

A Practical Guide to Leading Group Prayer

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Introduction

The world needs more prayer leaders, people just like you. Thousands of great books and articles on prayer have been written throughout church history. But very few resources exist on group prayer, and fewer still on leading it. This short, practical guide is intended to help you navigate the rewarding and vital work of leading prayer. And you don't go it alone. To state it up front: everything described herein is accomplished with the help of the Holy Spirit, along with others in your group. Be encouraged if you've never led prayer before. You can do it.

Role of the Prayer Leader

Leading a group of people in prayer is different from being a participant. Your role is not primarily to pray, but to lead. The prayer leader provides an atmosphere that values each participant's contribution, keeps the session on target, introduces transitions between prayer topics, encourages participation, and lovingly sets any needed guidelines. You know from your own experience how valuable and welcome these skills are to a group of praying people.

Prayer Venues: In Person vs. Videoconference vs. Teleconference

Traditional 'in person' group prayer has many advantages. Nothing compares to this when it comes to engaging all the senses. In person group prayer also supports creative options that are unavailable online or by phone (prayer-walking for example). However one thing traditional meetings cannot easily do is simultaneously bring people together from other locations, including the other side of the world. Group prayer via videoconference and teleconference has thus been a remarkable advance for the global prayer movement!

To lead an effective videoconference you want to become comfortable with the functionality of the platform (e.g. Zoom, MS Teams, WebEx). Learn to share your screen, including audio, and manage the chat window at a minimum. Through screen sharing you can display prayer points, Scripture verses and images. You can play music and other videos from YouTube or similar sites. The chat window is another useful way to engage the group. For example, you can ask all participants to enter a Scripture verse related to the topic at hand in the chat window and then invite prayers accordingly.

Don't worry if you're intimidated by the technology. There are lots of people using these tools who are willing to help you, and they all had to learn it too. Set up a few practice sessions with a friend until you get the hang of it. And it's not the end of the world if you run into a technical issue during a meeting. It happens to everyone!

Another option for videoconferencing, preferable for large groups, is to assign a 'producer' to help you. This person manages the screen sharing and other features while you lead the session. In this case you work together in advance on preparation and allow any needed access from the technical perspective. Using Zoom, for example, you would assign 'co-host' capability to your producer so they can screen-share and so on.

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Although teleconferences (voice only) offer fewer creative options, they can still be effective with good leadership. And they are less prone to technical issues. Furthermore, if you're conferencing by phone (as opposed to an online tool) you aren't limited by a weak wi-fi signal. 'Free Conference Call' is one popular and easy-to-use service for getting a teleconference number.

As you know, the famous 'mute' button is the one and only feature participants of your video and teleconferences must know how to use. This is especially true in large groups. It's perfectly acceptable to remind people to mute when not speaking. And sometimes it's necessary to mute a participant yourself if they don't get the message or have walked away from their device.

A disadvantage of both video and teleconferences is participants can easily become disengaged. It's common for meetings with thirty or forty people to have five or ten that are distracted by other things. And this is true for all such meetings, not just prayer meetings. Nevertheless it is possible to have highly effective, engaging, and enjoyable prayer meetings using these tools. And nearly everything in this guide can be applied to all three venues.

Choosing The Prayer Topic

We've all been in prayer meetings when topics are all over the map: one person is praying for their aunt's upcoming surgery, the next is praying for a church outreach, and the next is praying for the peace of Jerusalem. Certainly God hears all these prayers but jumping from topic to topic is distracting to the group. Think of group prayer as the release of many divine arrows. We want these arrows aimed at a single strategic bullseye rather than multiple different targets.

Setting the prayer topic and gently leading the group to stick with it is the role of the prayer leader (as stated earlier, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and help of the group). And to 'stick with it' doesn't mean you can't change topics. It only means you 'pray through' one topic before moving to the next.

