

Praying in Public

Preparing and leading the prayers of intercession.¹

Prayer is more than what we do, it is what God does through us.

The prayers of intercession are the point in worship where we pray for God's world, the Church, our community, each other and ourselves. *Intercession* comes from two Latin words, *inter*, which means "between" and *cedere*, which means "to go". To intercede is to go between two people in the hope of reconciling differences or to plead with someone on behalf of the other. In the context of prayer it means we make sure we bring others into our conversation with God. In some traditions, the intercessory prayers are called 'the prayers of the people'. This is helpful in terms of thinking about what is happening at this stage of the service. Although one or more people will actually say the prayers, they are speaking on behalf of the whole church community; they are facilitating the people to make their prayers to God.

An Intercessor acts as a "conduit" for the Holy Spirit to "connect" God's people with God. In our intercessions we are not trying to change God's mind nor are we presuming to say what should be done for our people. God knows about those for whom we pray and their needs, but by praying for them, we express our love and interest, and we share with God, in God's concern for the world. Intercession is a relationship in which we share our concerns with each other and with God, as a Christian community. It is natural that we should hold before God those people and situations in need.

The intercessory prayers should focus on God's reconciling, transforming, and healing love. The worshipping community's prayers are an expression of our belief that people, and the circumstances in the world that affect the human family, can be touched and changed through Jesus Christ and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The prayers are given shape both by our awareness of human need and the Gospel vision of God's Kingdom.

The Prayers of the People Are:

1. An expression of what we are concerned about, what we are excited about, of our joy and of thanksgiving.
2. About the world in which we live and concerns for the whole human family.
3. Concerns both of the local and wider church beyond the parish.
4. Representative but brief.
5. Intended to challenge people to continue to pray about these issues.
6. A response to the church season and theme for the day.

The Prayers of the People Are Not:

1. A sermon.
2. The announcements.
3. The occasion for promoting your personal point of view or issues.
4. Long (they should not take over the liturgy)
5. A monologue in which the people have no part.

¹ Some of this material is adapted from *The Handbook for Readers and Intercessors* prepared by the Anglican Church in Canada. The full text is available at http://www.anglicanprayer.org/resources/PG-32_Readers_and_Intercessors_Handbook.pdf

Preparing the Prayers

1. Check the Scripture readings, the theme of the service and note the prayer focus.
2. Individual parishes have different ways of encouraging parishioners to put particular prayer requests into the intercessions. In some congregations people are encouraged to write prayers, before the worship service begins, in an Intercession Book that is placed near the entrance to the worship space. The Intercessor expresses these prayers when offering the Prayers of the People.
3. Write out the special prayers that you have prepared, or adaptations of the chosen form, including the parish, diocesan, and world-wide Anglican cycle of prayer. This will help to keep the prayers an appropriate length as well as avoid any lapses of memory or confusion.
4. Be creative, and be aware of current events, both local, national, and international.
5. Find out who and what is in particular need of prayer each week. Also be sure to check that you are not breaking any confidences or sharing private information that people would prefer to remain private!
6. Think about the integrity of the prayers –that they are not manipulative etc. Check for length and for balance, being sure to include both thanksgiving, as well as petition.
7. While preparing for (and leading) the Intercessions, think of the people and situations for whom you are praying.
8. The Prayers of the People could be prepared and led by 2 or 3 people (who will have been in touch previously in the week to create the intercessions).

Leading the Prayers

1. It is important that the congregation understand that the Prayers of the People truly come from all of the people. It is very important the prayers be heard by the whole congregation. If a microphone is necessary to accomplish this, it should be used. The place from which the Prayers are led should be selected with this in mind.
2. When introducing the Intercessions, make clear to the congregation what the expected response is; in order to reinforce this, the Intercessor can introduce and join in the response. The response could be printed in the service sheet if necessary/possible.
3. As well as encouraging members of the congregation to write prayers in the Intercession Book, if such is the practice of the parish, it is important that their actual concerns be verbally expressed and that the intercessor makes space and time for people to articulate their cares and joys, either aloud or in silence.
4. During the prayers, leave a moment of silence after each intercession, to allow people to offer personal and private concerns silently.
5. Clearly address the prayers to God and include some affirmation that God hears our prayers.

