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Training Theme:

Meaningful Prayer in Small Groups

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How to Use This Resource

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

I remember when my narrow ideas about prayer were challenged for the first time, during a worship service in college. We spent the entire service experiencing God for ourselves instead of listening to a specific message from the pastor. We followed different prompts, engaged in short activities, and involved our bodies in different prayers. In all of it, we listened for God's voice.

Before then, I had looked at prayer very simply: I talked, God listened. With this overly simplistic view, my prayer times easily became boring and self-centered. Unfortunately, I carried this view into my small groups. When it was time for our obligatory group prayer time, I kept it to the point. I asked for personal prayer requests, and we prayed for the best possible outcomes—at least the best possible outcomes we could come up with. Prayer was simply about us bringing requests to God, not listening to his responses. By doing this, we were missing out on so much: actually experiencing God, hearing his voice, and being changed by his Spirit.

If our goal in small groups is to experience life-change and connect with one another and God, we must spend time engaging in meaningful prayer together. This download has been specifically designed for small-group directors, pastors, and coaches to use as the basis for a training day with your group leaders.

How-To Articles

The five articles in this section are written by small-group ministry practitioners who understand how to make application happen. You can use these articles during a group leader training event, or you can pass them out to your group leaders to read and discuss on their own time.

"Committing to Prayer" is a very practical piece from Trevor Lee that gives a broad overview of why meaningful prayer is vital in small groups. If your group leaders are having difficulty making time for prayer, they should check out "Making Prayer a Priority" by Seth Widner. Wayne Jacobsen gets real about prayer requests in "Beyond Prayer Requests" and Seth Widner gives tips to help small-group members open up in "Permission to Be Real." Finally, read an interview with popular retreat speaker Jane Rubietta, called "Leading Group Prayer Well."

Other Resources

The devotional from Spence Shelton is a great way to introduce the topic of prayer. And get your leaders experiencing God through prayer in the activity "Prayer Stations."

Finally, the Case Studies and Assessments included with this resource are a great way to supplement a training session for all your group leaders. Or you can distribute them to individual leaders for private study or use in their groups.

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

Thinking through common pitfalls and fresh ideas

By Spence Shelton

It's the end of your group's Bible study time. Almost with a cringe (because you've become conditioned to what's about to transpire for the next 30 seconds or 30 minutes), you say something like: "Okay, time to shift into our prayer time. Anybody got anything we need to be lifting up this week?"

What follows is either . . .

1. a colossally awkward silence where you are thinking: *Really? Nothing? Are these people dead inside?* And your group members are thinking: *Really? Share serious life stuff with everyone here? Are you stupid inside?*
2. a verbal cascade of prayer requests lasting 12 minutes each with tears, laughter, gossip, and maybe a little anger all wound up into such a mess that you have no idea what the bombardier who started this raid actually wants you to pray for.

Finally, after the awkward silence or the monologues, you say something like "Who will close us in prayer?" This leads to a single prayer, probably by the unfortunate soul who made eye contact with you when you asked that question, and it lasts about 30 seconds. "God, thanks for letting us meet, be with all the stuff we just talked about for 30 minutes, keep us safe this week, amen. No, wait—in Jesus' name, amen."

Or maybe you go so far as to say, "Let's have a different person pray for each one of those." This leads to five of the same nondescript prayers tailored slightly to the assigned requests.

Praying as a Small Group

Sound familiar? Hopefully that humorous picture strikes one or two chords with your past experiences. Sharing prayer requests can take far more time and energy than actually praying for the requests. God calls us to be people of prayer, not prayer requests. If you aren't careful you can "prayer request" your group into spiritual demise.

So let's take your group prayer time through a boot camp of sorts. We'll start by asking a few questions, then we'll look at some ideas to help cultivate a rich, participative, belief-saturated prayer life among your group members.

Prayer is God's means for people to acknowledge their dependence on him for all things. So when we praise him, when we confess to him, when we believe him for a brother or sister's need, we put ourselves where God designed us to be: dependent on his provision. A rich prayer life is one that regularly and unreservedly cries out, "Abba, Father."

Finding Areas of Improvement in Your Group's Prayer Life

Consider these areas commonly needing improvement.

1. **Who is the main character of your group's prayer time?** At first you may say: "God, of course." But who do most of your prayers really center around? God and his character? The nations? The orphans and widows? Or you and the people in your group?

This is crucial. You were created to be a part of something bigger than yourself. Most of the prayers in the Psalms, for example, are filled with praises for God—with requests for his help coming only in the last verse or two. If we really are here only by God's grace, our prayer life should be fueled by God-focused minds and hearts.

2. **How is the Bible involved?** It is not uncommon to find a big disconnect between a group's Bible study time and its prayer time. During Bible study, everyone has a Bible open and pages flipping. But when the leader transitions into prayer, just about everyone shuts their Bibles and puts them away to begin explaining to one another what they need to see or hear from God. The irony is that God's Word contains all of his promises, and it is sitting right there—unused.

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Is the Bible just a textbook for your group, or is it something more—as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 suggests it should be?

3. **Who is praying—and with whom?** This is a straight-up group dynamics question. Are you praying in one large circle with everyone in the group? If so, chances are good the same people (if any) are volunteering over and over again. You may have created an unnecessarily large barrier to a vibrant prayer life. Are guys praying with girls? Are new Christians praying only with other new Christians? What is the setup?

The "Ideas for Moving Forward" section presents a couple of ways to shake this up. Simply rearranging the size or make-up of the group can open the door to more and deeper participation.

4. **How are you preparing for your group's prayer time?** I know you feel obligated to say, "I could always be doing more." But it's important simply to look at what is happening so you can brainstorm a starting point. Are you putting enough effort into your group's prayer time?

As the leader, you set the tone for your meeting, including the prayer time. Your preparation not only shows that it's important to you, but also ensures that you'll have focus and a plan. Preparation may include gathering necessary supplies, thinking through how you will break the group into subgroups, or deciding how you will clarify the purpose of the prayer time.

Ideas for Moving Forward

Now that you've considered common problem areas, here are some ideas for breaking free from prayer normalcy. These are simple concepts I've seen provide great help for moving groups into rich seasons of prayer.

