will deepen and enliven your prayer life.

—WAYNE JACOBSEN; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP JOURNAL, copyright 2001 by the author and Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net).

**REVOLUTIONARY PRAYER IN YOUR SMALL GROUP**



**Making Prayer a Priority**

*Don't let the other elements of your group time squeeze out something this important.*

By Seth Widner

At first glance, Nate and Melissa's small group looks like the perfect model to follow. They kick their Tuesday evenings off with a theme dinner, and afterward everyone gathers in the living room for a short game. During the Bible study, Nate and Melissa lead their group through some great discussions. They are gifted facilitators and know how to ask thought-provoking questions that spark conversations. The evening is wrapped up with a closing prayer. After each gathering, Nate and Melissa go to bed feeling like the time was successful.

One morning, though, Nate received an email that really took him by surprise. A group member expressed an ongoing frustration with the weekly gatherings. For two weeks, she had some important prayer requests to share with everyone, but felt the prayer time was rushed at the end of the evening. So she didn't voice her requests. She hoped that Nate and Melissa would create some positive changes so that prayer would become a higher priority for the group. That email opened Nate and Melissa's eyes to a missing ingredient within the life of their small group: quality prayer time. But they faced an obstacle—where would they find the time to pray more with their group?

Many small-group leaders are facing a similar obstacle. They would like to have more prayer time with their small groups but do not know how to practically make it happen. I believe this happens because these groups have not made prayer a priority. But they can do so, and the following steps can help.

**Seek God's Direction**

The first thing to do is pray and ask for God's guidance. Ask him to show you his heart's desire for your group. Patiently seek him with all your heart. Proverbs 3:6 says, "In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight." He will show you how to lead your group toward revolutionary prayer!

**Set Your Goal**

Nobody knows a small group better than its leader. Before making any plan of action, make sure that you understand your goal. Every small group is unique and made up of people with different levels of spiritual maturity. Some groups have several seasoned prayer warriors and would likely benefit from a longer time of prayer. For other groups, prayer could be a brand new concept to the members. They may agree with the purpose of prayer but lack the discipline to follow through consistently. These groups may become discouraged if the bar is set too high in the beginning. So know your group well.

When setting your goal, begin with the end in mind. Try to imagine what your group's prayer time would look like if everyone were an experienced prayer warrior. This will be your long-term goal and will provide direction, much like a compass. If your group's prayer time were a race, the long-term goal would serve as the finish line. When a race has a finish line, the runners make steps in the same direction toward their goal.

After setting the long-term goal, you can create a starting point with steps toward growth. The key is to set realistic goals that promote growth. For example, if prayer time is a relatively new concept for the life of your group, don't try to have a long period of prayer time immediately. That would be unrealistic and your group may become discouraged. Developing a prayer time with a group can take time and requires patience.

**Cast the Vision with Your Group**

It's important to communicate with your small group in order to maintain a high level of trust. Let them know the importance of prayer. The key here is to be biblical. Don't just share your thoughts and feelings. Thoughts and feelings can be good when they line up with Scripture, so provide your group with verses from God's Word. Set a special time to share what God's Word has to say about the topic of prayer. If your group sees the biblical vision for it, they will likely be on board with you.

Here are some great verses to help you get started: Matthew 6:5–15; Matthew 21:22; Luke 6:27–28; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; and Colossians 4:2.

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### Create the Time

This is where the rubber meets the road. You must intentionally create the time to pray with your small group. Look at your agenda and find the time. It is there somewhere. You may have to take time from an activity or discussion, but it will be worth it. Having a revolutionary prayer time requires creativity and intentionality.

As you create time, remember that the average person requires four minutes to share their requests. Simply multiply the number of group members by four and you will get a better idea of the amount of time you are looking for. If people feel rushed, they will not share an intimate request. This step will be more difficult for those with a higher number of group members.

If you find yourself crunching for time, consider the following ideas:

- **Subgrouping.** Divide your group into smaller prayer circles of 3–5 participants. Appoint a leader for each prayer circle and have the leader report the requests to you. After gathering the requests, you can share them with the whole group through email. Subgrouping will help you get even more accomplished in a smaller unit of time.
- **Prayer theme nights.** Devote an entire evening to prayer once per month. This will quickly establish prayer as a priority in your group, as well as providing some quality time to pray.

### Establish Guidelines

Once you have created the time to pray, you need to make good use of that time by establishing some needed guidelines. A wise man once said, “Wisdom is the quality that keeps you out of situations where you need it.” Guidelines will help you stay on the prevent side of things. They will serve as powerful tools in keeping your prayer time focused. Guidelines will also help you intentionally guard your group’s prayer time.

Here are some guidelines to help you get started on the right foot:

- **Set the ending time.** Let everyone know when the prayer time will end. This will help keep everyone focused and prevent unneeded frustration from dragging things out too long.
- **No distant requests allowed.** As your group shares prayer requests, challenge them to share a need that is close to them. Do not allow them to share requests about distant relatives, friends, or circumstances. Challenge everyone to keep their requests focused on either themselves or their immediate family.
- **Allow time for all requests.** Make sure everyone in your group has the opportunity to share their requests. Let everyone know that each person has a set time to share requests. This time will vary depending on the size of the group, but I recommend giving people between 2–4 minutes. Without this guideline in place, the people who enjoy talking will naturally dominate the time, and those who are quiet will not have the chance to share.
- **Establish the plan for prayer.** Make sure that you communicate the expectation for the actual prayer time. No matter what you decide, your group needs to know what you want to happen. Here are some questions to consider while setting up your plan: How long will the actual prayer time last? Do you want everyone to have the opportunity to pray? Will you appoint people to pray? Who will be the first to pray? Who will be the last to pray?

### Consistency

It takes up to 30 days to form a new habit. Make sure that you are consistent in following through on your prayer time. This will require discipline. And be on the guard for anything that may take away from this time—distractions come when we least expect it. So be consistent by closing the door on any interference.

### Measure Your Progress

After 30 days of praying with your group, see how things are working. Get feedback from group members. Remember your long term goal? See how the group is measuring up to it. This is a great time to create any further steps or adjustments. Share the progress with your group, too. Help them see their spiritual growth. And celebrate together! This will fuel everyone’s passion toward even more spiritual growth in the future.

—SETH WIDNER is Family Pastor of The Journey Church in Fernandina Beach, Florida. Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.

**REVOLUTIONARY PRAYER IN YOUR SMALL GROUP**



**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

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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 worshiping, 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.

**REVOLUTIONARY PRAYER IN YOUR SMALL GROUP**



**Three Keys to Powerful Group Prayer**

*Practical advice gleaned from the struggles of a well-meaning small group*

By Danny R. Von Kanel

Three years in a men’s prayer group reaped eternal rewards that changed our community—ha! Hardly. Results were difficult to ascertain. My adventure with that group of eight men was an example of commitment, faithfulness, and unceasing prayers—but the result was ineffective praying. Maybe you’ve had a similar experience in one of your small groups?

