

Prayers

OF THE PEOPLE

Patterns and Models for Congregational Prayer

Second Edition

FROM
THE
Worship
SOURCEBOOK

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CALVIN INSTITUTE OF
CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
for the study and renewal of worship


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Prayers of the People: Patterns and Models for Congregational Prayer

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PREFACE

A typical worship service includes many prayers, such as an opening prayer of adoration and praise, a prayer of confession, a prayer for illumination before the Scripture reading and sermon, and a prayer after the sermon. These prayers are usually spoken by a pastor or another worship leader. In addition, many songs are prayers, sung by all worship participants.

One type of prayer stands apart, however, as the church offers thanksgiving and intercedes for local, national, and global communities. This prayer is usually the longest and most inclusive prayer of the service. Known in some traditions as the “congregational prayer,” it’s also one of the most challenging to prepare in such a way that, while led by one or just a few people, it becomes the prayer of all the worshippers, the “prayers of the people.”

As growing numbers of churches use the gifts of various members to lead in such congregational prayer, this little book, *Prayers of the People*, aims to offer guidance and models for leading this kind of prayer. The contents of this book are from *The Worship Sourcebook*, a larger collection of resources for use in all parts of the worship service. Since that larger collection is used mainly by pastors and worship planners, this smaller collection is available to make the “prayers of the people” from *The Worship Sourcebook* more easily accessible to the wider group of people who participate in leading congregational prayer.

We dedicate *Prayers of the People* to the hundreds of faithful pastors, worship planners, prayer leaders, and wordsmiths who work each week, often with remarkable generosity, creativity, and resourcefulness, to prepare and lead God-glorifying worship in congregations everywhere.

Emily R. Brink, former editor, *Reformed Worship*
John D. Witvliet, director, Calvin Institute of
Christian Worship

INTRODUCTION

Intercessory Prayer, the Prayers of the People

One of the central acts of worship is the intercessory prayer. In some churches this is known as the “pastoral prayer,” but “congregational prayer” or “prayers of the people” is preferable. This prayer is spoken on behalf of the entire congregation. Calling it the intercessory prayer is also helpful, of course, since that name calls attention to the prayer’s primary purpose.

In the intercessory prayer we address God in a special way as priestly intercessors for each other and for the world at large. We pray not just for our own congregation and for the people we know; we also intercede for those in authority, for those suffering oppression, for those who are poor, hungry, or sick, and so on. If this is the only prayer offered during a worship service, it can also appropriately include adoration, confession, and thanksgiving as well as intercession. If those elements are present in other parts of the service, however, then it will usually be fitting for the prayers of the people to focus mainly on intercession.

The intercessory prayer may include not only words but also periods of silence and sung prayers, such as a refrain or a stanza of a hymn. Prayers may be offered while standing with arms raised (see Ps. 141), kneeling, or seated with hands folded and head bowed. Prayers may be offered from the pulpit, from the communion table, from the baptismal font, or from among the congregation.

Sometimes the pastor or another member of the congregation offers a prayer on behalf of the congregation. At other times everyone prays in unison, or the congregation and leader pray by following a litany. The intercessory prayer may be offered in various ways by a variety of worshipers gathered. Some older members, officebearers, and young people may be able to lead the congregation in prayer. Some may be gifted in writing their own prayers. Others may be able to read well, making a prayer written by someone else come alive.

Christian congregations have produced many models, patterns, and habits for structuring prayer. The best of models feature both disciplined balance (to address a variety of concerns over time) and flexibility (to express the unique circumstances of a given moment). The model most suitable for a congregation’s regular

worship services will depend mainly on the size of the congregation, the degree of participation that can be achieved, and the expectations of the congregation.

Note that all the prayers presented in this book end with “Amen” in boldface. The purpose of the “Amen” (which means “this is sure to be”) is to invite worshippers to add their voice of assent to the prayer, reinforcing the understanding that the prayer is offered by everyone. Sometimes worship leaders invite the congregation to voice the “Amen” by ending their prayer with the words “And all God’s people say . . .” Others might encourage their congregation to spontaneously say “Amen” at the end of every prayer.