Here's how this could look practically: Say you lead a weekly prayer meeting for your local church, and you begin with a time of praise and thanksgiving. You could say to the group, "Let's hold off on making any requests during this time, but only focus on expressing our love to the Father." After everyone has had a chance to express their praise you then introduce the next topic: "Now let's spend some time interceding on behalf of the needs within our church family." Once all prayers have been released on that topic, you can introduce the next one. Then, towards the end of the time together, you might say something like this: "If anyone has a prayer on their heart, on any topic that we haven't covered, please offer it now and we'll all add our 'amen' to your prayer."

Sometimes decisions on the prayer topic or topics are made ahead of the meeting. On the other hand, the leader might start the meeting by asking the group, "What do people have on their hearts tonight for prayer topics?" An agenda can be formed from there. And even when we come together with something in mind, the Spirit of God is always invited to change our

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plans. It could be that you have a topic in mind, but the group has great passion over something else. Or it could be that a sudden need arises in the community that takes precedent over other plans. Or it could be you sense a gentle whisper of divine redirection.

Group prayer efforts are sometimes formed for a short season around *specific* prayer topics. For example, a group may form to pray ahead of an upcoming outreach event or to respond to a crisis in a city or a need in the church family. Other groups pray on an ongoing basis for a specific topic. 'Intercessors for America,' for example, has been mobilizing prayer for the United States for decades. 'Moms in Touch' exists to support prayer for children, schools, and educators. '10 Days' is an annual prayer effort to inspire ten days of focused prayer for participating cities.

Staying on Target

So now that you have your prayer topic, the next challenge is getting to it and sticking with it. Prayer, though enjoyable, isn't easy. It's divine work. Even when we meet specifically to pray, we can struggle to get to work. Have you ever been in a 90-minute prayer meeting that starts with 45 minutes of socializing? Yes, we love and care about each other. And this is good. But we save the socializing until after the session or arrive early for some chit chat before the start time. As prayer leader it's entirely appropriate and often necessary to say, "OK everyone. Let's get started."

Another distraction comes in the form of long explanations of prayer requests. Sure, there might be a time when someone needs to provide a little context for a prayer topic. But the group doesn't need every detail of the back story. God knows. One way to handle this as prayer leader is to gently say something like, "This is an important request you're raising. Let's do this, why don't you just go ahead and pray, and all of us will agree with you."

One more thing, we all come to prayer meetings with our joys and sorrows, our victories and troubles. This means sometimes we drop everything to minister to a member of the group who is suffering. This is living up to God's command to love one another. We do this gladly. On the other hand a group can be derailed by a precious soul who comes to the group seeking personal ministry week after week. In this case the prayer leader, or another member of the group, can offer to meet separately with the person for prayer and any other ministry needs. This way you can continue with the purpose of the meeting while also providing for the needy soul.

Matters of Style

There are as many styles of prayer as there are people. One person may shout half their prayers while another may pray in a gentle whisper. One person may use flowery speech while another may pray in the simplest language. We have biblical examples of a wide variety of prayer styles.

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Encourage the group to welcome this diversity of prayer styles. By doing this you strengthen those who otherwise think, “I don’t pray as good as so-and-so. They pray better than me. My prayers are not valid.” Furthermore, look for opportunities to lead in various styles. For example, you may lead the group to pray silently for a few minutes. You may also lead the group to shout declarations! Not every style is completely comfortable for everyone. You can affirm this fact to the group and let them know it’s ok to be stretched a little now and then.

Group Size

Groups of seven or eight people work well. Larger groups are more difficult for the timid to pray aloud. One option for a larger group, say twelve or more, is to break up into smaller groups for part of the session. To do this first identify other sub-leaders in the meeting, then give clear direction. It could sound something like this: “Let’s have some of us go to this side of the room with Alex and some of us go to that side of the room with Anna. Pray in your groups about *(name the topic)* and I’ll call us back together in fifteen minutes.”

Thus a mixture of praying in the large group and in small groups can be an engaging approach when there are many participants. If you’re leading a videoconference the ‘breakout rooms’ feature can accomplish this same thing effectively.

Another method with a very large group is to invite people to form a line up front, usually to a microphone, and offer short, topic-specific prayers one after the other while the large group stands in agreement. For large online meetings you could do something similar by asking people to say so in the chat window if they’d like to lead the group in a short prayer, then go in the order established.