After much soul-searching, reflection on God’s Word, and examining these men’s lives, I believe God has revealed why our prayers seemingly went nowhere and failed to acquire God’s blessing. Revolutionary prayer that transforms any small group into a conduit for multiplied blessings of God includes three keys: prayers from Christians living their faith, prayers infused with power, and prayers united in petition. And they were missing from our group.

**Prayers from Christians Living Their Faith**

The eight men in my prayer group claimed to be godly in the truest sense of the word. They were faithful leaders, many serving as deacons, and gave all outward indication of being in touch with their Lord. But looks can be deceiving. “Living” their faith proved elusive.

James 5:16 says, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” The key word in that verse is *righteous*. Sin left un-confessed robs us of prayer power. Indeed, the prayer of the upright is God’s delight (Proverbs 15:8). When our small groups pray while dealing with unresolved sin, it’s similar to having faith without love. It is that proverbial “clanging cymbal” in the ears of God. He may hear our requests, but they are useless in bending his favor to our request.

Here are a few ideas that can help group members pray as people living their faith:

- **Confession before praying.** Spend a moment in your group talking about confession and its importance in approaching God. Use silence to allow group members to confess their sins to God. As the group leader, vocalize a joint prayer of confession with the group.
- **Use a paper visual.** This idea has been around for a while, but it works. Ask members to write down any sins they need to confess on a sheet of paper. Pray aloud while group members pray silently and ask God to take each sin off the list and wipe their slate clean. When you finish praying, ask group members to wad up their papers and throw them in the trash can (or in a fire) to symbolize God’s forgiveness, and that he remembers our sins no more.
- **Use a body visual.** Tell group members that you are going to read a Scripture passage that connects with confession, and ask them to do what you do. Read Psalm 24:3–4 out loud. Read it again, and this time stop on the phrase “clean hands.” When you say “clean hands,” hold your hands out palms up. Let ten seconds pass in silence. Read it again and this time when you say “pure hearts,” cross your hands over your heart.

**Prayers Infused with Power**

In order to impact change, our prayers must be infused with power. And spiritual power has everything to do with our relationship with Christ. Psalm 34 gives insight here. When I seek the Lord, he “delivers me from all my fears” and I “lack no good thing.” When I “look to him” my face is “never covered with shame.” When the “poor man called, and Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.” “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry.” “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them.”

Could it be that as our relationship with Christ grows, God is more and more positioned to release his power into our lives, to hear our cries, and to save us from our troubles? I’m convinced that the reason our calling out names through prayer limps along with meager fruit is because we as petitioners lack God-infused power. We are limited by our sluggish relationship with Christ.

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To help your group members in this regard, ask them to set up a “plan of intimacy.” This is basically a roadmap for each person in the group regarding how they will seek to improve their relationship with Christ. Ask group members to write out their plan, and do the same thing yourself. Include steps to exploring adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Be specific. Set goals that are obtainable and measureable. You may even have members sign the plan as a contract with the group.

### **Prayers United in Petition**

Revolutionary prayer is conditioned on practicing our faith and developing a right relationship with Christ. But our prayers truly take wing when they are collaborative efforts—prayers in which we partner in one accord with other believers.

Jesus said: "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:19–20). God is moved to act when he hears and sees God’s people united in their petition.

To practice this, divide the group into prayer partners and have everyone spend time agreeing with each other on different requests. Sometimes we do disagree with a prayer request (for a variety of reasons), but we are afraid we would offend the person if we voiced our concern. Yet there are times when our concerns are valid—when things need to be clarified or addressed. One example is healing. To some healing has a physical connection, to others it’s emotional or spiritual. Clarification helps in our agreement.

If a group member can’t wholeheartedly agree with a request, he or she should have freedom to share why. Ask members to take that particular request home and allow God to address this issue in their heart. If still not in agreement at the next meeting, consent to put it aside. Allow others to take the request and follow same procedure.

My men’s prayer group suffered from issues that kept God at bay when it came to hearing and answering our prayers. But other small groups do not need to experience the same malady. As we practice genuine faith, pray with power, and unite our petitions, our group prayers will experience more fully the visible fruit of prayer.

—DANNY R. VON KANEL; copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### **Discuss:**

1. When have you experienced a powerful moment of prayer as an individual?
2. When have you experienced a powerful moment of prayer within a small group?
3. Which of the keys mentioned above is most pressing for your group?

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**Overcoming Common Obstacles**

*Move past the roadblocks that can prevent effective small-group prayer.*

By Andrew Wheeler

How is your small group's prayer life? If your group is like many others, you may be struggling to maintain a consistent, focused prayer time each time you meet. The key to a more meaningful group prayer life may lie in identifying and overcoming obstacles to praying together. In this article, we'll examine a few of those obstacles and offer suggestions for conquering them.

**Establish the Environment**

Perhaps the most obvious category of prayer obstacles is that of environment. Is your physical environment conducive to prayer? If your group is meeting in a public place, like a restaurant, some members may not feel comfortable praying out loud or sharing personal prayer requests. You may need to consider moving to a more private environment or setting up a separate prayer time in a different environment. The fact that a few members may be comfortable praying in restaurants or other public places doesn't mean that all members are.

Even private places like a group member's house can provide distractions. Children running around or telephones ringing can spoil a moment of intimate prayer or sharing. As a leader, be aware of these situations and do all that you can to protect against them.

The structure of the group meeting can be another obstacle to an effective group prayer life. Many groups leave their prayer time to the end, creating a hurried environment if the Bible study runs over. Group members can be distracted from concentrating in prayer as the closing time draws near. Consider moving the prayer time to the beginning of the group, when the level of energy is at its highest. Often, the opening time tends to be a time of sharing anyway, so focusing that time on prayer can take advantage of a dynamic already in place. Additionally, opening your group with prayer communicates a strong message about the importance of prayer in the group's life together.

Finally, pressure can become an obstacle. If everyone is expected to pray out loud, this may distract those in the group who are not comfortable praying this way. Rather than joining in with the prayers of others in the group, these group members will be anxious about their "performance" and will likely come to dread the prayer time. As a leader, set the expectation clearly that group members are free to pray aloud or silently as the Holy Spirit leads them.

**Fix the Focus**

Group members can be distracted in the prayer time by lack of focus. This can happen in a couple of ways. First, if the group has no clear prayer topic, the prayers often become disjointed. The resulting prayer time can be like a group conversation in which each person talks about a topic of importance to himself without reference to other topics being discussed. To prevent this, set and clearly communicate a prayer topic before beginning prayer. Whether you are praying for group members or for some external topic like missions or your church, having a clear topic will help keep group members on track when they pray.

Perhaps the most common obstacle preventing focus is the sharing time. Many groups incorporate a time of sharing prayer requests and then praying for each other. Often, the sharing takes up the entire allotted time, and the groups never really get to prayer. Sometimes an individual member so dominates the sharing time that insufficient time is left for the rest of the group members, who may feel cheated. A solid structure for the sharing and prayer time can make a significant difference in the group's ability to focus on prayer.

Consider dividing the time allotment evenly among the group members and then subdividing each member's time in half – half for sharing, half for group members to pray. If you have 6 members, for example, and 30 minutes allotted to sharing and prayer, give each member 2 ½ minutes to share and then allow 2 ½ minutes of prayer before moving to the next member. You'll find that a system like this keeps the time moving and lively and keeps group members engaged. What once seemed like a slow, uninteresting part of the group meeting will seem to fly by.