- **Index cards.** Give each person an index card at the start of each meeting. Ask everyone to write their prayer requests on the card at some point before prayer time. Here's the secret: people will write the "need to know" information on these cards without all the side-track stories they would share if given the chance. When everyone is finished writing, collect and redistribute the cards for prayer time and have each person in the group pray for the needs on the card they receive.
- **Subgroups.** Divide into groups of three. Sharing takes way less time here and usually will draw out the prayer needs of someone who wouldn't share with 10 to 15 people.
- **Single-gender prayer groups.** Men and women become much more transparent when they are speaking only with others of their gender. And that is a good thing. I encourage you to try this and see what happens.
- **Prepare.** Come to the prayer time with an agenda for what you will pray for. Check in with your church leadership (pastor, elders, director, coach) to see what the entire church or organization is praying for. Maybe even hand out a prayer guide that walks everyone through what the group will be praying for that night. This is a great way to keep things fresh in the group. You may even try devoting an entire meeting to prayer. (Bonus: collect individual prayer requests, written or by email, and send them to the group so they can pray throughout the week.)
- **Pray through Scripture.** Find a resource like *For the Love of God* by D.A. Carson or Oswald Chamber's *My Utmost for His Highest* to help your group think and pray through passages of Scripture. Consider memorizing a passage of Scripture together and pray the promises of God in those passages each time you pray.
- **Delegate prayer time to another group member.** As a group leader, part of your role is to raise up more disciple makers. The prayer element of your group is a great one to delegate to someone you are hoping to see take an increased leadership role or eventually serve as a group leader.

Small-group leader, this all starts with you. God designed prayer to be a holy, worship-filled communion between you and him. Do not settle for anything less!

—SPENCE SHELTON is the Small Groups Pastor at Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina. Copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

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Discuss

1. Did any of your answers to the five questions surprise you? Which ones?
2. Have you identified an area that you can work on together? What is it?
3. Which of these prayer ideas do you want to try with your group? When will you do this?

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 pray for them. Once again, you close the meeting with a reminder to pray for those requests at home.

Making Time to Pray

Take the following assessment and see how well your group does at making prayer a priority. (You may want to let all of your group members take the assessment, as well.)

1—Strongly Disagree

5—Neutral

10—Strongly Agree

1. Our group spends the majority of each meeting in Bible study and discussion.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. It takes a long time for all of our group members to verbalize their prayer requests.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. Group members often give advice when listening to prayer requests from others.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. It is normal for us to have a group meeting that does not include praying together.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. It is not normal for us to have a group meeting that is entirely focused on prayer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. Fellowship is more important to our group than praying together.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. It's normal for group members to express prayer requests not immediately connected with the group.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Our group rarely divides into subgroups for prayer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. Prayer normally occurs at the end of our small-group meetings.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. Our group has no boundaries when it comes to expressing prayer requests or verbalizing prayers.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Total Score:

10–35: Your group places a high priority on prayer.

36–70: Your group could spend a little more time in prayer.

71–100: Prayer is a low priority for your small group.

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Making More Time to Pray

Use the following ideas to pray more often (and more effectively) in your small group.

- *Ask for wisdom.* Let's not forget that our God is a problem-solver. James 1:5 reminds us, "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 make 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 God is!
- *Ask for help.* I always admit to the group when I'm having trouble making 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.

- *Keep prayer requests immediate.* Make a ground rule to limit requests to the needs of the group members and their immediate families. 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.
- *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 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.
- *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.
- *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.
- *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.

—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 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. How did you score on the assessment? Did the score surprise you?
2. What areas can your group work on when it comes to prayer time?
3. What ideas would you like to try with your small-group prayer time?

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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 certain obstacles to praying together.

Use the assessments below to examine several of those obstacles and learn suggestions for conquering them.

Overcoming Common Obstacles

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

By Andrew Wheeler

Obstacles in the Group's Environment				
<i>How regularly does this obstacle impact our group?</i>	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
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.				
Distractions can also occur in homes and other private settings. Children running around, telephones ringing, and intrusive pets can spoil a moment of intimate prayer or sharing.				
The structure of the group meeting can be another obstacle to an effective group prayer life. Many groups leave their prayer time for the end, creating a hurried environment if the Bible study runs over. Consider moving the prayer time to the beginning of the group, when the level of energy is at its highest.				
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. As a leader, clearly set the expectation that group members are free to pray aloud or silently as the Holy Spirit leads them.				

Obstacles in the Group's Focus				
<i>How regularly does this obstacle impact our group?</i>	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
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 he or she finds important without reference to other topics being discussed. To prevent this, set and clearly communicate a prayer topic before beginning prayer.				
Often, sharing requests takes up the entire allotted prayer time, and the group never really gets to praying.				
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				

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solid structure for the sharing and prayer time can make a significant difference in the group's ability to focus on prayer.				
Groups lose focus when there is an "anything goes" feel to the prayer time (which often leads to a majority of third-party and surface requests). Better to 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?"				

Obstacles in the Styles of Group Prayer				
<i>How regularly does this obstacle impact our group?</i>	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
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. As is true in any conversation, balance is necessary so the whole group can participate. 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"—praying for the benefit of other people to hear, rather than God. Group prayer should be thought of as "praying <i>to</i> God, <i>with</i> people."				
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 they should share details 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 its 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. May we have wisdom to know the right words to say." 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				

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share your love with them effectively." Prayer like this is vertically addressed—the verbs are all things that God is asked to do, rather than directed at the group.				
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—ANDREW WHEELER is author of [Together in Prayer](#) (IVP, 2009); assessment adapted from "Revolutionary Prayer in Your Small Group;" copyright 2010 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Which of these obstacles seem most prevalent in your small group?
2. Which obstacles do you think are most harmful to small-group prayer?
3. What are three steps you can take as a leader to begin overcoming these obstacles?

Keeping Your Prayer Focus

When prayer requests just skim the surface

By Pat J. Sikora

"I'd like to pray for my Aunt Martha in Cleveland. She's been depressed lately."

"My neighbor's dog ran away last week. I know she's sad about that."

"Pray for my daughter to get a job."

"My daughter-in-law's cousin, Joe, in Miami has the flu."

"Let's remember to pray for world peace. Heaven knows we need it!"

