

Open Table Worship Service on Prayer – Leader’s Sheets

Theme: Growing in the habit of prayer

A complete worship service weaving together scripture, prayer, meditation, readings, reflection & conversation, compiled & written by Ana Gobledale for *Open Table*.

This service is designed for a congregation gathered around tables. It can easily be adapted for a more traditional setting.

There are several choices to make, i.e. readings and activities to choose. The resources will easily provide material for additional services or sessions focusing on types and methods of prayer.

Each section of the service is available as a separate print out (listed below in ‘items to print’).

Materials & planning

- Items in centre of each table:
 - pictures or 3-D items related to prayer, might be of praying hands or a person/persons in a position of prayer
 - gathering questions printed on strips of paper.
- Have all readings ready to use, in a font large enough for easy reading.
- Bible translations: Suggested are *The Inclusive Bible: the first Egalitarian Translation* 2007 by Priests for Equality; *New Revised Standard Version*; or *The Message*. Ideally, have all three available. NRSV provides the scholarly translation and TM provides an interpretation in modern vernacular. *The Inclusive Bible* provides a ready-to-read inclusive language translation.
- Candles to light (one lit candle to use for lighting others)
- Communion elements: juice and bread to be shared (gluten free and non-alcoholic, so no one is excluded). These might be set out before the service on each table or set aside to be brought forward later in the service. Consider setting out a full unsliced loaf of bread and a bowl or bunch of grapes.

Items to print

Each item listed below is also included, with the link, at the point of the service at which it is used. They are included here for easy reference. (They are noted in **RED** throughout.)

- Gathering questions – to cut in strips
- Handout – Readings about prayer: enough copies for each person to take one with them at the close of the service.
- Bible readings on prayer
- The Knots Prayer – (if you are using this Activity Option)
- A way into prayer – heart worksheet (if you are using this Activity Option)
- Hymns (as needed—see suggestions below)
- *A version of the Lord’s Prayer* by Stephen Best
- *The Lord’s Prayer* — interpreted by Sam Alexander
- *Disciples Prayer* by Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson
- *The Abba Prayer* by Rex AE Hunt
- *Earth Maker*, a modern version from New Zealand

Coffee & Chat

Have a look at the prayer-related items on your table.

Gathering questions: for discussion around the tables:

Complete these sentences:

- To me, prayer is
- I pray when.....
- When I pray, I hope that

Gathering

Purpose: *to establish as a group; to each fully arrive, moving from the outside world to being fully present here; to get to know names; to affirm one another as God's creation.*

Let us greet one another as members of the family of God. You are invited to introduce yourself with your first name and one of the suggested phrases, and then we all will join in the response.

All: We are here. We are the family of God.

Each person: I am (first name). 'I am here.' or 'I am who I am,' or both.

Alternatively: I am (first name) and I am a child of God.

All: (after each person's introduction): **'You are who you are, created in the image of God.'**

Sharing a greeting of peace:

Whoever we are and wherever we are on life's journey, we are welcome here. I invite you to turn to those near you, greeting one another saying, 'Peace' or 'Shalom' or 'Salaam,' whichever you are comfortable with.

Sing: *Sing a familiar song/hymn related to Prayer. Here are some possibilities:*

- *O Lord, hear my prayer* (change to plural: 'our'); come and listen to me/us.
- *Day by day, dear Lord*
- *What a friend we have in Jesus...carry everything to God in prayer*
- *Prayer Canticle: We do not know how to pray as we ought* (Erik Routley)
- *There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord* (Anne Quigley)

So...let's talk about prayer

Reading the Bible

Choose three or four of these readings. Print them out and pass the printed sheet around to different readers. The prepared sheet is called 'Bible readings on prayer'.

Psalm 54.2: Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

Psalm 69.13: But as for me, my prayer is to you, Yahweh. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

Psalm 88.2: let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

Luke 11.1: Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'

Acts of the Apostles 2.42: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Romans 12.12: Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Colossians 4.2: Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.

Readings about prayer – on the handout 'Readings about prayer'

Distribute the handout. Have people read a section/item. Depending upon time available and interest, invite comments and responses. A suggestion: start with the poem by Mary Oliver.

You might ask:

How does the statement/poem match your understanding/experience of prayer?

How is it different? What rings true for you. What doesn't?

- "If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy." --Anonymous
- "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." --Soren Kierkegaard
- "Prayer is not so much talking to or addressing God, but rather about deepening our awareness that God—the Breath of Life present through the universe – comes to visible expression in us."
--Michael Morwood, *Praying a New Story*
- Prayer is no easy matter. It demands a relationship.... A first prayer is often a painful prayer,

because you discover you don't want to let go...To be calm and quiet all by yourself...involves a self-discipline where the urge to get up and go is recognized as a temptation to look elsewhere for what is really close at hand.' --Henri J. M. Nouwen, from *With Open Hands*

- *The Serenity Prayer* -- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. Thy will not mine be done.