Praying for Transformation

Christian communities are shaped by the way in which they pray. Prayer can be safe and comforting and *churchy*, but it can be so much more than this.

Prayers for the frontline

At the end of each service, every person leaves the Church and goes back to their homes, families, friends, workplaces, activities etc. We spend most of our time in these environments and they are the places that we have most encounters with other people. The *London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC)* call this our 'frontline'. If we go out to work, one of our frontlines will be the workplace, if we work in the home one will be there, if we spend time at the shops, the pub, in clubs and societies – wherever we are, is our frontline.

The prayers offered in our worship together should reach our frontlines. The challenges, possibilities, and opportunities people will face throughout the week should be part of our worship together. Church should help all of us to be full time Christians – and this means recognising that the work each of us do throughout the week – whatever it might be – is part of the work of the church.

Prayers for our enemies

One of the huge challenges Jesus lays down, is the challenge to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. The prayers of intercession are not just about praying for people who belong to us and our community, or even to our worldwide church. They are also about praying for those who oppose us, whom we don't understand or like or know.

"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:46.47)

It is when we pray for our enemies, for those who perpetrate destruction, who sow darkness and hatred that we begin to manifest some of the values of the Kingdom of God. It is easy to pray for those who are victims of war and wrong doing, and of course it is important to do so. It is much harder to pray for those who seem intent on evil, for those who cause untold hurt and pain. It is easier to distance ourselves from such people. But Jesus says otherwise. That is the disturbing radicalness of the Gospel. We are not called just to be agents of comfort, but agents of transformation. Whatever drop of comfort or glimmer of hope we, the Christian community, can give to those who suffer; whatever ways in which we may be able to help them experience God's love and care, we gladly do. But it is when we pray in earnest for perpetrators of dreadful acts, when we surround in prayer the most broken and corrupted of our brothers and sisters, when we look for light to shine in the very darkest hearts and corners of the world, that we do more than the tax collectors. And it is when we pray for those who persecute us that transformations begin, and the kingdom of God grows.

So What?

If you are going to lead intercessory prayers in church, develop a system for keeping note of people and situations for whom the church should offer prayer. Inevitably, we pray for things which have been high profile in the news, and that is extremely important, but we still need to pray for situations and people that are no longer news worthy.

Consider ways in which members of the parish can be supported through the prayers, in the rest of their week. How might you begin to include regular prayer for specific work places, community groups, the challenges individuals face, in a way which is appropriate and helpful?

Reflect on what you think God's kingdom is like. What are the values of the kingdom? What is transformed by the kingdom? Shape your prayers in such a way that they reflect the Kingdom of God.

Follow up ...

Resources for Prayers of Intercession

There are lots of prayer books and resources available, some of which are more helpful than others. If you are leading intercessions, try and find prayers which give you a framework for the intercessions and allow you to include the concerns of the community.

One example of a framework that you can add to is:

For the unity of the Church in witness and
proclamation of the Gospel ...
let us pray to the Lord: *R*

For the peace and stability of all peoples
and for the leaders of the nations ...
let us pray to the Lord: *R*

For places of work, education and leisure ...
let us pray to the Lord: *R*

For a blessing on our homes;
for our relations and friends and all whom we love ...
let us pray to the Lord: *R*

For the sick and suffering and all who minister to their needs ...
let us pray to the Lord: *R*

Let us commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

As well as adding in particular people and situations, you could use a range of responses.

Internet Resources

The Revised Common Lectionary online includes prayers for the different seasons of the Christian year.

<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>

This website has contributions from all kinds of people who have prepared prayers for use in their own parish. They are listed under themes.

<http://www.intercessions.co.uk>

Church of England resource of topical prayers

<http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/topical-prayers.aspx>

The Diocesan prayer diary has themes to pray for on particular days

<http://www.lichfield.anglican.org/prayer-diary>

Books

Ian Black *Intercessions for Years A, B and C* (2009) SPCK

Doug Chaplin *Leading Common Worship Intercessions* (2009) Church House Publishing

Raymond Chapman *Leading Intercessions* (2006) Canterbury Press

John Pritchard *The Intercessions Handbook* (1997) SPCK

Susan Sayers *Prayers of Intercession for Common Worship* (1999) Kevin Mayhew