Do these sound like the prayer requests in your small group? They were all too familiar to me as my group began another year of Bible study. The members did well with the Bible study portion of our time together, but when it came to prayer requests, they seemed to lean toward the trivial and impersonal.

Now that's not to say that any of these requests are unimportant. Each is surely meaningful to the person prayed for. But are they the most pressing needs within the group? Within each life? In our limited time together, is this as intimate as we can get?

I found that as the group focused on external requests—that is, requests that involved someone else's needs rather than the group members' own needs—we created a culture of shallowness. Let's face it: it's much easier to request prayer for someone else than it is to be open, vulnerable, and raw with our own needs. And once this culture of shallowness takes hold in a group, it's difficult to move people deeper and share at a more personal level. When people don't share their own stuck points, it's unlikely that they will grow. Praying for other people is safe, but it isn't terribly effective if the goal of your group is to grow in intimacy and Christian maturity.

What would you do?

1. Would you assume that it simply isn't going to be a very intimate group and live with it?
2. Would you ask the members if this is the level of intimacy they want?
3. Would you decide on some parameters for prayer and communicate them to the group?

What Happened

As I prayed about the problem, I became certain that I had no interest in leading a shallow group. I desire to encourage spiritual and emotional growth in each member, and I'm not interested in participating in a social gab-fest. I want to see people measurably changed by the end of their time in the group. So continuing to pray for Aunt Martha wasn't going to work for me.

The next week I shared my concern with the members. I emphasized that my goal in our sharing and prayer time was to help each person grapple with their own stuck points. I offered our group as a safe and confidential place in which to share struggles and seek accountability. And I began by sharing my own stuck points.

Fortunately, most of the members were agreeable to this change. They, too, wanted to grow. They wanted to conquer their own giants, and they were willing to risk vulnerability for the sake of change. We agreed to the following guidelines for our prayer time, and you may want to institute them in your own group.

1. **Each member will focus on the personal growth points motivated by the Bible study.** That year we were doing my Bible study *Conquering Your Giants*, based on the book of Joshua. Since the focus was identifying and conquering the giants in our lives, it was easy to relate prayer needs to each chapter.

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2. **All prayer requests will relate to the small-group member's personal growth and needs or to urgent needs for immediate family members.** We agreed that if a person wanted to share Aunt Martha's prayer needs, they would do that privately before or after the meeting with one or more members.
3. **Confidentiality is a non-negotiable.** We reinforced the value that anything shared belongs to the sharer. No one else in the group has permission to bring it up outside of group time, especially not in the presence of anyone else. The needs of others were not to become prayer requests in another setting. What was shared in the group stayed in the group.
4. **Our group will be a grace-filled, shame-free zone.** The issues we were dealing with were sensitive and painful. Some of us were emotionally raw from the unresolved and seemingly unresolvable nature of these giants. The last thing we needed was an elbow in the side. We agreed to honor each request, to take it seriously, and to offer grace and support.
5. **We will allow other members to hold us accountable in acceptable ways.** This meant that we could ask for an update within the group. We could ask a member how he or she wanted to be held accountable and do that. Sometimes that meant a phone call midweek. Sometimes it was simply prayer. The member got to decide what would work best. Again, as leader, I set the pace by asking the group members to hold me accountable for what I said I was going to do.
6. **We will celebrate all victories, great and small.** We had no interest in waiting until the ultimate goal was reached. We celebrated a phone call made, a "no" declared, a pound lost. As we cheered one another on, we did indeed see more love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

So did it work? Better than I could have imagined. By the end of the season, every member of the group had made one or more measurable, verifiable improvements. Huge obstacles had been overcome, which in turn encouraged more growth. So, we celebrated.

—PAT J. SIKORA is founder of [Mighty Oak Ministries](#) and author of [Conquering Your Giants](#). Copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. What kinds of prayer requests do your group members normally share?
2. What kinds of prayer requests do you share? What might this model to your group members?
3. How can you encourage group members to share deeper personal prayer requests?

Encouraging the Reluctant Prayer

When a group member doesn't want to pray aloud

By Pat J. Sikora

It was the beginning of a new year of women's Bible study, and I was excited. We had a great study guide, great leaders, and great enrollment. What could go wrong?

Then Beth, a woman new to our church, took me aside one Sunday morning. "Pat, I'm excited about being in the Bible study, but I just wanted to let you know in advance that I don't pray out loud. Please don't ask me to and please don't call on me to pray. I just don't do that."

Her look and tone of voice told me not even to try to change her mind. It was already set in concrete. I smiled and assured her there was no pressure. I told her I wanted her to be comfortable, and I was sure that she would be just fine in the group. Inside, I wasn't so sure.

I wasn't sure how to handle the situation. I wasn't even sure if it was a major issue or a minor issue. So I prayed—for her, for me, and for the group. I was concerned that if she maintained this stance, it could affect both her growth and the group's cohesion. It probably wouldn't be critical in the beginning, but it could eventually create a rift—maybe not a huge one, but certainly a crack. And I sensed that Beth would miss out on something important.

What would you do?

1. Would you just let it go and hope that eventually the group member would come around?
2. Would you set aside a small-group meeting to teach on group prayer?
3. Would you try to manipulate the environment so group members wouldn't have a choice about praying aloud?

I realized as I prayed and talked with other leaders that this issue is not unique to Beth. There are several reasons why people don't pray out loud in a group.

- *Some have no experience with it.* This is especially true of new Christians and those from a religious tradition that doesn't include audible prayer or conversational prayer.
- *Some find it scary.* To hear their own voices talking to the God of the universe may feel presumptuous.
- *Some feel intimidated.* They're certain that they aren't eloquent enough to pray with those who are more experienced. This is especially true if they've been in a group where someone prayed in perfect King James English or if there are wide educational, language, or cultural differences in the group.
- *Some people are just naturally shy.* They not only don't pray aloud; they do everything they can to avoid speaking in a group.

What Happened

Based on my assessment, I took several courses of action that I hoped would avoid discomfort for everyone.

1. **I assigned Beth to my small group.** We had a large Bible study with several smaller breakout groups, and Beth was assigned to my breakout group. I decided that because I was the teaching leader, I should tackle this problem rather than delegate Beth to another leader. At this point, I had the most invested in her growth.