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This approach has several advantages over the typical method—where everyone talks and then the whole group prays. First, the chances of one person dominating are greatly diminished. Second, if the time is managed well, the group is assured of spending half the time in prayer (a relative rarity). Third, group members more easily remember the prayer requests when they pray immediately after hearing the requests rather than letting everyone talk first. Finally, this method allows group members to surround each other in prayer, focusing on each member in turn rather than the somewhat haphazard skipping around that so often characterizes these times. This leads to a more cohesive and meaningful prayer time.

Another way to help the group focus is to set up the prayer time with an opening question for group members to use to formulate their thoughts to share. Rather than an “anything goes” prayer time (which often leads to a majority of third-party and surface requests), set the tone with a question like “How has God been working in your life this week?” or “What do you sense God wanting to do through you in the coming weeks?” Questions like this can help the group pray more deeply and more meaningfully for each other.

### Settle the Style

People have different prayer styles, and these styles can become obstacles to group prayer if left unchecked. Prayer topics and styles that may be perfectly appropriate in the prayer closet may not be conducive to group prayer. As a leader, it’s important to help your group understand that group prayer is fundamentally different from private prayer because it involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions, rather than just the vertical dimension in private prayer.

Probably the most common style problem in group prayer is praying too long. Nothing distracts group members from prayer more than a person droning on and on. Other group members may become impatient or tune out, their thoughts wandering. As is true in any conversation, balance is needed so that the whole group can participate. The more outgoing pray-ers may need to limit themselves for the good of the group and may need encouragement from the leader in that direction. Group prayer is not about the eloquence of the individual but about agreement and unity in the group.

Another common obstacle to group prayer is horizontal praying. Group prayer should be thought of as “praying *to* God, *with* people”. Balancing the horizontal and vertical dimensions can be difficult, and praying for others to hear rather than for God to hear shortchanges the vertical dimension.

One form of horizontal praying is emphasizing the details surrounding the prayer request rather than focusing on God’s intervention. God doesn’t need all the details—he already has them. Sometimes group members may not have all the details they need, but the time of prayer is not the time to share those details. They should be shared before going to prayer so that the prayer time can be focused on addressing God.

A second form of horizontal praying is addressing group members rather than addressing God. Consider a group praying for their own outreach and evangelism. “Lord, you call us to be lights to the seekers around us. May we be open to see those who are far from you, and may we have the courage to share your love with them. Lord, we need to see them with your eyes. May we have wisdom to know the right words to say, and may we be sensitive to the needs of those far from you.” A prayer like this is horizontally addressed – it’s all about what the group needs to do and be. Such a prayer ignores God’s activity and can put group members on the defensive rather than bringing agreement and unity.

Here’s an alternative. “Father, please soften our hearts toward the seekers around us. Open our eyes to see them as you do, and give us sensitivity toward their needs. Give us courage and wisdom to share your love with them effectively.” Prayer like this is vertically addressed—the verbs are all things that God is being asked to do, rather than being directed at the group.

Establish the environment. Fix the focus. Settle the style. And always be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit (even if he occasionally leads you to “break the rules”). You may find that your group’s prayer life grows deeper than you ever expected.

—ANDREW WHEELER is author of [Together in Prayer](#) (IVP, 2009); article copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## Invitational Exercises

*Here are several innovative ways to help your group find focus before prayer time.*

By Kim Engelmann

### Unison Prayer

Sometimes it is helpful to start the meeting by reading a unison prayer, which is also repeated to close the invitation segment. To avoid the mindless recitation of empty words, have each person first read through the prayer silently. Then have the group read the prayer in unison. A psalm or Scripture verse can be used, or you can write your own prayer. The following are two suggested prayers:

1. Come, Lord Jesus, you are welcome here.  
Come and stay with us, for our days are far spent,  
and we need the refreshment of your presence.  
We do not know what we do, so we are stopping our doing.  
And in these moments, we open ourselves up as best we can.  
Forgive us, Lord, for all the ways we miss the mark.  
And open us to your transforming grace and love that covers all of our sin.  
We want to let you in on our conversation, our thoughts, our dreams.  
Come, Lord Jesus.
2. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.  
We are closed off to your presence so much of the time.  
We gather in hope that you will let your love burn within us.  
We invite you to come to us.  
Open our eyes, we want to see you.  
Open our ears, we want to hear you.  
Open our hearts, we want to receive you.  
Open our minds, we want to know you.  
Open our hands, we want to serve you.  
Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.  
And meet with us today.

Sometimes the facilitator can lead the group in reading an appropriate Scripture together, or a chorus can be sung together at the end of this period. Depending on the group, soft background music may help create a mood of calmness, receptivity and an awareness of God's nearness. Some groups have closed this time by prayerfully passing the peace. This practice involves having individuals look into each other's eyes, shake hands and say "Peace be with you." It is a way to give a blessing and connect spiritually as a community.

Group members can be reminded that when they look into the eyes of their sister or brother, they are looking into the eyes of Jesus.

### God as Sustainer of Life

Grow quiet together as a group and have each person become aware of their heartbeat. (Sometimes it helps if people feel their pulse, either on their wrist or their neck.) The heart is the center of our being, an organ that keeps pumping even when we are not thinking about it. This all-important, life-giving source can remind us of our Creator. Spiritual life gets pumped through us as we allow God to be at the center of our day. God loves us constantly, even when we are not thinking about him. Praise God for the fact that he has given us life and continues to sustain us even when we are not thinking about him.

Have the group close their eyes and imagine that their heart is a prayer room where Jesus can enter. Direct them to think about Jesus entering their heart in many ways. It may be that they think about this as a light flooding their chest; maybe it would be easier for them to think about Jesus' words "Abide in me" being

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literally pumped out from the center of their being. Whatever image helps them to “center” on Jesus, to rest in him as the Source of life, have them focus on that. Suggest they ask Jesus to take away any sin that is separating them from him. They could ask him to forgive them and clean up their heart, which is ultimately his home. They also may wish to imagine seeing the others in the group awash in God’s love and light, and whisper, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come into our fellowship. We invite you. Stay with us. For the hour is late, and we need your companionship.”

### **Experiencing God’s Light**

As people arrive, give everyone a votive candle (or any freestanding candle). Have each person light their own candle and spend some quiet moments watching the candles burn. Let the flame represent God’s holiness and the light that exposes all things. Praise God (either silently or aloud) for being the light, for purifying, for bringing illumination and that his light never gets extinguished. Praise him that because of Jesus, humanity does not have to walk in darkness any longer.

Observe that as the candle burns, the top gets deeper at the core. With the candles still lit, pray together (in silence or aloud) for God to burn away anything inauthentic or superficial that may be distancing them from him or from others. Have the group silently confess any sins they may be aware of in this area. Then, invite Jesus to come into the small group gathering and illuminate ways that the group can grow in authenticity and depth as a community. Ask God to burn away anything that is getting in the way of each member experiencing the fullness of his love. Allow the candles to burn throughout the group time, and have people take their candles home as a reminder of God’s longing to burn away superficiality and sin and instead make us deep and authentic in our relationships with one another.

