

Leading Prayers in Church

Dr Neil Percival

1. Qualities of a prayer leader

There are two qualities that make an effective leader of corporate intercessory prayer.

First, a prayer leader must have a heart for intercessory prayer. What does that look like? Consider your personal prayer life. Do you believe that prayer is one of the most important ways that we can individually and corporately intervene for good in the world? How frequently do you engage in intercessory prayer? Our corporate prayers in Church are a public reflection of the prayers that we pray throughout the week for those in need.

Second, a prayer leader requires some skill in public speaking. This can be learned and is an area where we can all improve.

2. Practical advice

- A number of forms for prayer are provided in the Prayer Book (pp. 14-16, 172-173, 183-187). While these can be used as printed, they can also function as outlines and examples for prayer that we can adapt to suit our own specific needs and context. Similarly, some of the language in these prayers is dated and should be modernised. Be creative.
- The forms of prayer in the Prayer Book include a number of broad topics: the welfare of the world, our nation, and all in authority; the universal church, its members, and its mission; the concerns of the local community; those in need; and thanksgiving for the faithful departed. Whether or not we use the words of the Prayer Book, this is a good model to follow.
- There are a number of other liturgical resources that provide weekly prayers and these can provide helpful variety. Some have the advantage of following the themes and language of the lectionary readings. “Let Us Pray” is one example., However, as with any resource, check the theology. “Let Us Pray” occasionally uses the phrase, “we pray for all who have died...” This is not consistent with the bible’s teaching. We can, however, rejoice that believers are with the Lord and give thanks for their life and witness. Change the words where necessary. Websites like <https://re-worship.blogspot.com> can be very helpful.

- Prayer is relational and a means of deepening our connection with God. We can only pray with confidence because God is our heavenly Father, we belong to his family, and because Jesus, our brother, is interceding on our behalf. We should address God as “Father” and conclude our prayers with some variation of, “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
- Prayer is a means of building unity with one another. As much as possible, we should use plural pronouns like “we” and “our” rather the singular pronouns like “I” and “me”.
- If possible, draw on themes from the Bible readings and application points from the sermon. The prayers are one part of a larger worship service and this will help integrate our prayers into the flow of the service as a whole.
- When praying for individuals in the Church or local community, make sure you know how their names should be pronounced. If names are difficult, practice saying them out loud. Getting names right shows respect and builds connection. When we mispronounce the same names week after week, we show that we haven’t made an effort and this can lead to a sense of alienation and disconnection.
- Make prayers specific, however, be very cautious about identifying anyone publicly in prayer unless they have expressly given their consent. This can cause embarrassment and may be a breach of privacy.
- As well as praying for the needs of individuals, our corporate prayers should address the tragedies, possibilities, and challenges of life today. We need to be aware of current events and important issues and that means research.
- If a microphone is available, use it. If there is no microphone, speak loudly and clearly. Look up while praying. Bowing our heads, while showing respect and reverence, makes us much harder to hear. Arrange with someone in the congregation to give you a signal if you need to speak louder.
- Stick to time. Ask the service leader how long they have allocated for the prayers.
- Leading prayers during worship is a privilege and significant responsibility. It requires careful preparation and a commitment to improving our practice. Take it seriously. Don’t just turn up and wing it.