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2. **I let everyone know that they were under no compulsion to pray aloud.** Before the prayer times in my first few meetings, I casually mentioned that I understood that not everyone was comfortable with praying audibly. I affirmed that silent prayers are as effective as audible prayers, but encouraged members to join in as they felt comfortable.
3. **I encouraged short sentence prayers.** Just in case the long-winded prayers of others might intimidate Beth, I encouraged group members to keep prayers brief and to the point, even offering them a sentence to finish such as "Lord, I thank you for . . ." (This helped keep the group on time as well!)
4. **I encouraged conversational prayer.** While some people are comfortable praying in King James English, others are terrified of making a mistake or not sounding spiritual enough. Since I knew that I also had a woman in my group who always prayed in a formal, stilted tone, my co-leader and I decided to break the pattern by being contemporary, conversational, and even familiar as we prayed. I made sure to model prayers that reflected my honest feelings. When I was angry, I didn't minimize my feelings by telling God I was "bothered" or a "little concerned." I told him how furious I was. I found that being real was an encouragement to the entire group, especially Beth.
5. **I formed smaller groups for prayer.** After Beth had become comfortable with the group, we would occasionally break into groups of three for prayer. I would let people choose their own partners or I would partner Beth with the people she was closest to. I hoped it would be easier for her to break the silence with just a couple of close friends rather than the whole group.
6. **I avoided going around the circle for prayer.** I knew Beth would spend the entire time in terror, counting the number of people until it was her turn. And the person after her, knowing of her reluctance, wouldn't know whether to wait or to rescue her. Anytime it looked as if members were "praying around the circle," my co-leader or I would jump in and upset the pattern.
7. **I never called on Beth to open or close in prayer.** I would either ask for volunteers or simply invite another member to do this.

During the year, I practiced these strategies while never making Beth feel out of place or odd. By Christmas, she was venturing a short prayer from time to time, and by spring she had become so confident that we invited her to become a co-leader for the following year. I was glad that I hadn't just ignored the problem, hoping it would get better. By following a deliberate strategy, I was able to mentor Beth into a new level of maturity.

—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 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. When have you encountered a reluctant pray-er? What did you do about it?
2. What might the reluctant pray-er be missing out on by not praying aloud?
3. What are some things you can do in your small group to make praying aloud more comfortable for all your group members?

Committing to Prayer

A rich group prayer life can transform a small group.

By Trevor Lee

Let's Talk about Prayer

One of our favorite family car games is "Would You Rather." In this game we give two hypothetical options and each person must choose one. Usually neither option is especially appealing. For instance, I might ask my kids, "Would you rather eat a whole plate of broccoli or mushrooms?" Because my young kids are fascinated with disgusting noises and bodily functions, I'll spare you an example of something they'd say.

I have a "would you rather" for you. Would you rather spend half an hour with a small group leading a discussion about prayer or actually praying? I don't know which you'd choose, but I know which one most small groups are more likely to do—the half hour discussion. For many small groups, prayer is an obligation or an appropriate Christian way to end their time together. Small groups regularly spend far more time sharing prayer requests than they do actually praying. It's unfortunate because prayer is essential for small groups to flourish.

Three Reasons Prayer Matters

1. **It's foundational for Christian community.** In Acts 2:42 the early Christians devoted themselves to three things: Scripture, fellowship, and prayer. Two of these are centerpieces of small groups, and things we often stress in our small-group leader training and small-group meeting plans. When small-group leaders are chosen, we make sure they can teach, facilitate discussion, and facilitate relationships. However, we rarely pay attention to their ability to fashion a deep group prayer life.

When we anoint leaders who are not committed to one of the three things the churches in Acts were committed to, we sanction communities that are less than what they could be. It's like saying we just want our small groups to be able to pass with a C-. Is that really what we want for our small groups? Our small groups will never be all they can be if leaders are not committed to developing a deep group prayer life alongside the study of Scripture and formation of relationships.

2. **It adds a key element.** When small groups discuss and study Scripture they are growing in their knowledge of God. When group members share prayer requests or meals together, they are growing their relationships with each other. When prayer is an afterthought, the group is missing out on actually relating to God. In church-speak, the horizontal aspect of faith is developed, but not the vertical one.

Our faith cannot flourish without a growing relationship with God, and that requires communicating with him. Bible study and fellowship are very important, and our relationships with God grow through them, but talking with God in prayer is equally important. If we wish for our group members' relationships with God to grow through our small groups, we must connect with him through prayer together.

3. **It's powerful.** Prayer is powerful in two ways. First, God uses prayer to shape us, both individually and corporately. We pray in the Lord's Prayer that the Father's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Through prayer we come to know what his will is. It is often through prayer that the Holy Spirit is able to convict, guide, and empower us. We are shaped as we come into God's presence, presenting our thoughts, feelings, and worries, and listening for his will.

Second, prayer is powerful because God has decided to answer prayer. Jesus told his disciples they could throw mountains into seas if they believed when they prayed. I'm not sure throwing mountains into seas fits with God's will, but the point is that prayer has power beyond what we can fathom. Your small group can participate in God's redemption of the world—justice, healing, and salvation—

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through prayer. God has chosen to work through the prayers of his people, and if we don't pray we'll miss out on all God is able and willing to do.

Two Reasons We Don't Pray

Most small groups pray as part of their time together, but prayer is usually brief and focused only on praying for group requests. Jesus spent hours praying. The early church did the same. Even small-group leaders who think prayer is important can fall into minimizing their group prayer time. There are two main reasons this happens.

1. **It's uncomfortable.** Have you ever sat in a group during a prayer time when there was only silence? A few seconds of silence quickly feels like hours. In our busy and noisy world we should relish a few minutes of quiet, but for some reason we writhe and squirm when no one is praying. Leaders who commit to prayer in their small groups have to accept the fact that it will feel uncomfortable at times.
2. **Leaders are focused on group members instead of God.** It's natural for small group leaders to be tuned into what others in the group are thinking and feeling. Part of being a good leader is being aware of these things and facilitating the group accordingly. However, when leaders are tuned into the group members rather than God, they can derail the prayer time. A leader who is tuned into group members may begin thinking, "I wonder if Judy is going to be scared off from coming back because we spend so much time praying" or "Oh no, Bill is fidgeting. He must be bored." Being too focused on this during prayer can make it easy to go through the entire group prayer time without giving much thought to God.