Encourage Participation

Ask for volunteers whenever possible, rather than do something yourself. If there’s an opening or closing prayer to be prayed, invite someone else to pray it. If there’s a responsive reading to lead, invite someone else to lead it. If there’s a story or an article to read, invite someone else to read it.

It’s typical for a group to have participants with varying degrees of confidence praying out loud in front of others. Find ways to engage the timid without putting anyone on the spot. For example, you could say, “Let’s leave some room for others that may want to pray and haven’t yet had a chance to do so.” Another option is to call out three or four names, like this: “Let’s pause for a minute in case Victor or Brittney or Chin or anyone else that hasn’t prayed yet would like to do so.”

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Expect Resistance

When we pray, and especially when we lead prayer, we are engaging in spiritual warfare. Our prayers make a difference in circumstances on earth, and the evil one takes notice. So don't be surprised if you suddenly feel exhausted before the meeting. Don't be surprised if you bicker with a loved one. Don't be surprised if you have a feeling of heaviness out of nowhere. Stand firm. Call on the name of the Lord and move forward in victory. Also, don't hesitate to ask a friend or two to pray for you concerning your leadership assignment.

Things to Consider Including in Your Meeting

Music

You can have effective group prayer without music. But it's better with it. Music can be anything from a full-scale worship team to a guy on a guitar to a playlist and a Bluetooth speaker to everyone singing a song or two.

A common approach is to start the meeting with two or three songs to engage hearts and settle minds. Another approach is to play music quietly throughout the meeting. Another is to intersperse music and prayer throughout the session, sometimes called 'harp and bowl' (see Revelation 5:8). Music and prayer go hand in hand. We can sing, for example, the chorus "How great is our God," and then engage in a time of declaring God's greatness. Or we can sing "I will trust you Lord," and then make personal declarations of challenging areas of our life where we choose to trust him.

Praise and Thanksgiving

Before launching headfirst into intercession take time to honor the Lord with praise and thanksgiving. There are many ways to do this. Invite someone to read a psalm of praise, invite someone to share a quick story of God's goodness, listen to a song that honors the name of the Lord. Not only does this activity bless the Lord but it also establishes a divine atmosphere and diminishes the cares of our lives that we inevitably bring into a meeting. There's no need to rush through this. In fact, consider dedicating an entire meeting to nothing but praising the Lord and honoring His great name.

Repentance

We don't want anything to hinder our prayers. Thus it's good to take time to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal any area needing repentance before beginning intercession. One way of doing this is to ask the Lord to search our hearts while having a moment of silence. Another is to read Psalm 51, or to play a song and ask the group to silently bring any failures before the Lord. To close this exercise remind the group that forgiveness has been fully granted for any sins confessed (1 John 1:9).

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Guidelines

There may be a couple guidelines you'd like to establish up front. This is most important if a group is meeting for the first time, or if someone new has joined the group. Here are two to consider.

Maintain Confidentiality

Group prayer is a public activity; thus the prayer leader sets loving boundaries around anything that could embarrass others or breach trust. We avoid sharing anything sensitive in group prayer that has not already been shared publicly. For example, "Lord please help Jose and Maria with their marriage problem." It's best to set this boundary ahead of time to avoid having to address it in the middle of the meeting.

Pray Short Prayers

If you find the longest prayer in the Bible, and pray it out loud, you'll be praying for about three minutes. Let this be our model. If someone prays on and on for eight or ten minutes, others can become disengaged. Furthermore, one person's prayer inspires a prayer in another person, so we want to leave room for this activity of the Holy Spirit.

To address this, remind people ahead of time to pray as often as they wish, but to keep their prayers to two or three minutes to allow time for others. And if someone forgets, and is twelve minutes into their prayer, gently say "Amen ... amen ... amen ... amen" (a little louder each time).