### **Using Scripture to Focus the Time of Invitation**

Find a Scripture verse that describes who Jesus is. Read it together as a group. Scriptures that emphasize praise or listening (1 Samuel 3:9; John 10:27) are excellent. Another example is, “The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:25-26). Phrases that state something about the nature of God also work well: “You are the lily of the valley, the bright and morning star,” “You are our Comforter,” “You are our shepherd,” “You are our advocate,” “Be still and know that I am God.” These kinds of statements help focus our thoughts and direct us to praise and inclining our ear toward God. These statements can be repeated aloud throughout the entire period of invitation.

### **Using Symbols for Invitation**

Set in front of the group a meaningful symbol as a focal point. If someone’s mind starts to wander (everyone’s does!), this symbol will help him or her focus. It might be a candle, a cross or even an open Bible. As we posture ourselves to be attentive to God, we can look at the symbol as a reminder of God’s presence in the center of the group. One especially meaningful symbol for me was a stone representing Christ as the cornerstone. All the names of the group members were written on the stone. We put it in the middle of the table as our focal point. I could look at that and recognize that all of us were joined together by the rock-solid truth of Christ’s eternal presence with us now.

### **Breathing In the Life of God**

Have people sit quietly with their palms open in their lap as a gesture of open receptivity to the presence of Jesus. Praise God for a few moments together, thanking him that he is Lord and at the same time is present and available, close and approachable. Lead people to become aware of their breathing and how close God is to them—closer than their breath. Then have the group imagine that as they are breathing in they are inhaling the Holy Spirit. Each person can imagine this in whatever way he or she wishes. Many find that seeing themselves breathing in light and warmth is helpful. As people breathe out, have them exhale any tension or stress they might be holding. Tell the group that very often stress or tension is held in the jaw, shoulders or neck. Have them focus on any other areas of the body where they may be experiencing tension or stress, and consciously relax these areas. Encourage everyone to keep breathing together, inhaling Jesus’ presence, exhaling tension or stress. Ask Jesus to forgive any sins that are hindering the group or individuals from experiencing the fullness of his presence. Then invite Jesus to come and bring a sense of his presence to the group as a whole during your meeting time together. Praise God again for his attributes of healing, grace, forgiveness and love.

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### **Rivers of Life**

As people arrive, have them go into prayer, praising God for his presence with them. Then, have the group see, in their mind's eye, a dam caked with dirt and sticks. On one side of the dam lies crystal-clear water, on the other side a parched desert. Ask the group if there are any parts of them that are parched today. What is walling them off from God's presence? Ask God for forgiveness for anything that might be keeping the members of the group from him. It might be hurt or resentment, doubt or exhaustion. As the group confesses, see the dam breaking down and crystal blue water flowing into the desert in the form of a mighty river flooding the cracked, parched ground and bringing life to withered plants. Praise God that he is the living water, and ask him to flood the group with an awareness of his life-giving power.

### **A Stone Before a Sculptor**

As people arrive, have them come into God's presence by imagining themselves as a stone. Hand people some sharp or misshapen rocks to hold when they come in. As people hold the stones, have them ask God to smooth down any sharp edges and carve something beautiful and meaningful out of the rock. Lead the group in confessing anything they would like God to carve away from their life. Ask God for some quality they would like him to shape in their life. Stay for a moment in the Lord's presence, waiting, given over to God's design for them as Master Sculptor. Have each member ask the Lord to give him or her the ability to attend to his presence in this way, surrendered, open to his plan and design, moment by moment throughout the day. Then they may turn their prayer to the group as a whole. Ask that each person in the group will recognize their giftedness and that as a community they will be able to grow and flourish. Praise God that he is the Master Sculptor, able to shape even stones into masterpieces for his use. You might want to read 1 Peter 2:5, which is a great Scripture on community, joint purpose and call: "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood."

A variation on this exercise can involve handing group members clay or Play-Doh as they arrive, asking them to knead it in their hands as they pray and invite Jesus into their gathering. Ask God to fashion the group in such a way that all participants would be conduits for the presence of God and represent the body of Christ. Afterward it might be fun to put everyone's piece of clay together to form a joint sculpture of the group, which symbolizes unity and being open and receptive to God's presence. This sculpture, fashioned together, can be a focal point for the group. (It doesn't have to be perfect, just symbolic and representative of everyone's participation together and willingness to be open to what God wants to do in and through them.) Sometimes the sculpture comes out looking ridiculous, but it helps everyone not take themselves too seriously. It reminds the group that God uses us in our weakness, and all of us are a work in progress.

—Taken from [Soul-Shaping Small Groups: A Refreshing Approach for Exasperated Leaders](#) by Kim V. Engelmann. Copyright 2010 by Kim Engelmann; used by permission of InterVarsity Press, PO Box 1400 Downers Grove, IL 60515. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

### **Discuss:**

1. What do you see as the value of invitational exercises before a prayer experience?
2. Which of the exercises mentioned above have you already tried? What happened?
3. Which of the exercises mentioned above are you most excited to try in your group?



## The Power of “Concert Prayer”

*Learning to pray like the rest of the world is a great option for American small groups.*

By Randall Neighbour

Here is something you may already know about "conversational prayer" (where one person prays aloud and everyone else listens): it can be a frightening experience. Many small-group members are scared to death to pray out loud for fear they'll say something wrong in their prayer and be heard by others.

Of course, we know in our minds that we are praying to God and nothing else should matter. But this is not an issue of fact; it's about emotion. Many of us have a fear of rejection from other people.

### Another Option

I travel all over the world for my ministry work, training small-group leaders and members in far flung places such as Brazil, South Korea, and Malawi. In all of these places, as well as many others around the world, believers don't pray the way we do. When it's time to pray—and it's always time to pray, by the way—everyone prays out loud and at the same time.

Some call this "concert prayer." Dr. Cho, pastor of the largest church in the world, calls it "tabernacle prayer." But no matter the name, it's a significant break from the conversational prayer experienced by most small-group members in the West. And that is because church leaders around the world feel that concert prayer is a more powerful experience.

When I asked a pastor from Malawi if they ever have one person prays aloud while others listen, he said: "There is far more power when everyone is praying instead of listening to one person. When we pray with many voices, it builds faith and removes fear that others will be critical of the words the person is using to speak to God. You should try it and you will see that it is much more efficient and powerful."

### A Legitimate Option

If the idea of concert prayer sounds Pentecostal or hyper-charismatic to you, you're dead wrong. Down the line, denominational churches around the world such as Southern Baptists and Methodists teach their people to pray aloud with everyone else when it's time to pray. And I agree with them. When I hear teaching on prayer in small groups, I can't think of anything more boring than praying for an hour with others and being forced to listen to them talk (or ignore them while I pray silently). Why listen to just one person when everyone could be praying?

Having said that, I know there's a place for conversational prayer—I don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water. But excluding concert prayer because it's not the way we did it in the 70's doesn't make sense. It's a different experience, yes, and a very powerful one!