For some reason the things we assume others are thinking are seldom positive. I don't ever remember thinking, "Wow, Jose is so quiet. He must really be deep in communion with God." If leaders are focused on trying to figure out the other group members more than on connecting with God during prayer, they will inevitably decrease the amount and the depth of prayer the group engages in.

One Thing to Do

Building great small groups requires that small-group leaders be committed to prayer as well as Scripture and building relationships. Make commitment to prayer an essential part of your leader recruitment and training. Seek leaders who are committed to all three areas, and make clear this expectation during small-group leader training. It will quickly increase the quality of your small groups.

It is also important for coaches and small-group pastors to give leaders ongoing support by continually training on leading prayer and holding leaders accountable. One way to do this that doesn't seem heavy-handed is to ask leaders to share one way they've seen prayer work in their groups. They could share an answer to prayer they've seen or a way praying has changed how the group interacts. If you don't find a way to follow up with ongoing support and accountability, you are not communicating the importance of a commitment to prayer.

God wants to help people grow through small groups, and prayer is critical to that mission. So commit to prayer and lead others to do the same.

— TREVOR LEE; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Which do you feel more comfortable with: a half-hour discussion on prayer with your small group, or spending a half-hour in prayer with your small group? Why?
2. Sometimes prayer is left to the end of the meeting and cut short due to time restraints. How might you make more time for prayer during your meeting?
3. What are your fears about spending more time in prayer during small-group meetings? How might you overcome those fears?

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 off their Tuesday evenings 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 wraps up with a closing prayer. After each gathering, Nate and Melissa go to bed feeling like the time was successful.

One morning, though, Nate receives an e-mail that really takes him by surprise. A group member expresses an ongoing frustration with the weekly gatherings. For two weeks, she has some important prayer requests to share with everyone, but the prayer time was rushed at the end of the evening so she didn't voice her requests. She hopes Nate and Melissa will create some positive changes so prayer will become a higher priority for the group. That e-mail opens Nate and Melissa's eyes to a missing ingredient within the life of their small group: quality prayer time. But they face an obstacle—where will they find the time to pray more with their group?

Many small-group leaders face 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 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. 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 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 intimate requests. 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:

- **Subgroup.** Divide your group into smaller prayer circles of three to five participants, and have them share prayer requests and pray for one another. Appoint a leader for each prayer circle to report the requests to you after the meeting. Then, you can share them with the whole group through e-mail. 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. You might choose to spend the evening in extended prayer for group members or praying about a specific topic. This will quickly establish prayer as a priority in your group, as well as provide 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 guidelines. A wise man once said, "Wisdom is the quality that keeps you out of situations where you need it." Guidelines will serve as powerful tools in keeping your prayer time focused. They 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 needs that are 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 families.
- **Allow time for all requests.** Make sure everyone in your group has the opportunity to share 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 two and four minutes. Without this guideline, 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 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 you are consistent in following through on your prayer time. This will require discipline. And be on guard for anything that may take away from this time—distractions come when we least expect them. 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.

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

Discuss

1. How do you feel about the amount of time your group sets aside for prayer?
2. What is your long-term goal? What are your short-term goals to get there?
3. Does your group have guidelines for prayer time? What are they, and what would you like them to be?

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.

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

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- *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 is 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. Scripture paints a clear picture: it's not the number of people praying that brings results. Prayer was designed for two or three faithful believers to focus on, agree, and fervently intercede.

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 into 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.

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

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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 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Which of the prayer snares have you witnessed in your group prayer times? Is there a pattern to them?
2. What new information did you learn from this article? Did anything shock or surprise you?
3. How often do you follow up on prayer requests? How can you do this more often?

Permission to Be Real

Helping people open up is a valuable skill for small-group leaders.

By Seth Widner

I grew up attending Sunday school and Bible study classes in the church—all of which were packed full of great information about the truths of Scripture. The purpose of those classes was to educate people with the knowledge of Scripture. They were guided by a set curriculum, and the focus was always on the content of that particular study. In essence, everything was knowledge-driven.

The Problem with Knowledge

I learned a lot of great things in those classes over the years and met many people. Although I gained some knowledge of Scripture, I made very little connection with my fellow participants. Our interaction didn't really connect us in any way. When I talked, I was normally shouting out an answer, hoping I would gain the approval of my teachers and peers.

During those years, I was struggling with sins in my life. My mind was plagued with many questions and doubts about my faith. But I didn't dare bring them up in front of my classmates or my teachers. Why? I feared I would be rejected. I didn't feel as if I had permission or freedom to be real. So I wore a mask to cover my struggles and weaknesses, hoping my teachers or classmates would believe I was perfect.

Our small groups must be safe places for people to remove their masks. People must have permission to be authentic, to be real. A healthy small group contains people who live transparent lives before Christ and one another. First John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light, as he (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Here are some practical tips to help your group be real:

1. **Be the example.** If you want your group to live transparent lives with one another, you must pave the way. No matter what type of day you are having, tell your group about it, whether it is good or bad. If you never pick up a mask to cover your sins or struggles, you will give them permission to be real.
2. **Let them see your weaknesses.** Never allow your group to think you are perfect.
3. **Allow your group to see you being real with God through prayer.** For a greater understanding of our freedom to express our emotions to God, read through the Psalms.
4. **When you sense someone being real with your group, thank them for it.** It takes courage to be real!
5. **Ask great follow-up questions.** If someone requests prayer, ask how they want you to pray. If someone states their perspective on a topic or question, ask them to explain their point of view.

Following Up

Let's follow up on that last point: follow-up questions. They are a great way to help your group members open up and apply what they are learning through your group. In small groups, it's crucial to ask the right questions. This begins with the discussion questions from whatever material we are studying, but we shouldn't stop there. Those questions are designed to stimulate conversation. But once the conversation begins, we must keep things flowing.

We can do this by asking great follow-up questions. A great follow-up question places people in a position to conform their lives more to Christ, and prevents a group from staying on the surface level with God. Follow-up questions give the needed details that offer explanations for our answers. These can come during our group discussions, in casual conversations, or while sharing prayer requests.