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Appendix A

Examples of Creative Ways to Pray

Pray the Scriptures

The Bible is our prayer book and, to be clear, praying in alignment with Scripture is not optional. Praying the very prayers recorded in the Bible is one easy and powerful way to pray the Scriptures. There are many resources to identify them (see Herbert Lockyer's 'All The Prayers Of The Bible' for one example). Of course the most famous prayer of the Bible is the Lord's Prayer. And as a side note, notice that this prayer is written for a group: give **us** this day our daily bread, forgive **us** our trespasses as **we** forgive those who trespass against **us**.

Another common way to pray the Scriptures is to choose a chapter and divide it into five or six sections. Ask for different volunteers to read each section and offer a short prayer related to their reading followed by any others who also have a prayer on their heart.

Use Prayer Points

Even when we're all aligned on the prayer topic, it sometimes helps to have Scripture-based prayer points available. For example, say you're in prayer concerning the salvation of the lost in your region. Your prayer points could look like this:

- Pray for open doors to communicate the Gospel (1 Corinthians 16:9)
- Pray for a demonstration of power to accompany the Gospel message (1 Corinthians 2:4-5)
- Pray for the Lord to draw unbelievers with lovingkindness (Jerimiah 31:3)
- Pray for conviction of sin and awareness of the need for a Savior (John 16:8)
- Pray for the church of Jesus Christ to represent Him well (Philippians 1:27)

A common way to use prayer points is to ask a different volunteer to read each one, and then 'pray into it.' Others can join in before moving to the next point. Another way is to have everyone read them aloud together before the Lord. Using the examples above, the group would add the word 'we' to the beginning of each statement. Another way is to simply have the prayer points available if anyone needs them, and just leave it at that.

Share Stories

We are sometimes called to pray concerning things for which we have little firsthand experience. In cases like this it's helpful to have a blog post, magazine article or news story to inspire our prayers. For example, if you're praying for the persecuted church in another part of the world, ministries such as 'Open Doors' or 'Voice of the Martyrs' have published many current firsthand accounts that can be read aloud to the group before praying.

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Read Written Prayers

Written prayers are a great way to engage the entire group, especially those who are timid about praying out loud. As mentioned earlier, the Bible itself is the best source of written prayers. Many Christian ministries are also good sources for Scripture-based written prayers. There may even be a gifted writer among you who would be happy to write a Scripture-based prayer on behalf of the group.

Written prayers can be used many ways. One person can read the entire prayer for the group. The reading can be shared among several people in the group. The whole group can read the prayer aloud together. Or one person can read part, followed by the entire group reading part.

Read Responsively

Similar to the above, responsive readings are another way to engage the whole group. Many of the Psalms are perfect for this. Take Psalm 121 for example: assign a reader to read the odd verses (1,3,5,7) and have everyone else read the even verses (2,4,6,8) aloud together.

Be Silent

Sit in silence before the Lord as a group. Listen for His voice. Report back what you sense the Lord is saying. As mentioned above in 'Matters of Style,' this is powerful and meaningful for some, and may be difficult for others.

Pray One-Sentence Prayers With Response

This is another unintimidating way to encourage participation, especially in a large group. After each one-sentence prayer the entire group responds with, "Amen, in Jesus' name!" (Or something similar.)

Let's say the topic is praying for the spiritual health of the church. As prayer leader you can begin with the first example, such as: "Lord, I pray you would give us courage in the face of hardship." Then the entire group follows with the response. Then another person is free to offer a one-sentence prayer, followed again by the response. This continues until everyone who wants to pray has had a chance to do so, at least once.

Declare Jesus

Similar to the above, this powerful and simple form of one-sentence prayer is focused on the name above all names. One day everything and everyone will submit to this name. With that in mind declare the name of Jesus over situations, people, cities, and countries. For example, say your prayer topic is the schools in your region. Direct the group to declare Jesus' name over various aspects of the education system. Here are some examples: I declare the name of Jesus over Hilldale school. I declare the name of Jesus over the school board. I declare the name of Jesus over the graduating seniors.

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Pray Korean-Style

This form of prayer is effective for short bursts of a minute or two. Everyone offers their prayer aloud together simultaneously. This is called ‘tongsung kido’ in Korean, which means cry aloud together. Tongsung kido is widely practiced in Asian and African churches. Prayers can be offered in people’s native language or in their personal prayer language.