The first time I prayed for an entire hour was in an auditorium in Singapore, praying with 2,000 other people. We were invited to pray aloud in 10 minute segments for our church, our pastor and staff, our family members, our small group, the lost, and ourselves. The six segments flew by and I wondered why we were not given another hour to pray. The fervor in the room was electrifying. I couldn't hear anyone else praying, but I was lifted up by the roar of intercession. No demon within a mile of that auditorium could have remained. Because of our concurrent prayer, we brought heaven down in a way I have never experienced before.

If you've never prayed for an hour with your small group in concert prayer, use the six topics above and give it a try. Invite the members of your group to take a walk on the wild side and pray like the rest of the world. Discover what many have already found—listening to other people pray for any length of time isn't nearly as powerful and inviting everyone to pray aloud simultaneously.

—RANDALL NEIGHBOUR is author of [The Naked Truth About Small Group Ministry](#). Article excerpted with permission from [www.RandallNeighbour.com](http://www.RandallNeighbour.com).



## Developing and Using a Prayer Labyrinth

*It can be done, and it can benefit your group.*

By Rachel Gilmore

Debbie Warnock is an artist, a gardener, a mother, a grandmother, a church and community volunteer, a pastor’s wife—and a labyrinth lover. Back in 2007 she was sitting at home folding laundry when her spiritual life spontaneously changed. “A thought just popped into my head that I ought to build a labyrinth,” Warnock shared. “Then a second thought popped into my head: *Exactly what is a labyrinth?*”

### Isn’t That a New Age-y Thing?

Within minutes she was on the Internet googling labyrinths and trying to determine how Christians used them to draw closer to God. Warnock previously associated labyrinths with Greek mythology, yet what she found surprised her. Labyrinth symbols have been discovered on archeological remnants dating back almost 4,000 years in pre-historic cultures. However, use of the labyrinth in Christian art and architecture dates back to Roman Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and his hosting of the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Founded in 324 A.D., the Basilica of St. Reparatus outside of Algiers in North Africa is the first documented example of a Christian church with a labyrinth. Following the Roman-style mosaic tile floor layout, the center contains the words “Santa Ecclesia” or “Holy Church” repeated over and over again as a type of prayer.

While the terms *labyrinth* and *maze* often get used interchangeably, they are very different things. Both are pathways, often big enough to be walked. A labyrinth, though, is not designed to deceive. It has no dead ends or confusing twists and turns like a maze, so that a walker can never get lost. The oldest form, called a Classical labyrinth, is rounded and contains a single path that loops back and forth on itself toward a center point which requires the walker to turn around and go back out the way she came. During medieval times, when labyrinths grew in popularity as a Christian symbol of following one path to God, another design emerged based on a symmetrical, quadrant geometry, with the most famous one still on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France.

The purpose of these labyrinths was to allow the walker to move intentionally toward the center (toward God), pause for a time of extended prayer or worship, and then follow the path back out of the labyrinth (toward the world)—hopefully leaving with a deeper sense of God’s presence in her life. (For detailed descriptions and illustrations of labyrinth types, visit <http://www.labyrinthos.net/typology.html>.)

“For me, personally, I think we need more symbolism in Christianity,” Warnock explained. “Sometimes it seems like we forget about the whole thought process with symbolism. It’s a tool that God gave us. It’s like art. Symbols give us a visual that can help ground us in our feelings.” And, according to labyrinth users and researchers, a revival has been underway since the 1980’s, reintroducing this spiritual-physical prayer practice to modern Christianity.

Debbie Warnock has been part of that revival. After an hour of on-line research, with the basic information in her head, she walked out to her backyard with her cell phone and her measuring tape in hand and called her husband Chuck at his church. “I’ve decided I’m going to build a Classical, 7-circuit labyrinth with 30” wide paths in the backyard,” Warnock told him.

Being a very wise husband, Chuck said, “Okay.” And so began Debbie Warnock’s labor of love, which resulted in a 42-foot Classical labyrinth laid out with 500 rocks, half of which came from her neighbor’s yard and half from a church friend’s farm. “I knew God put that thought in my head that day,” Warnock explained. “The labyrinth has become a special place where I can intentionally go to meet God with my body and my heart.”

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### Labyrinth Life Lessons

More specifically, Warnock sees the labyrinth like her faith forefathers did: as a metaphor for a life spent walking with God. Warnock has prepared a bookmark for visitors to her labyrinth which explains that upon crossing the threshold, walkers are encouraged to let go of their worries, clear their minds of worldly things, and invite God to be present with them. Upon reaching the center, walkers can pause to reflect on areas of their lives that need spiritual work, that need God's healing, that need God's guidance, that need celebration and thanksgiving of God's blessings. This rest can be a time of prayer, of enjoying God's creation, of reading Scripture, or of heart to heart conversations with God. When the walkers are ready to move out of the labyrinth, they are encouraged to actively listen for the still, small voice of God speaking into their lives.

"I think of when God was walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (before the Fall) and how the whole experience was so intimate, just the two of them and God, walking and talking," Warnock said.

She has also used her labyrinth time to notice the things in and along the path and how they teach her about life—like the weeds she's been doing battle with. "Here I was trying to root out the wild onions on the path and having to go at it again and again, and I realized two things. First, I'm a work in progress, just like my weeding. And, second, I need to do all things lovingly, even tasks like weeding. You know, be kind to yourself and others," Warnock explained.

### Giving It a Try

Warnock says that some people might feel that walking a prayer labyrinth is too far outside their faith tradition for it to be meaningful at first. So if your small group is considering visiting a labyrinth, the leader should keep these pre-walk guidelines in mind:

1. Do background reading on labyrinths and be prepared to answer questions from the group as to the purpose and practice of walking a labyrinth. Testimonies from Christians who use a labyrinth as part of their prayer life might be useful to share. Visit [this website](#) for a reading list. (Jill Geoffrion's entire web site contains a wealth of labyrinth information, as well.)
2. Be sensitive to your church's theological comfort zone and determine if this prayer technique is acceptable. Remember that a gentle nudge to encourage risk taking for spiritual growth can be helpful—but a shove over the edge, not so much.
3. Give some structure to your group's labyrinth time, especially if participants are new to the experience (see ideas below).
4. Explain labyrinth etiquette in advance. Warnock says new walkers need to know that it's okay to step aside or move off the path to let someone go around you. If your group is the only group using the labyrinth, decide if you will be silent or if talking quietly with one another is okay. It's also normal for some to walk slowly and others more quickly. Each labyrinth walk is individually paced.
5. Depending on the size of your small group and the size of the labyrinth, you may want to walk it in shifts or stagger the entry times. Having additional devotional materials or prayer options available can help keep the group focused even if they don't all start and finish together.

### Learning from the Labyrinth

A prayer labyrinth returns believers to an ancient Christian practice designed for intentionally exploring and growing one's faith. Help your group members maximize their prayer power by:

- **Incorporating Scripture into your walk.** Have a verse or verses printed on a slip of paper for people to stop and read along the way. Or have a reader stand outside the labyrinth and share a verse every few minutes. Warnock says her favorite is Psalm 16:11 from The Message translation: "Now you've got my feet on the life path, all radiant from the shining of your

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face. Ever since you took my hand, I'm on the right way." You can also look up words like path, way, feet, guide, direct, or seek in a concordance and choose a handful of passages to read, or select denominational devotional/prayer materials for reflection. Make copies to give to the walkers.