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For example, Jillian was in a difficult season of her life. Every week, her prayer request seemed to be the same as before. She would simply say, "Please pray for me at work. I have a lot of stress." Her leaders recognized that Jillian was keeping things on the surface level. So they asked great follow-up question: "What is the source of your stress?" This opened a door for Jillian to provide more details. She simply said, "Pray for me." Her leaders then asked, "How would you like us to pray?" By asking those simple follow-up questions, Jillian was able to open up more with her group. Her eyes were also opened to the source of her stress and she included the group in praying for specific things.

Here are some tips to help you begin asking great follow-up questions:

1. **Request an explanation for an answer.** This will help provide more details and background for a given answer.
2. **Avoid closed questions.** An open question requires more details, while a closed question requires simply a "yes or no" answer.
 - a. Open question: How do you get to work?
 - b. Closed question: Do you drive to work?
3. **Practice makes perfect.** Find a friend or family member to practice on. Simply ask a question and go from there. Remember that follow-up questions provide more details.
4. **Create the expectation for your group's discussion.** Once you use follow-up questions with your group, they will catch on quickly. Soon they will learn that it's important to provide details to their answers and prayer requests. Eventually, you will ask fewer follow-up questions because your group will begin giving more details beforehand!

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

Discuss

1. How are you modeling being open, vulnerable, and authentic? What else can you do?
2. What is your normal reaction when you see someone wearing a mask? What would you like it to be?
3. How well do you ask follow-up questions? How can you further improve in this skill?

Leading Group Prayer Well

An interview with Jane Rubietta on meaningful prayer in small groups

By Rachel Gilmore

Jane Rubietta speaks internationally and is the award-winning author of several books including [Come Along](#), [The Journey into a More Intimate Faith](#) and [Resting Place: A Personal Guide to Spiritual Retreats](#). Find Jane online at www.janerubietta.com.

How do leaders, as they're busy doing a million things to get or keep a group running, keep their personal prayer lives a priority?

I think it helps to reconsider what prayer really is. I don't think prayer is just talking to God. Prayer is really being with God. It's about community and communication. And real communication isn't just me talking to God. It's a relationship. Often I find in my own prayer life that I just have to shut up.

So when you're thinking about everything you have to do with this group and in your own life, sometimes it's just being still and letting those anxieties bubble up. Think about catching them in your hand as they bubble up and holding them out to God to take. And that doesn't have to be relegated to your morning quiet time, either. It's so cliché because it's rarely quiet (chuckles). But honor that place of quiet because then God can slip a word in edgewise. Then prayer becomes a dialogue, not a monologue.

How does a leader make prayer a priority in small-group life, encouraging people to really participate in the prayer life of the group?

How do we pray for each other? That always drives me insane. It's always: Oh my aunt. Oh, my daughter's friend's sister . . . I mean it's good to a point, but it's never about themselves.

Why do you think people always offer up intercessory prayer requests instead of sharing what's really going on in their lives?

Oh, it's much less threatening and it's so much easier. We are so out of touch with our own needs. We are made to feel selfish, to feel ashamed if we ask for prayer for ourselves. But we have to be vulnerable, to share our own needs.

So how does a leader get people to do that?

You set it up up front. You just tell them, "This is often how it works (asking for prayer for others), but the way I think the Lord can build community in our group is this: being open and honest about what's going on in our lives." Tell them before the prayer requests. Then afterward, thank the two people who shared. Say: "I know it requires safety to share your own needs. Hopefully next week you'll feel even safer and will be able to share with the group."

John Wesley, the father of Methodism, did a lot with small groups. One of the primary questions they asked was: How is it with your soul? That's where they shared their own struggles, their own temptations, their own needs. That's what groups need to be doing. In James 5 it says, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16a).

What types of prayer can a leader introduce into a group?

You can do a prayer of silence. Preface that with "This is a place just to turn your heart towards God and invite God's presence."

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You can try one-word prayers, which is a really interesting thing. It could be a name, a thing. People just offer up that one word: hope, pain, sadness, sick, a spouse's name... whatever. This avoids that very long discussion of prayer requests.

And it might encourage people who are otherwise too uncomfortable sharing a full request to speak just one word representing a bigger issue in their lives. It gives those people an opportunity to participate, right?

Yes, absolutely!

What else comes to mind?

I do like doing the Lord's Prayer in a group. Some people may not even know it.

Do you have any particular resources for group leaders for unison prayers they could use?

The *Ancient Christian Devotional* from IVP or the *Book of Common Prayer*. They can be really powerful prayers if they're not what you're used to.

You can also try praying through a Psalm. Rich and I do that a lot. It helps if you're all reading the same version. Read a verse out loud. Then have a moment of silence for people to pray on that verse. The prayer could be silent, verbal, or visual with their hands. You can pray through a Psalm and praise through a Psalm. But you have to think through that before going into your group. Leaders should practice doing it themselves first.

Not all leaders, even though they are small-group leaders, may be comfortable praying out loud. Any suggestions for leaders on how to be at ease so it feels natural and inviting for the group?

I recommend praying out loud in your personal time. Part of it is just externalizing your voice. And tell the group that pauses are okay, that sometimes when we're praying, this is just how it is. The more we communicate with our group, the more relaxed they'll feel.

What about when, as a leader, you just don't feel like praying? When you've got too much going on in your own life and you feel empty? How do you lead meaningful prayer for your group then?

I always recommend honesty with a group. Let's just bear with each other and see what words come. As a small-group leader, it's not a bad thing to say: "It's been a bad day and I don't know how many words I have."

But it's tricky for a small-group leader, too, because they can't go in and be a basket case. The prayer time can't be all about them and their pain. But to say: "I'm just a wasteland inside and maybe some of you are too. Let's go to God in prayer together."

But the leaders do need a place they can be a basket case, don't they?

Oh, yes, I strongly recommend a place where you can fall apart, a covenant group or something where you can be totally real. There needs to be a safe place like that for every leader.

And if your group's prayer life feels like it's stagnant? Is there anything the leader can do to change it?

Sometimes it's helpful to stand up and do breathing. To breathe in God's presence and breathe out your lethargy, your sadness, whatever. Think of the song/psalm, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." Circle your arms around and lift them up. The Scriptures are very physical about prayer. I have found it very helpful to get on my knees and stretch out sometimes.