The Language of Prayer

“I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed.”

—Annie Dillard

Worship is much more than words, of course. And often prayers feature too many words. We may long for worship that breathes with silence and meditation or for instrumental music that transcends words. Still, worship depends on words. God’s revelation to us is given not only in creation but also in words that communicate all we need to know about God, ourselves, and our salvation. Our communal worship is made possible because we have words to speak to each other, to call each other to worship, to speak common prayers, and to encourage each other in the faith.

Yet the words of our worship often don’t get the attention that our music does. We often devote hundreds of rehearsal hours to music each year, but very few to selecting how we will speak to God in worship. Yet language, like music, is an art to be received and cultivated as a gift from God. Liturgical cliché is not a virtue. As art, language can be immeasurably enhanced by creativity, imagination, and forethought—all of which need not preclude the energy and immediacy of extemporaneous prayer.

Perhaps the largest challenge for the language of worship is that one set of words—usually spoken or prepared by a single person—needs to somehow embrace, express, and elicit the worship of a whole group of people. From the perspective of a worshiper, *public* worship always involves using words that come from someone else. One skill for worshippers to hone is the skill of “learning to mean the words that someone else gives us,” whether those are the words of a songwriter or prayer leader. This skill requires a unique mix of humility (submitting ourselves to words given to us by the community of faith), grace (willingness to offer the benefit of the doubt when those words may not have been well chosen), and intention (to actually appropriate those words as our own).

Certainly the ideal is a worship service in which each worshiper in the community is unself-consciously engaged with heart, mind, soul, and will and really means every good word that is spoken or sung. Yet not everyone who sings songs of praise has heart, mind, and will engaged every moment. Not all who speak the Lord's Prayer, for example, are "meaning it" at the moment. And although worshippers' later reports or body language can give us some clues about whether they are meaning it, we never know this with certainty. Some who appear less engaged may actually be deeply engaged. Others who are vigorously participating may be more caught up with the music or beauty of the language than the act of worship itself. The goal for language in worship, as it is for music, is to do everything possible to elicit and express the community's worship in ways that don't unnecessarily get in the way. This is a goal that is never perfectly attainable. But it is also a practice that can be deepened over time. That deepening happens in part through a use of good models. It also is encouraged by reflecting on the goals and criteria of our language. Consider the following goals and criteria for language in worship.

- 1. We need words that are faithful to the content of Scripture and the gospel of Christ.** Many prayers in this book are directly from or are based on Scripture. With this feature we hope to encourage the use of scriptural language in worship. Scriptural texts in this book are from a variety of Bible versions and are referenced as exact quotations, as slight adaptations (noted as "from" a particular text), or as paraphrases or quotations coupled with additional phrasing (noted as "based on" a particular text). Some other resources also include references to Scripture texts; an index of Scripture references (p. 85) offers additional Scripture source information as an aid to worship planning.
- 2. We need words that offer a balanced diet of biblical themes.** We need to speak of God as both a mighty sovereign and a tender encourager. We need to speak of Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. We need to reflect a balanced piety that stresses that salvation in Christ is intensely personal but that it also extends to creation and culture. We need to speak of the church, the community of believers, as a community called to embrace truth and to extend hospitality, to witness to the gospel of Christ and to work for justice and peace on earth.

Language about God has been especially contentious in our time. This volume reflects a commitment to focus in on and to draw more intentionally on the wide range of names, metaphors, and images used explicitly in Scripture to shape our language about God. This approach will not satisfy

everyone, but we pray that this book will provide a helpful point of departure, especially for congregations having conflicts over language issues.

