

How to improve your public prayers

Foundations

- Cultivate a rich private prayer life as a basis for your public prayers. Lack of authenticity is so easy to spot in those who pray publicly. There are simply no short-cuts in this area. If you desire to pray publicly, you must pray privately, unseen by anyone but your Father in heaven (Matt 6:5-8).
- Study the prayers of scripture, especially Paul's prayers, and learn what he prays for and how he articulates those prayers. Carson's book, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, is a useful resource to help with this.
- Remember the rich diversity of the purposes and types of prayer as outlined in this leaflet. Prayer is not merely filler between songs or something you tag on to the end of time of sung worship just because you've finished singing now. Be intentional and purposeful in your public prayers.

Praying

- Prepare to pray. Carson says, 'In non-liturgical churches, many prayers are so predictable that they are scarcely any more spontaneous than written prayers, and most of them are not nearly as well crafted.' Certainly we can have spontaneous prayer that overflows from the encounter with God in the moment, but spontaneous prayers should not just reflect a lack of adequate preparation.
- Consider quoting scripture passages into your prayers as a means of stirring faith in those listening. Also use or adapt the prayers of others (see, for example, Valley of Vision below).
- Consider your tone when praying.
 - Don't be too formal; using archaic religious terms does not mean your prayer is more holy. All it will do is distance you from the people you're leading and make God sound dull and irrelevant. Avoid jargon.
 - Don't be too flippant as this can lead to a dumbed down sense of the transcendence and holiness of God.
 - Don't put on pretence when you're praying. There are a great many temptations for those praying publicly to be so aware of the others around them that they lose sight of the fact that they are praying to God. Guard against hypocrisy.

Useful resources

The Valley of Vision edited by Arthur Bennet, a collection of old prayers that will deeply enrich your prayer life. A great source of material that could be adapted for use in Glenabbey.

A Call to Spiritual Reformation by DA Carson takes you in a thoughtful and God centred way through many of Paul's prayers in the New Testament.

www.paultrippministries.blogspot.com contains prayer poems written by Paul Tripp.

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Leading public prayer

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. Rom 11

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thes 5:16-18

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Ps 51:1

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Ps 13:1

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? Ps 137:1,4

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Ps 63:1

I love you, O LORD, my strength. Ps 18:1

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. Ps 119:18

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Phil 4:6

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone. 1 Tim 2:1

Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Ps 119:33

Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Ps 119:36

Sound familiar?

Almighty God, we come unto you now. Because of our transgressions, we are not worthy of you, but we plead forgiveness for Christ's sake. Give us fervent hearts to worship you in a faithful and worthy manner. Let your word be mighty in us for the pulling down on strongholds, and to the casting down of imaginations and everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. Amen.

Lord God, it's just so good to be here today with you. Here with the family of brothers and sisters who love you. And we just ask that you would be really near to us, and help us to really just lift up your name in praise. Lord, you're just incredible.

Are these good examples of public prayer? If not, what's wrong with them?

What is the purpose of our public prayers?

The main difference between private and public prayers is that public prayer exists in *two dimensions*: for the blessing of God *and* of those gathered in the meeting. In 1 Cor 14, Paul is addressing the issue of intelligibility in corporate gatherings, specifically praying in tongues. He says, 'If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand

say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.' (v16-17) Earlier in the chapter, Paul calls the Corinthians to 'strive to excel in building up the church' (v12). Our meetings should serve to build each other up, and our corporate prayers play a vital role in this. As with all aspects of our gifting, we must work to grow and develop in the gifting that we might better serve others as we lead in corporate worship.

What are the types of public prayers?

