

# Leading Intercessions in Church

## Introduction

Leading intercessions in public worship is vital and important ministry. Done well it both enables the entire congregation to pray together as the body of Christ and places prayer at the centre of the life of the church. There are many ways that this ministry might be expressed but the basis for the ministry is rooted in the biblical witness to the prayer of the people of God and it is crucial that this underpins all that we do.

## Biblical Background

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8:26).*

Prayer should be:

...in *faith*

*Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:7-11)*

- praying in faith means depending on the truth of the nature and character of God as he has revealed himself in Jesus.

...in *agreement*

*Jesus said, "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:19-20)*

- agreement in prayer requires prayerfully seeking God's will and God's way.

...with *thanksgiving*

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)*

- thankfulness focuses on God and reminds us of our dependence on him. It gives glory to him and builds up our faith.

...in *Jesus' name*

*Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." (John 14:12-14)*

- asking in the way Jesus would ask (such as with compassion and desire for God's will to be done rather than our own)

*What does the Bible specifically tell us to pray for?*

- those who persecute us/our enemies (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:28)
- for the sick (James 5:13-14)
- for all Christian people (Ephesians 6:18)
- that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere (2 Thessalonians 3:1)
- for everyone but specifically for those with secular authority (1 Timothy 2:1)
- that we may not enter the time of trial (Matthew 26:41 and the LP)

These concerns are specifically reflected in the *Common Worship* pattern in Order One of the Communion Service (p 174) where we pray for the Church, Creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority, the local community, those who suffer, and rejoice in the communion of saints.

*What should we avoid in prayer?*

- heaping up empty words (Matthew 6:7)
- long prayers (Mark 12:40)
- praying for those in mortal sin? (1 John 5:16)

### **Leading the Intercessions in Public Worship**

*The intercessions need to:*

- spring from a life of personal prayer (if we do not have a prayer life of our own we should not be trying to lead others)
- reflect as far as possible the concerns of the congregation (so we need to think about the type of service, avoid our own personal agendas and seek to find out the prayerful concerns of others)
- actually enable the congregation to pray and use forms of words that facilitate this (avoid introductory phrases such as “Let us pray for...”)
- involve opportunities for congregational response (if you are using a response other than ‘Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**’ or whatever is printed in the service card, then make sure the first petition before the use of the response is as short as possible to avoid people forgetting the response, or rehearse it as soon as you’ve told people what it is).
- avoid becoming mini-sermons or monologues. There are a number of ways in which the intercessions can be a problem here. One is the leader giving their opinion and then moving to prayer. We don’t need their opinion (and ours may well be different) but we may well share a concern and simply need to be led in prayer. Another (which has happened a bit recently) is using phrases like ‘we hope’ or ‘we wish’. These are warning signs (so check your script) that we have drifted from actually praying to offering vague hopes and dreams (which are often quite personal to the leader).

*Some pointers:*

- The Christian tradition is to pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son and *in* the power of the Holy Spirit. This trinitarian pattern is almost always used in the Collects and reflects the biblical witness. The name or title we use for God is important and can usefully be dictated by what we are praying for. So, an obvious example might be to pray ‘Creator God’ when leading an intercession about climate change. Another might be praying ‘Merciful God’ in the face of a natural disaster.
- All those involved in leading worship need to be aware of how gendered language is heard by others.
- Using famous prayers or collects can be helpful but should not be overused as the intercessions become rather wooden.
- The congregation should know when the intercessions have ended (by saying the Grace together or “Merciful Father...” or using one of the ending prayers in *Common Worship* p288).

- Space for silence is seldom wasted and can be used for the congregation to bring their own concerns silently (or aloud!).
- The intercessions need to involve specific praying for things to which the congregation can assent (so, for instance, there is an established tradition in the Church of England that we do not pray for the dead. We may give thanks for their lives, rejoice in fellowship with the saints in glory and suchlike but we do not 'pray for the repose of the soul of...'). When the issue is political it can often be helpful, for instance, to pray for wisdom for those in authority or for the electorate etc.
- When the service is an All-Age Service of the Word the prayers need to involve a healthy dose of thanksgiving as well as petitioning.
- It is always vital to check the news on Saturday night/Sunday morning (the BBC website is good for this, as is the Sky News website) and make sure you go with the big news stories of the week and of the hour.

*Some resources:*

- Newspaper/Internet/TV/Radio
- The Bible. Biblical prayers are an excellent source. For instance one could use (suitably adjusted) such prayers as Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3.14–21; Ephesians 1.17–19, 2 Thessalonians 1.11–12, Colossians 4.3, 1 Timothy 2.1-2a, or the direction that James offers in James 1.5–8.
- *Common Worship* (see the form on p281, which is also on the CofE website)
- Do take notice of note 15 on p332 of *Common Worship* (concerning prayers at the Communion service)
- *Patterns for Worship* and *Times and Seasons* (available on the CofE website)
- *The Intercessions Handbook* (borrow from JBB)
- de Lange, A., Simpson, L., *How to...Lead the Prayers* (Grove Worship Series No.169) which is available post-free from [www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk)
- The clergy have other resources available, do ask.

*Things to note:*

- We have a regular prayer meeting called *Refresh* (held in the Saint Andrew's Centre) for praying for our Sunday worship for both churches and for all those who are taking a leading role. Check the pewsheets diary for dates.
- Please contact the service leader and the preacher well in advance for information on what is happening in a specific service and if there is a theme they would like the prayers to focus on.
- We always pray before the service in the vestry with the churchwardens; we welcome all those involved in leading aspects of our worship (such as those leading the intercessions) to join us. Just come to the vestry 5 mins before the service starts.

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