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So **you**'ve been asked to . . .

# Lead in Prayer



TIMOTHY J. MULDER

## **Acknowledgments**

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ISBN 978-1-56212-217-1

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So you've been asked to lead your congregation in prayer. Thank you for saying yes. Such prayer should not be left just to the professional ministers as if no one else can pray. The more members of a congregation who pray, the richer that congregation's prayer life will be. What you do is a gift both to God and to your church.

## Types of Prayer

It's important to recognize that several different kinds of prayers are offered in a worship service. As listed in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, these include

- Prayers for Use Before Worship
- Prayers for Worship Leaders (for example, the choir)
- Prayer of Confession
- Prayer for Illumination
- Prayers of the People
- The Great Thanksgiving
- Prayer After Communion

In addition, there are prayers for specific services:

- Prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water (baptism)
- Prayer of Commendation (funeral)
- Blessing of the Rings (wedding)

Other kinds of prayers may not be appropriate for public worship. Prayers for personal devotions differ from those offered when God's people gather. A prayer in the first person—"I want to thank you, Lord . . ."—is appropriate at home, in the car, anywhere and anytime we lift our hearts and voices to the Lord, but it is not appropriate when we pray *on behalf of the people* during worship.

There may be times in worship when individuals are invited to offer a prayer of thanksgiving or intercession in the middle of a corporate prayer. Such a bidding prayer (so called because the congregation is bid to offer their individual concerns) is the only time personal prayers should be offered aloud during corporate worship. Sometimes times of silence within the prayers of the community give individuals the opportunity to offer their own personal prayers. But the point is that when the community gathers, it sings, prays, affirms its faith, receives the Word, and celebrates the sacraments as a body.

Understanding this is crucial to your task as a leader of prayer in worship. You will be praying to God on behalf of the whole people, not just for yourself in front of people. So the first rule for leading corporate prayer is: Think *we*, not *I*.

With that in mind, consider some of the prayers you may be asked to lead. Your church may use contemporary names for some of these prayers in place of traditional ones.

## Invocation (Opening Prayer)

To invoke means to call upon God. That doesn't mean calling God to be present; God is always present. But we may need to be called into an awareness of God's presence and into the spirit of worship.

An example of an invocation from *The New Zealand Prayer Book* reads, "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, so that we may truly love you and worthily praise your holy name; through our Savior Jesus Christ."

## Collect (Sentence Prayer)

This is a one-sentence prayer that begins with a description of God and then makes a specific request. It often pertains to a Scripture passage, an event, a need, an occasion for thanksgiving, or a concern.

This example of a collect for Easter is from the *Book of Common Prayer*: "O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever."

## Prayer of Confession

The Reformation taught that each person has direct access to God. However, in worship the confession of sin becomes a corporate prayer. As the body of Christ, we have not been right with God or with our neighbors. So we need to confess our sins—for neglecting the world's poor, for failing to follow Christ as we should, for not standing in evil's