- 3. We need words that members of the congregation can appropriate as their own.** The language of prayer should be both accessible and reverent, both understandable and evocative. The language of worship should enable the participation of all members of the body, young and old, brand-new Christians and lifelong believers alike. Many prayers in litany form, for example, encourage congregational participation (as noted by bold print), sometimes also calling for additional responsive use. Leaders may alter boldfacing as they wish to suit the needs and style of their congregation's participation. Most churches need to work to expand worshipers' participation in corporate prayer. Patterns of participation cannot be mastered in one service. They must become habits—in the best sense.
- 4. We need words that both express our experience and form us for a deeper experience.** A healthy prayer life, both private and public, involves two kinds of prayers. First, some prayers are specific, extemporaneous, personal, and immediate. These prayers arise from the honesty of our own experience—for example, "Lord God, help our congregation in this time of great uncertainty and even fear. . . ." Second, some prayers are communal or "given," even "imposed" on us. Think of children learning the Lord's Prayer. They may learn this prayer before they even understand the words, but they grow into it over time, learning to pray it more and more sincerely throughout their entire lives. Think also of an evangelist's invitation: "Pray this prayer with me." Or the practice of praying the Psalms. In all these examples, we can be grateful that our prayer life is not limited to what we can generate from our own thoughts, experiences, and emotions but that we are invited to grow into something bigger than ourselves.
- 5. Worship at its best features a balance of extemporaneous and prepared prayers.** In other words, just because this book contains prepared prayers does not imply that every worship service should feature only prewritten prayers. The goal is not to impose uniformity on worship but rather to provide reliable, trustworthy resources, drawing on the riches of the Christian tradition to help leaders be good stewards of the words they use in worship. We should also remember that most songs are prepared prayers; the challenge is to pray as we sing.
- 6. Worship at its best is intergenerational.** Worship leaders need to invite children to be full, conscious, active participants, not just onlookers. The

potential for children's participation varies greatly from congregation to congregation, depending on the nature and level of biblical literacy and education programs. Children are able to participate in worship much more fully than many churches encourage or allow. For that to happen, the language of prayer should be appropriately accessible. Leaders may well need to adapt some texts so that the tone, rhetoric, and content are appropriate for all participants.

- 7. Worship at its best is prepared in advance.** Some leaders may have every word printed out, others may lead from a prepared outline, and still others may speak entirely extemporaneously. But even if you lead extemporaneously, consider preparing to lead in prayer (or other aspects of worship) by writing your prayers out before leaving the script behind. Extemporaneous or spontaneous prayers often leave us to rely on all-too-familiar phrases and expressions. For example, we might pray, "Be with our missionaries. Be with our friends. Be with our families." Writing a prayer out or adapting another resource forces us to think about our language and to avoid language that becomes monotonous or even meaningless through overuse. Even if you leave your script behind and offer the prayer without notes, a journaling or adaptation exercise will challenge you to use fresh language and consider the balance and vitality of your language.

One final note about the words we use in worship and the words contained in this book: words in a book are no more useful than musical notes on a page. Their effectiveness depends on how the words are brought to life through speech. The same prayer, read from a manuscript, book, or bulletin, can be either lifeless or life giving. It all depends on how the words are actually spoken.

Organization of Resources

This book provides prayer resources for regular Sunday use, along with teaching notes about the meaning and use of various types of prayers included within. All of these resources are from Section 4: Prayers of the People of *The Worship Sourcebook*.

For ease of reference, each section is assigned a number, and each resource within each section is also numbered. All that's needed to identify a resource, then, is to cite the section number and resource number.

For example, resource 1.5, an invitation to prayer, is found in section 1 (Invitations to Prayer) under resource number 5 ("Let us join in prayer . . .").

For easy identification of Scripture and confessional texts in this book, we've included credit lines immediately following those particular texts. You may also wish to identify the sources of other items; we did not place credits next to those items, preferring that they be presented without the distraction of numerous and sometimes lengthy credit lines. However, there are appropriate occasions for including that information as well. To identify sources, you can look up their respective resource numbers (for example, 1.5 or 4.25) in the Acknowledgments section, which supplies all necessary source information for resources used in this book. In addition, if you are looking for a prayer from a particular author or collection, you can find the author's name or collection title in the Acknowledgments section.