They could also write some prayers down and put them in a basket. Then everybody prays over that basket. The leader could close by offering it up as a love offering.

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What about getting outside?

To have the group go on a prayer walk? That's great! They could walk and say: "Let's just challenge ourselves to pray for what we're seeing."

Any closing thoughts for leaders about developing a meaningful prayer life in their groups?

I would just encourage the leaders to not be afraid of silence and not be afraid of tears and not try to stop emotions when they show up in other people.

What are those words from Philippians? "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). Prayer is a safeguard and a strengthening that we can't afford to miss.

—RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats](#) and [Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations](#). Copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well-equipped do you feel to develop a meaningful prayer life in your small group? What do you feel are your strengths related to prayer? What might be your weaknesses?
2. How often do you build quiet time or listening time into your prayer life so that "God can slip a word in edgewise"? What's one way you might intentionally build listening time into your small-group prayer life?
3. Which one of Jane's suggestions for types of prayer intrigued you most? How can you incorporate this into your next small-group meeting?

Prayer Stations

Ten methods of prayer to inspire leaders to think outside the box

By Amy Jackson

Let's face it: sometimes our prayer lives get boring. We pray for the same things in the same way, and we forget that we're talking with the creator of the universe. There is something significant about experiencing God through prayer, and sometimes we need to pray in a new way to get out of our prayer ruts. Praying for something we don't normally pray about, allowing a visual to take us deeper into prayer, giving ourselves time to listen for God's voice, responding to God in a new way, or positioning our body in a new way can give us new glimpses of God and ourselves. Our hearts are opened to new ways of communicating with God, and that inspiration can carry over into our other relationships and our small groups.

While group prayer time can become routine and, dare I say, boring, sometimes leaders just need a little inspiration to make the group prayer time more meaningful. If they can experience new types or methods of prayer, their personal prayer lives can improve, and they can bring those new ideas to their groups.

Below you'll find a number of prayer stations—prompts and setups for different methods of prayer on different topics. For an activity during your training day that will give leaders both meaningful personal time and inspiring ideas, set up several of these prayer stations for leaders to experience. Set up as many stations as fit your time and focus for the day. Provide ample resources at each station so all leaders can complete each station.

You may choose to play soft music in the background, light candles, or otherwise set a worshipful tone. Tell leaders they can spend as much time praying as they'd like at each station, and move on to the next station whenever they are ready. You may direct leaders to go through the stations in a certain order, or you may allow them to skip around depending on how you set up your stations. Decide how much time your leaders will spend on the prayer stations as a whole, and let them know ahead of time. You may also choose to ring a bell, make a quiet announcement, or turn down the music when five minutes remain so leaders know to finish their stations.

Prayer Stations

Washing Away My Sin. Place a vase filled with water on a table. Place several drops of red food coloring into the water and swirl or stir until the color is spread evenly throughout the water. Have small sheets of clear transparency paper and black washable markers available. Then provide this prompt:

Spend some time reflecting on unforgiven sin in your life, and write the sin on a sheet of transparency with a black washable marker. Then lift it up to God. After you have prayed about it, dip the transparency piece into the water in the vase until it has been fully washed away. Jesus' blood washes away your sins just as this water washes away what you've written.

Entangled Heart. You will need a net and several small hearts. The net could be a butterfly net, decorative netting from a craft store, or even a reusable produce bag—whatever you have available. The small hearts could be candy, hearts punched out of paper, or anything else you can think of. I found small wooden hearts at a craft store. Place the hearts in the net. Then give the following prompt to participants:

God has freed our hearts to live fully for him, but our hearts can get entangled by so many things. We focus on praise from others, having the clothes we desire, advancing our careers, being the best parents, or making ourselves happy with a multitude of things. We need to bring our hearts to God continually to allow him to free our hearts again.

What is entangling your heart at the moment? What is keeping it from being free as God intends? Lift up these issues to God in prayer. When you're finished talking to God about this issue, remove a heart from the net, visually representing that God has freed your heart.

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Let's Get Visual. Place paper and markers on a table. Provide a short passage of your choosing. You could use 1 Peter 5:1-4, Ephesians 3:14-21, or Philippians 4:4-9. Provide this prompt:

After reading through the passage, use the markers and paper to respond to the reading by drawing a picture. Consider: What is the main thing you learned from this passage? What questions do you have after reading this? How do you feel after reading this passage? What is God telling you through this passage?

Listening to God's Voice. Provide paper, pens, and this prompt:

What's been on your mind lately? What have you been praying about? Spend some time silently listening for God's voice. What does he want you to know? What response does he have to your prayers? What promise does he want to reassure you of? Then, spend time journaling about God's personal message for you right now.

Craft Stick Prayers. You will need several cups or mugs, a bag of craft sticks, and a fine permanent marker or pen. Write a different thing to pray for on each craft stick and place the sticks in the cups. You might choose to list specific ministry needs, specific leaders, countries around the world, government officials, community needs, or church-wide concerns. Try to keep a theme for the requests, and think about what your leaders might not be praying for on a regular basis. Then, provide this prompt:

Sometimes we can limit our prayers to the same list of items day after day. God definitely wants to hear those prayers. But, prayer is also much bigger than the things we pray for on a regular basis. Choose several craft sticks from the cups and pray for the items on the sticks. Consider how often you pray for these items or people. Replace the sticks when you are finished.

Give it Away. You will need to provide small pieces of paper, pens, and a small garbage bin or basket that can sit on a table or chair. Provide the following prompt:

Read Matthew 11:28-30 and Luke 17:30-33. Jesus says we are to come to him, to give away the burdens the world places on us and those we place on ourselves, to take up his yoke. We can easily forget that we were not created to carry the heavy burdens we so often carry. We must go to God and give them to him. Jesus said that those who hold on too tightly will lose their lives, but those who let go will preserve their lives.

What are you holding on to unnecessarily? Are you carrying a burden that you need to bring to Jesus? Is there something in your life you are unwilling to relinquish to God? Write it on a piece of paper. Spend time in prayer, giving it over to him. When you're finished, rip the paper and throw it away in the trash can. It is no longer yours. God is holding it now.