Use Posters

This option is limited to in-person prayer and is especially good for a large group. Before the meeting create posters related to the prayer topic or topics. Include Scriptures and prayer points on each poster and place them in various locations around the meeting space.

Let’s say you have five posters. When you get to the point of intercession in your meeting break up the large group into five smaller groups, each stationed at different posters. Give clear instructions, such as, “We’re going to pray for ten minutes at each station. Joe will give us the signal when it’s time to move clockwise to the next station. Then we’ll meet back together and wrap up.”

Another way to do this is to announce the topic at each poster station and invite the group to choose a station. Then they pray together with whoever else has gathered around that prayer topic.

Change Your Posture

Sitting in a circle works very well. But shake it up a little bit! Have everyone stand for a few minutes while you cover a certain prayer topic. Or kneel before the Lord (those who are able), as you pray through a serious topic. You can suggest everyone stand or kneel even in a video or teleconference.

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Appendix B

Sample Group Prayer Outlines

Sample Outline #1

Introduction

- Have gentle worship music playing softly in the background.
- Welcome everyone and briefly cover the plans for the meeting, such as the prayer topic/s, and any guidelines.
- Ask for a volunteer to offer an opening prayer.

Praise and Thanksgiving

- Ask for a volunteer to read a Psalm of praise (chosen ahead of time, or not).
- Invite the group to offer words of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Repentance

- Invite the group to enter into a short period of silence to remember the cross and confess before the Lord (either out loud or silently) any sin revealed by the Holy Spirit.
- Ask someone to read 1 John 1:9 (or otherwise remind the group that they have been completely forgiven).

Intercession

Topic #1

- Share prayer points on the prayer topic. For an in-person meeting this can be covered in a printed handout, a slide, or a poster. For a phone conference they can be emailed or otherwise posted ahead of time.
- Ask for a volunteer to read the first point and then offer a short, related prayer. Invite others to offer related prayers. Then ask for a volunteer to read the second point and so on until all prayer points are covered.
- Ask the group if anyone has another prayer on this subject that they'd like to offer before you move on.

Topic #2

- Read a news story, a magazine article, a newsletter, or any other form content related to the prayer topic.
- Invite people to pray concerning the situation in light of what was just read.

Topic #3

- Announce a time of praying for each other.

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- Ask for a volunteer to share a personal prayer request in three sentences or less.
- Invite one or two people to offer a prayer based on the request.
- Continue with the next request and prayers until everyone's request has been offered and prayed through.

Conclusion

- Turn the music up, play a worship song and invite everyone to sing along.
- Offer a word of encouragement or exhortation as you conclude the meeting.
Share any announcements.

Sample Outline #2

Introduction

- Welcome everyone.
- Play a song whose theme is to welcome the Holy Spirit. Invite everyone to sing along.

Praise and Thanksgiving

- Ask for one or two people to briefly share a recent story that demonstrates God's goodness.
- Invite everyone to make the following statement and fill in the blank: "Lord, I thank you for _____."

Repentance

- Ask for a volunteer to read Psalm 51, or any other reading related to repentance.
- Invite the group to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any sin that would otherwise hinder our prayers and silently confess them before the Lord.
- Remind the group that they have been forgiven and justified by the blood of Jesus.

Intercession

- Ask the group to silently seek the Holy Spirit for a couple minutes on what the Lord has in mind for prayer topics. After hearing back from everyone suggest three or four topics.
- Ask for a volunteer to begin interceding on the first topic, and then for others to join in.
- Once the prayers from the first topic 'die down,' ask for a volunteer to begin interceding on the second topic and so on until all topics are covered.

Conclusion

- Invite someone to close in prayer.

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Final Note

Thank you for reading this guide! If you have suggestions for future editions, or experiences to share based on using these ideas, please feel free to send them to taylor-jan@comcast.net

Also, many thanks to 'Rock House of Prayer,' a small group of faithful praying people who made this guide possible.