For each resource used in a printed bulletin or on a projection system, we ask that you include the following acknowledgment: "Reprinted by permission from *Prayers of the People: Patterns and Models for Congregational Prayer*, © 2015, Faith Alive Christian Resources." This notice can appear in small print preferably on the same page on which the resource is reprinted. To keep records, you'll want to record the resource number (such as 1.4 or 4.25) on your worship planning documents and write the date used next to the text in this book.

As much as you are able, use this resource book to God's honor and glory!

John D. Witvliet, director, Calvin Institute of
Christian Worship

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

1 INVITATIONS TO PRAYER

The following simple introductions to prayer emphasize the corporate nature of prayer. They stand in contrast to the familiar phrase “Please join me in prayer,” which can imply that the prayer is an individual prayer of the leader to which others are invited to listen.

- 1 We offer now our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession.
- 2 We join our hearts and voices to offer our prayers to God.
- 3 We pray together now in Jesus’ name.
- 4 We offer our prayers together now, uniting our voices with Christ, who perfects our prayers.
- 5 Let us join in prayer, offering our praise, thanksgiving, and intercession to God.
- 6 Let us bring our thanksgiving and concerns before God in prayer.
- 7 Let us pray for the growth of God’s kingdom in our world today.
- 8 God calls us to be a praying people.
Let us join in prayer, offering our praise, thanksgiving, and intercession to God.

Intercessory prayer is a matter of Christian obedience. We pray in response to God’s invitation and command. The following texts convey both the privilege and significance of prayer. After each of the following texts, add a phrase of introduction from numbers 1-8 above.

- 9 Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

—Psalm 124:8, NRSV

- 10 Let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress,
the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
—Psalm 32:6, NRSV
- 11 The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
—Romans 8:26-27, NRSV
- 12 Pray in the Spirit at all times
in every prayer and supplication.
To that end keep alert and always persevere
in supplication for all the saints.
—Ephesians 6:18, NRSV
- 13 Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication
with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 4:6-7, NRSV
- 14 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers,
intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone,
for kings and all who are in high positions,
so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life
in all godliness and dignity.
This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,
who desires everyone to be saved
and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
—1 Timothy 2:1-4, NRSV
- 15 As Christians, we believe that
prayer is the most important part
of the thankfulness God requires of us.
We also believe that God gives his grace and Holy Spirit
only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly,
asking God for these gifts
and thanking him for them.
—from Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116

- 16 The prayer our Savior taught us begins with the words
“Our Father in heaven.”
With this address, Christ aims to stir
in our hearts a childlike awe and trust
because through Christ God has become our Father.
God, our Father, loves us and desires what is best for us.
God, our Father, answers our prayers.
So let us come with reverence and confidence,
trusting in our Father’s mercies through Jesus Christ.
—based on Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 120
- 17 God is the one who makes us, loves us, and sustains us.
God is the one who makes, loves, and sustains the world.
- 18 Nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love;
we put all our experiences, all our lives, in God’s hands.

2 GATHERING PRAYER REQUESTS

To live up to its name, the “prayers of the people” should express a broad range of both thanksgiving and petition that reflects the diversity of experience within the congregation. This prayer should also be specific and immediate, expressing the unique circumstances of a congregation at a given time and place. Prayer requests may be gathered in writing prior to a worship service; gathered through a discussion with congregational leaders, worship planners, or a representative group of congregation members; or gathered extemporaneously during the service itself.

At times, lists of prayer concerns can become too narrow or self-centered. The following prompting questions can help expand the range of prayer topics suggested by members of the congregation. Leaders may choose to use a representative sample of these or similar questions each time requests are gathered.

Praise and Thanksgiving

- For which divine actions or attributes shall we bless God?
- For which blessings shall we thank God?
- For which aspects of biblical teaching shall we thank God?

Petitions

- For which country (or part of the world) shall we pray?
- For which ministry shall we pray?