Our corporate prayer life will be enriched if we consider the wide variety of prayers used in the bible and throughout the church. We could begin a list of types like this:

- **Adoration/praise** – acknowledging God's divine nature and worth, marvelling in who he is, finding delight in telling him how wonderful he is.
- **Thanksgiving** – thanking him for all he has done on our behalf, as a natural response to the undeserved grace poured out on us. We are called to give thanks in all circumstances, which, when leading public prayer, will need thought and pastoral sensitivity given the context of hurt and pain that many bring into our services of worship.
- **Love and longing for God – perhaps** expressing our delight in God; perhaps expressing our desire for greater delight; perhaps expressing a sorrow that the delight and desire are not all they should be.
- **Confession** – where we acknowledge both our sins and sinfulness before a holy God, turn in repentance from those sins and seek forgiveness from our God who delights to show mercy.
- **Lament** – both *personal*, allowing for the person struggling with personal issues to connect with our gathered worship; and *corporate*, in light of national tragedies.
- **Prayer for illumination** – usually before the teaching, where we ask God by his Spirit to take his word and apply it to our hearts, challenging, encouraging and admonishing us through his living and active word.
- **Pastoral petitions** – where we bring our requests before our God, gathering the joys and celebrations, needs and concerns of the worshippers. In this prayer, we also remember the needs of others in the wider world. Paul's prayers in the NT give great examples of things of substance to pray for when praying for others.
- **Prayer of dedication** – in response to the God who has spoken, where we dedicate ourselves to apply what God has said to us and where we seek his help to empower the obedience he requires from us.
- **Blessings/benedictions** – where we speak words of God's grace and love over people.

Of course a single prayer may contain more than one of these elements and we may not have them all included in every meeting, nor in the same proportion in different meetings. But nevertheless, this list gives us an idea of the diversity that should characterise our corporate prayer life over a period of time.

How wide is the variety of prayer used in corporate worship in Glenabbey? Which of these types do we major on? Which are less common? Which ones do we need to build in more regularly? Do we allow time for confession, reflection and repentance? How often should we do this? As there has been an increasing recovery of songs of lament

in recent years, are we at the same time learning to articulate lament in prayers? Are our pastoral prayers sensitive to the needs and circumstances of Glenabbey and of our local the community? Do they lift our eyes off our own situation to express a concern for the world and those who suffer?

How can we incorporate public prayer in Glenabbey?

Just as there is a great deal of variety in the types of prayers, so there is a variety of methods of praying. These methods would include:

- **Prayers by the corporate worship leader**
 - **Written prayers** – written either by the service leader or taken from some other source (and adapted if necessary).
 - **Planned prayer** – where we have considered the overall content and direction of our prayer before hand, spending time considering how best to lead others in prayer, but we have not written those prayers out word for word.
 - **Spontaneous prayer** – which is a spur-of-the-moment response in prayer to God, not planned out beforehand.
- **Corporate prayers** – those actively including the congregation. They could be:
 - **Unison prayers** – where we all join together to say a prayer read from the screen
 - **Responsive prayers** – where the worship leader prays and the rest of the worshippers join periodically with a phrase like 'Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer'.
 - **Silent corporate prayer** – where the worship leader guides the people on the topic of prayer and then leaves space for the people to pray silently to God.
 - **Spontaneous prayers** – similar to the above, but the worshippers are encouraged to speak out their prayers audibly, either in the whole group or in smaller groups.
- **Sung prayers**

Of course, there isn't a neat distinction between praying and singing. Many of the songs we sing are clearly prayers, and these can be chosen carefully and woven in to our set lists, along side spoken prayers, to allow people to respond to God in prayer.

What are the strengths and potential problems with spontaneous prayer? And of written prayers? Of all these methods with which is our congregation most comfortable? Which methods do we tend not to use? Why? Which of these alternative methods could be used to help us pray more genuinely and creatively? How willing would our people be to engage in corporate (spoken) prayer? In which form? How can we encourage greater participation? Do the prayers — both those spoken by a leader on behalf of the congregation and spoken by the congregation — reflect the voice and concerns of the range of people present? Is anyone left out of prayer? What changes in type, language or method of prayer would help include more people in our meetings?