- **Assigning prayer partners who will pray for one another during the walk.**
- **Creating your own simple labyrinth from masking tape using directions found on-line.** Visit [this website](#) for instructions and helpful hints.
- **Adding stations.** If you make your own labyrinth, adding a few meditation stations gives walkers something to do or think about along the way—like stepping off the path into a tub of sand, making footprints, and then reflecting the footprints you will leave in this world as a child of God. Visit [here](#) for labyrinth and station directions.
- **Setting aside time after walking to talk with your group about their experience.** Was it helpful? Was it comfortable? Did walkers gain any insights? Could they hear God's voice? Would they do it again?
- **Inviting group members to bring a journal into the labyrinth and/or spend time journaling after walking.**

If you've decided that revolutionary prayer is what your group needs and you're ready for a road trip, find a labyrinth near you by visiting [www.labyrinthlocator.com](http://www.labyrinthlocator.com). Just type in your city, state, or zip code and see what your options are. These days, public labyrinths grace the grounds of retreat centers, churches, parks and private homes, and this web site gives you all the details you'll need to plan a revolutionary road trip.

"The main thing for me," said Warnock, "is that the labyrinth is a place to be and to enjoy God's presence, and any means that we can use to bring us closer to God that's a healthy and wholesome thing to do is good."

—RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats](#) and [Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations](#).

### Discuss:

1. Does the idea of a prayer labyrinth make you nervous or excited? Why?
2. Has anyone in the group experienced a prayer labyrinth? What was it like?
3. What is the next step your group needs to take toward experiencing a labyrinth?



## Accepting the Embrace of God

*Experience a deep and transforming connection with God through Lectio Divina*

By Father Luke Dysinger

*Lectio divina* is a very ancient art that was practiced at one time by all Christians. It is the slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures that enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God. This ancient practice has been kept alive in the Christian monastic tradition. It is one of the precious treasures of Benedictine monastics and oblates.

Together with the Liturgy and daily manual labor, time set aside in a special way for *lectio divina* enables us to discover an underlying spiritual rhythm in our daily life. Within this rhythm, we discover an increasing ability to offer more of ourselves and our relationships to the Father, and to accept the embrace that God is continuously extending to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

### Lectio

The art of *lectio divina* begins with cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear “with the ear of our hearts,” as St. Benedict encourages us in the Prologue to his Rule. When we read the Scriptures, we should try to imitate the prophet Elijah. We should allow ourselves to become women and men who are able to listen for the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19:12)—the “faint murmuring sound” that is God’s word for us, God’s voice touching our hearts. This gentle listening is an attunement to the presence of God in that special part of God’s creation that is the Scriptures.

The cry of the prophets to ancient Israel was the joy-filled command to “Listen!” “*Sh’ma* Israel: Hear, O Israel!” In *lectio divina*, we also heed that command and turn to the Scriptures, knowing that we must hear—listen—to the voice of God, which often speaks very softly. In order to hear someone speaking softly, we must learn to be silent. We must learn to love silence. If we are constantly speaking or if we are surrounded with noise, we cannot hear gentle sounds. The practice of *lectio divina*, therefore, requires that we first quiet down in order to hear God’s word to us. This is the first step of *lectio divina*.

The reading or listening in the first step of *lectio divina* is very different from the speed-reading that modern Christians apply to newspapers, books, and even to the Bible. *Lectio* is reverential listening—listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally—not loudly, but intimately. In *lectio*, we read slowly and attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God’s word for us this day.

### Meditatio

Once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures that speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and ruminate on it. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing its cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God. Christians have always seen a scriptural invitation to *lectio divina* in the example of Mary “pondering in her heart” what she saw and heard of Christ (Luke 2:19).

For us today, these images are a reminder that we must take in the Word—that is, memorize it—and while gently repeating it to ourselves, allow it to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, and our desires. This is the second step or stage in *lectio divina*: *meditatio*. Through *meditatio*, we allow God’s Word to become his word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

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### Oratio

The third step in *lectio divina* is *oratio*. It is prayer understood both as dialogue with God—that is, as loving conversation with the One who has invited us into his embrace—and as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants. It is consecration.

In this consecration-prayer, we allow the Word that we have taken in and on which we are pondering to touch and change our deepest selves. Just as a priest consecrates the elements of bread and wine at the Eucharist, God invites us in *lectio divina* to hold up our most difficult and pain-filled experiences to him, and to gently recite over them the healing word or phrase he has given us in our *lectio* and *meditatio*. In this *oratio*, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the Word of God.

### Contemplatio

Finally, we rest in the presence of the One who has used his Word as a means of inviting us to accept his transforming embrace. No one who has been in love needs to be reminded that there are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. It is the same in our relationship with God.

Wordless, quiet rest in the presence of the One who loves us has a name in the Christian tradition: *contemplatio*, or contemplation. Once again, we practice silence, letting go of our own words. This time we focus simply on enjoying the experience of being in the presence of God.

### Lectio Divina as a Group Exercise

In recent years, many different forms of so-called “group lectio” have become popular and are now widely-practiced. This form of *lectio divina* works best in a group of between four and eight people. A group leader coordinates the process and facilitates sharing. The same text from the Scriptures is read out three times, followed each time by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of her or his *lectio*.

The first reading (the text is actually read twice on this occasion) is for the purpose of hearing a word or passage that touches the heart. When the word or phrase is found, it is silently taken in, and gently recited and pondered during the silence that follows. After the silence, each person shares which word or phrase has touched his or her heart.

The second reading (by a member of the opposite sex from the first reader) is for the purpose of “hearing” or “seeing” Christ in the text. Each person ponders the word that has touched the heart and asks where the word or phrase touches his or her life that day. In other words, how is Christ the Word touching their experience, their life? How are the various members of the group seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text? Then, after the silence, each member of the group shares what he or she has heard or seen.

The third and final reading is for the purpose of experiencing Christ “calling us forth” into doing or being. Members ask themselves what Christ in the text is calling them to do or to become today or this week. After the silence, each shares for the last time. The exercise concludes with each person praying for the person on the right.

Those who regularly practice this method of praying and sharing the Scriptures regularly find it to be an excellent way of developing trust within a group; it is also an excellent way of consecrating projects and hopes to Christ before more formal group meetings.

—FR. LUKE DYSINGER, O.S.B., ST. ANDREW’S ABBEY. *The author has placed this document into the public domain.*

### Discuss:

1. Can Christians benefit from a spiritual discipline that is over 1,500 years old?
2. What prevents you from hearing the still, small voice of God?
3. Has your group Bible study produced real, transformational change in your spiritual life?



## How to Have a Prayer Vigil

*Practical steps to make this important experience a success*

By Angela Dion

To electrify your prayer time, schedule a prayer vigil for your small group, mission team, or entire church. A prayer vigil is a watchful, awake time set apart for the purpose of prayer. Over the years, I have organized a 2-hour vigil for our small group, a 12-hour prayer vigil for my short-term mission team, and a weekly (for 8 weeks) 4-hour prayer vigil for our church.