God Will Provide. You will need sealable baggies and cornflakes cereal for this station. You may choose to place the cereal in a bowl on a table, spread out the flakes on a tabletop, or spread them across an area on the floor. Provide this prompt and the baggies near the cornflakes:

Read Exodus 16:11-31. One of the downfalls of living in a wealthy society is beginning to think that we have the power to provide for ourselves—that God is not at work, providing for each and every need. This familiar passage reminds us that God provides for our needs day-to-day. Where are you on this? Have you forgotten that God is providing for you? Pray a prayer of praise. Do you feel that God is not providing adequately, or as you would hope? Talk to God about your fear, anger, or concern. Are you worried that God will not provide in an area of your life? Lift up your worry to God. Then be reminded that God does provide. Collect some flakes and put them in a baggie. Keep this as a reminder that God provides for all our needs day-to-day.

Mind-Body Connection. This station needs some space for participants to move around. Provide this prompt: So often prayer is simply an intellectual act. We think, we speak, we listen. But our bodies are connected to our minds and spirits, and positioning our bodies in different ways can help deepen our prayer. How do you normally position your body during prayer? Do you sit with your hands clasped in your lap? Do you close your eyes and bow your head? Do you kneel?

Think outside the box. How are feeling? What kind of prayer do you want to raise to God? As you praise, stand up tall, lifting your hands to the sky, eyes raised. As you submit to God, lie on the ground or kneel. As you ask for God's provision, hold your hands in front of you with palms up. As you let go of worries

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and cares, hold your hands in front of you with palms down. Allow your body position to enhance and deepen your prayer.

Praise Together. Hang a poster board on the wall or provide a long sheet of paper on a table. Place a container of markers, chalk, crayons, or other writing utensils nearby. Provide the following prompt:

Psalm 9:1-2 says: "I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High." Take some time to think through all the ways God has been working in your life and the life of your group. What prayers have been answered? What blessings bestowed? What life-change has occurred?

Write or draw your praises on the poster board. Then take a moment to praise God for all the other praises on the poster board. Be encouraged that God is at work.

Moving Forward with Christ. This station will need slips of paper and pens. Provide this prompt:

Read Ephesians 3:14-21. This is a prayer Paul lifted for the church in Ephesus. He wanted them to be strengthened by the Spirit from the inside out, to be rooted and established in God's love, to take up the power of God, and to be filled with the fullness of God. There is a knowledge aspect, a heart aspect, and a spirit aspect. We could easily pray these same things for our groups. Where is your group with these things? Where do they need to grow? What are they struggling with? What is showing much fruit? Ask God what your next steps with your group should be. How can you help facilitate a deeper understanding of God's love, tapping into the strength of the Spirit, or taking up God's power? What specific goals should you have as the leader of this group? Pray that God will make this clear to you.

Use the paper slips to write down a few goals that God has brought to mind. What will you need in order to accomplish these goals? Will you need help from a coach, additional training, or another leader to hold you accountable? Decide what you will do to work with God to accomplish these goals.

Be sure to give leaders a copy of these station ideas and prompts for use in their own prayer lives and in their small groups after completing the activity. These prompts can also be used at retreats, with large groups, and with youth groups. Know that many of these can be modified to fit a number of situations. You might also use a single prompt during a small-group meeting or set up a few stations for a meeting dedicated to prayer.

Unpacking:

- What was this time like for you? Was it restful, peaceful, difficult, trying?
- Which prayer ideas were new for you? Which were your favorites?
- Which was most uncomfortable for you? Why?
- How might you incorporate some of these ideas into your small group?
- What other ideas can you come up with for creative prayer?

—AMY JACKSON is the Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com and a former small-group director. Copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Further Exploration

Websites and books to help your leaders provide meaningful prayer in their small groups

[Smallgroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Go Deeper with God](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Evaluating Prayer in Your Small Group](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Revolutionary Prayer in Your Small Group](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). This website offers practical advice and tools for church ministry leaders.

[Together in Prayer](#) by *Andrew Wheeler*. The author lays the groundwork for establishing a meaningful prayer ministry in your small group. You'll find guidelines for praying in groups, common pitfalls of communal prayer and suggestions to spur your group onward. (IVP Connect, 2009; ISBN 978-0830821143).

[Authentic Relationships](#) by *Wayne and Clay Jacobsen*. In a culture that promotes isolation and autonomy, this book reveals life-changing methods for creating healthy relationships and authentic community. (Baker, 2003; ISBN 978-0801064517).

[Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer](#) by *Richard J. Foster*. According to Richard Foster, listening is at the heart of meditative prayer and in *Sanctuary of the Soul* he explores this faith tradition, showing its biblical roots and sharing insights from Christian writers, of both recent and classical tradition. (Formatio, 2011; ISBN 978-0830835553).

Retreat Plan

How to create a one-day retreat on the theme of "Meaningful Prayer in Small Groups"

SMALLGROUPS.COM training themes expand easily into one-day (or even weekend) training events. Here is a sample schedule you may follow for the theme of meaningful prayer. The purpose of this event is to help your small-group leaders begin exploring ways to deepen and enhance their small-group prayer times so they are meaningful and transformative.

Morning

- ◆ 9:00–10:15 A.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of "Committing to Prayer" by Trevor Lee, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the article. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider the implications of Lee's ideas for your church.
- ◆ 10:15–11:00 A.M. **Devotional:** You can lead a Bible study, or you can have group leaders remain in their subgroups and explore "A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer" by Spence Shelton. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.
- ◆ 11–12:00. **Activity:** Use the activity "Prayer Stations" to give everyone a bit of a break from pure discussion and inject some personal prayer time. Allow time at the end to debrief the experience. Be sure to have these set up ahead of time, or have someone set them up during the Devotional segment.
- ◆ 12:00. **Lunch**

Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. **Second Session:** Have each person read through the article "Beyond Prayer Requests" and then take the "Overcoming Common Obstacles" assessment. Allow 15–20 minutes at the end of this session for discussion and reactions.
- ◆ 2–2:30 P.M. **Stretch Break.**
- ◆ 3–4:30 P.M. **Final Session:** Allow groups to choose a Case Study they want to review and give them 20–30 minutes to read through it and discuss. Allow time for sharing ideas and reactions as a large group, then have everyone read through "Permission to Be Real" and discuss in smaller groups.

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other SMALLGROUPS.COM themes. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.