Here are some ideas that worked for our 12-hour vigil. They will help you organize and make your next vigil a success.

**First—pray.** Seek the Lord's guidance on how, when, and why you want to do the prayer vigil. I plan my own personal vigil, praying and fasting and seeking the Lord's will in any group vigil that I plan.

**Second—the logistics.** Select a length of time and location for your vigil. You can make it one hour or as long as your group can go with the Lord's leading. We scheduled ours on a Friday night from 7 PM to 7 AM. We picked this time so most people could attend the vigil and sleep when the vigil was over without interfering with work or church schedules. We did not make it mandatory for anyone to attend. In fact, we suggested people come when they could. About five of our group of 14 stayed the entire 12 hours. All but two of the 14 made it to the vigil.

One team member volunteered his house for the vigil. Since he had a large property, we were at liberty to do some things we could not have done at a smaller or inside-only location.

**Third—collect requests.** Since our vigil was specifically for the mission team, I asked everyone on the team to write their personnel prayer requests on index cards and turn them in to me before the vigil. We did not limit how many index cards anyone could turn in, but we did only want personal requests. Since this was a targeted vigil, we did not want to get sidetracked with requests that were not relevant to our mission or individuals on the mission team.

Next, I emailed the missionaries we were supporting and asked for their requests. I also asked them to provide any information about the culture/population/mission plans for which we could be in prayer. I put their prayer requests on index cards as well.

**Fourth—the vigil itself.** I developed a schedule for our vigil since it was 12 hours long. This is what we did.

- **Worship time.** I assigned a team member to bring CDs and song lyrics. We started with music. Throughout the night we would go back to praise music. At one point we built a bonfire and a team member played his guitar while we sang praise songs.
- **Silent time.** We each spent an hour alone with God, not talking to anyone but God. The purpose of this was to be still and quiet ourselves and to listen to anything God wanted to say to us. We had 2 of these times during the 12 hours.
- **Prayer for individuals.** Next we passed the index cards around. Each person prayed for the requests on their index cards. We gave participants the option of praying alone or in small groups. We had three of these times during our vigil.
- **Group prayer for members of the team.** During a time when almost everyone was present, we each took turns praying for every individual on the team. Each person praying shared whatever he/she felt led to share about the blessing this particular team member was to him or

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her. This was one of the most powerful times of our vigil. We wept and laughed in our prayers while edifying each member of the group.

- **Ending the vigil.** A half hour before the vigil ended, we were all pretty tired and goofy. We did some humorous reminiscing about the last 12 hours—like how one member decided to climb a tree during quiet time and how one (the biggest guy on the team) freaked out when he saw a bug.
- **Benefits.** Our team bonded more during this prayer vigil than at any other time in our eight-month preparation for the mission trip. We became a family during that vigil. Spending the night in prayer allowed God to minister to the entire team collectively and individually. This experience brought us closer to God and his will for us during the mission trip, which was a great success.

—ANGELA DION; copyright 2007 by the author and Christianity Today International.



### Adding Spice to Group Prayers

Here are 15 practices that will help keep things interesting in your group.

By Rick Lowry

When it comes to the prayer portion of a small-group meeting, it's easy to fall back on the same old question every week: "Are there any prayer requests?" This can lead to emotional detachment during prayer (and possibly some snoring!).

Here are some fresh prayer practices that any small group can try.

1. **Sing Prayers Together.** Many songs are prayers addressed to God and put to music. Think of the hymns "Be Thou My Vision" or "How Great Thou Art." Or contemporary songs like "Be Glorified" and "God You Reign." Afraid everyone might not know the words? Provide hymnbooks, lyrics, song sheets, or even Powerpoints to help out.

If you have a musically talented person in your group, have them bring along a guitar and quietly sing a prayerful song while everyone listens and meditates.

2. **Subgroup.** Divide the group into pairs or threes, where individual needs can be shared and prayed about more easily and intimately. Send them off to different rooms in the house (or outside if the weather is conducive).
3. **Men and women.** When it's time for the prayer portion of your meeting, have the women remain in the living room while all the guys go off to another room. People tend to share more easily and openly when only those of the same gender can hear.
4. **Suggestion prayer.** Announce a general topic and allow time for several people to pray specific prayers related to that area. Then move to another topic. For example: Our church body, the leaders of our church, revival, missions, families, governing authorities, and so on.

Or, prepare ahead of time a list of specific prayer requests. The leader introduces them one at a time, then allows group members to pray about each one. Another idea: post a written list of prayer ideas in front of the group—on a whiteboard with an easel, a poster board, or a laptop. Open it up for a time of prayer. Group members can glance occasionally at the list for ideas as prayer prompts. You can also write prayer prompts or topics on separate pieces of paper and either hand them out ahead of time or have people draw one from a box.

5. **A.C.T.S.** Have the group work through the "Acts of Prayer" in one sitting. This works well if the group wants to focus on an extended time in prayer one session.
  - a. *Adoration:* Encourage the group to focus only on songs and prayers of praise.
  - b. *Confession:* If the group is close, encourage audible confession; if not, have a silent time of confession.
  - c. *Thanksgiving:* Prayers of thanks for God's blessings and answered prayer.
  - d. *Supplication:* Intercession and petition—asking God to intercede in your life.
6. **Silent Prayer.** Encourage the group to spend time listening to God, perhaps after a time of worship. Sometimes gentle music in the background can help if the group is unaccustomed to silence.
7. **Pray Scripture.** Many passages in the Bible are prayers addressed to God. (For example: The Psalms or the prayers sprinkled throughout Paul's letters.) Some of these passages can be assigned

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to group members before the prayer time, which they can read from their Bible. Or you might print out the passages and hand them to various group members to read during the prayer time.

Another version of this one is to “pray your way through” a chapter or book of the Bible. Read one section at a time, then leave a space for people to reflect in prayer on how God is speaking to them and prompting them to pray about the message of those verses.

8. **Communion.** Build a prayer time around the Lord’s Supper. Have the emblems there to share as the focus of the prayer time.
9. **Just Thanks.** Most of our prayer times are about prayer requests. For one night, challenge the group not to ask God for anything, but just thank him for his blessings and answered prayers.
10. **Slips of Paper.** Hand out slips of paper ahead of time with prayer requests on them, then ask group members to pray for the request on their slip.
11. **Church Leaders.** Obtain a list of your church’s leaders (staff, elders, and ministry leaders) and have an extended prayer time on their behalf. Another version: Invite one of your church’s leaders to your group meeting and pray for them, then ask them to pray for you. You can also make a night of praying for leaders by making appointments at three of their homes and, in lieu of your regular group meeting, spending the evening traveling to each leader’s home and praying for the leader and their family.
12. **Government Officials.** Obtain a list of government officials (from federal to local) and spend an evening praying for them. Or make an appointment for your small group to gather at an official’s office and pray for them.
13. **Those Who Need Christ.** Have the group make a list of lost people they know who are in need of salvation, and then pray for them by name and need. Afterward, make a plan to invite those people to your group meeting.
14. **Sentence Completion.** Start a prayer thought and then leave space so people can finish the sentence with their own prayer. This is a non-threatening prayer setting for groups with members who may not be accustomed to praying out loud. This setting can get people used to hearing their own voice in prayer and eventually help them move into deeper experiences.. Here are some sample sentences:
  - a. “God, I thank you for....”
  - b. “God, I like you because....”
  - c. “God, as a church we need your help with....”
  - d. “God, please help this person who has a spiritual need....”
  - e. “God, help me as I struggle with this sin....”
15. **Repeating Prayers.** This approach can be used in any small group, but it’s another practice that works well for groups with members who have not done much praying out loud. Say one line at a time, then everyone repeats it in unison. This could be a written prayer or something straight from Scripture (Psalm 145 works well for this).

—RICK LOWRY is the Small Groups Pastor at Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, IN.  
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### Prayer Labs

*Make an effort to learn about (and practice) different forms of group prayer.*

By Trevor Lee

It's easy to get into a rut. What starts out exciting, new, and interesting becomes routine, robotic, and thoughtless. This can become a big problem in the life of a small group when it happens with prayer. Many groups start out having deep and meaningful times of prayer, but then things become more perfunctory than transformative. Prayer is an essential part of the life of the church and an essential aspect of any thriving small group. If your prayer life is stagnant or dead, it is likely that the spiritual life of your small group will follow close behind.

So what do you do when prayer times become stagnant? When this problem arose in our church we decided to try something called prayer labs.

#### What Are Prayer Labs?

Prayer labs are a way for a group to explore a variety of types and aspects of prayer, and then actually participate in them. The group chooses an aspect of prayer they're interested in and then has someone in the group (or even someone from outside) come and facilitate some instruction and discussion around that type of prayer. Then the group spends time practicing the type of prayer they've been discussing. We encouraged our facilitators to try and split the time about 50/50 between discussion and practice.

#### Why Try Prayer Labs?

There are many reasons that prayer time gets stagnant—a lack of connection with the Holy Spirit, routine leading to thoughtless prayer, or even a lack of concern for the other group members. One other reason is a lack of variety. What if you were asked to eat your favorite food every day at every meal for the next year? By the end of that year it wouldn't be your favorite food anymore. The lack of variety would make you completely indifferent to something you used to love. Consider also if you lived your whole life believing the only foods that existed were green beans and rice. You would eat them because they kept you alive and probably be content, but imagine your joy when one day someone began introducing you to other foods. You would taste the food in new ways and experience eating differently because of the newfound variety.

Prayer labs can do the same thing for our prayer lives. It is so easy to get stuck in a certain way of praying as a group. When this happens, one of two things is going on. Either we know other ways to pray but don't want to change things up, or we don't know any other ways to pray. Prayer labs can push your group to solve both of these problems. They will push you to engage different aspects and types of prayer.

For example, one week I asked a pastor to come in and lead our group in exploring *lectio divina*. I had been introduced to this method of prayer a couple times, but I didn't engage it much personally because I didn't fully understand it and because it hadn't resonated with me much. However, as that evening's facilitator led us through this different way of engaging God through prayer, I saw the eyes of a number of people in the room light up. It was clear this was new to them and resonating deeply. And that's normal. God has made us different, so it makes sense that some things resonate with certain people more than others. Prayer labs provide a means to help people discover things that strengthen their prayer lives and the prayer life of your group.

One other reason to try prayer labs: they can help you grow in your relationship with God. Many times we're so focused on what God wants us to do or how we're supposed to live that we forget we have

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been invited to engage God in deep relationship. There is no deep relationship in the world that is not multi-dimensional. If I only ever told my wife what I needed from her and promised to give her ten minutes in the morning and a couple hours one day a week, our relationship would be doomed. Our relationship thrives as we spend time together, share new experiences, reflect on old ones, and wrestle through difficulty. Prayer labs are a chance for all the members of your group to move into new places with God that they've never been before. And as people in the group find new depth in their relationship with God, it will make your whole group more vibrant.

### Hosting Prayer Labs

Prayer labs aren't all that difficult, but here are a few tips to make sure they're as successful as possible.

1. **Make sure the leader/facilitator is competent.** When we focused on *lectio divina*, it would not have been very effective if I led it. It worked well because the person leading it was experienced and knew what he was talking about. If you have people in your group who have explored different aspects or types of prayer, that's great. But don't hesitate to ask outsiders to come and lead your time together. You want someone leading who is not a novice.
2. **Make sure the leader/facilitator knows this is not a class or a lesson.** Part of the point of prayer labs is to actually pray. Learning more about prayer is nice, but if you don't practice what you learn right away it is unlikely you ever will. This is especially true with types of prayer that seem a bit odd or uncomfortable. They may really resonate with you or other people in your group, but if you refuse to try them you'll never know.
3. I found that people coming in to teach a lab needed to be pushed to include substantial prayer time instead of giving a lecture. For some reason it is easier for most people to teach a lesson than it is to lead a group in prayer. Be clear about your expectations with the person who will be leading.
4. **Debrief together.** Whether immediately after the prayer lab or a week or two later, make sure you spend some time with your group talking about what you experienced. This will help you understand what you've done and get to know new things about other people in your group. During this time include a discussion about how your prayer lab might be incorporated into the prayer life of the group in the future.

### Possible Types and Aspects of Prayer

In case you'd like some help getting a list of types and aspects of prayer started, here are some we tried.

- Confession
- Silence
- Adoration
- Persistence
- *Lectio Divina*
- Holistic Prayer (Engaging your whole self in prayer, including mind, senses, emotions, and will.)
- Intercession

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## Further Exploration

Websites and books to help your group experience revolutionary prayer

[SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com). Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International:

- [Making Bible Study Transformational](#) (E-Training Module)
- [Small-Group Facilitator](#) (Orientation Guide)
- [Choosing and Evaluating Bible Studies](#) (Assessment Pack)

**An Invitation to Centering Prayer** by *M. Basil Pennington and Luke Dysinger*. This book is a spiritual discipline rooted in the affirmative awareness of God's dwelling within us (Liguori/ Triumph, 2001; ISBN 978-0764807824).

**Creating Community** by *Andy Stanley and Bill Willits*. Stanley and Willits unveil the principles that have connected more than 8,000 people in small groups (Multnomah Publishers, 2004; ISBN 978-1590523962).

**Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading** by *Eugene Peterson*. A provocative challenge to read the Scriptures on their own terms—as God's revelation—and to live them as we read (Eerdmans, 2006; ISBN 978-0802829481)

**Making Small Groups Work** by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. In this book, facilitators will learn how to promote growth within their groups, what makes a group work, the roles of members, and how to find solutions for problems (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

**Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us** by *Adele Calhoun*. Insight into disciplines like fasting, solitude, contemplative prayer, and lectio divina (IVP, 2005; ISBN 978-0830833306).

**Together in Prayer** by *Andrew Wheeler*. A great book for groups looking to pop out of a prayer rut (InterVarsity Press, 2009; ISBN 978-0830821143).

**Why Didn't You Warn Me?** by *Pat J. Sikora*. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).