- *Praying by Mary Oliver*

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try



to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

- *Prayer by Saint Teresa of Avila*

Let nothing disturb thee
Let nothing affright thee
All things are passing
God alone is changeless



Patience obtaineth all things
Those who hath God wanteth nothing
God alone sufficeth
Amen.

More about prayer

- "Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can't. Take yourself as you find yourself; start from that." -- Dom Chapman
- "A lot of trouble about prayer would disappear if we only realized – really realized, and not just supposed that it was so – that we go to pray not because we love prayer but because we love God." --Hubert van Zeller
- A good prayer life is defined by saying 'please' in the morning and 'thanks' at night.
-- Anonymous

An activity in prayer

Choose one or two of the following activity options. Explanations and directions are set out on separate pages.

1. Conversations – a gateway to prayer
2. A guided time of prayerful meditation -- inner stillness
3. The Examen – prayerful discernment
4. The Knot Prayer
5. A way into prayer – letting go of worry and anxiety (heart worksheet)

Activity Option 1: Conversations – a gateway to prayer

You may want to choose only one or two questions to help people have adequate time and not feel rushed.

In pairs, consider these questions:

- For what am I grateful today? Where might I say 'thank you' to God?
- By what am I challenged today? Where might I say 'please, help' to God?
- Where is God in my life today? Where have I encountered God today? How might my recognition of God's presence (or lack of recognition) make a difference to my prayer life?

Activity Option 2: A guided time of prayerful meditation -- inner stillness*

Explanation:

A temptation for Christians can be to be so concerned with 'doing' that we neglect the inner stillness out of which Christian social action best flows.

- In this inner stillness our being is quieted, able to be attentive to God's presence within ourselves, within others, and in history. Here we can become purged of our bowing down before the idols we do not wish to serve: the idols of control, of arrogance, of frenetic doing, of taking on too much.
- In this inner place of peace, we can better see things as they are, and recognize the choices before us. We can hear the invitation to renounce again the vicious principalities and powers around us, and to say a quiet "no" to their attempts to seduce our own spirits.
- In this inner stillness we may surrender to God the hidden corners of our willfulness and other secret motives.

Action: (adapted)

1. First get comfortable. Shake out your hands. Roll your head. Close your eyes. Offer a silent prayer that in this prayer exercise you may be fully present to God (without this intentionality the act of prayer may be a hollow shell).

2. Breathing:

Slowly take in a full breath. Now hold the breath for several seconds...1...2...3...4..

Now slowly exhale. 1...2...3...4...Pause. Now repeat the process over again. .

Repeat at least 4 times.

As you breathe in, consciously breathe into yourself *that which is of God*; and as you exhale, breathe out of yourself *that which is not of God*. Let God guide you into any specific content for this prayer; as you breathe in the fruits of the Spirit, and breathe out anxiety and the desire to control, fear and willfulness.

Continue breathing, concentrating on that which is not God leaving you as you exhale, and that which is of God entering you as you inhale. (Continue for a bit.)

3. Now bring to mind a specific, problematic situation you face.

As you breathe in, consciously breathe into this situation *that which is of God*.

As you exhale, breathe out of this situation *that which is not of God*.

Continue breathing, concentrating on that which in this situation is not God leaving you as you exhale, and that which in this situation is of God entering you as you inhale.

Breathe in God's compassion and wisdom.

Breathe out your fears, your anxieties, your worries.

Continue breathing and praying for 2 minutes (or a time comfortable to all).

Breathe in God's wisdom and understanding about this situation.

Breathe out your own frustration and confusion.

4. **Bringing your prayer to a close**

a. Let your mind rest. Place the problem in God's hands. With your eyes closed, see yourself place the problem, the worry, in the hand of God. And leave it there.

b. Prayer

God, thank you for tools to help us discern your will, and make right judgements. Thank you for the inner stillness in each of us where we can go to find your wisdom and guidance. Please hold the problems and concerns we are bringing to you today. Thank you that we are never alone. Amen.

c. Now feel your feet on the floor, your hands beside your chair, your heart beating, the hardness of the chair. Slowly open your eyes.

*Adapted from 'Inner Stillness: Seedbed of Action; A Suggestion for Uniting Prayer and Action' 2003, Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA).

Activity Option 3: The Examen: prayerful discernment

Explanation:

The *Examen* is spiritual practice that was commended by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. The *Examen* offers us an opportunity to examine ourselves, to look deeper at our relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. I will be leading this time in the manner of a guided meditation, providing quiet pauses for prayerful reflection.

Activity:

1. Find a quiet and comfortable space to be still.
Suggest that people sit comfortably. They might consider sitting up tall, feet flat on the floor, hands resting on thighs. Closing one's eyes can facilitate calm and focus.
2. Try to be aware of God's presence. Sense God in your breathing. In each breath you take, feel God's spirit filling you. (pause; give ample time for people to focus on their breathing).
3. *In a clear voice, say each of these lines, leaving significant time in between for reflection and prayer:*
 - Consider the day's events.
 - Where have you felt close to God?
 - Where have you felt distant from God?
 - What has brought pleasure?
 - What has brought difficulty?
 - Focus on one particular incident. Is there something that God wants to show you?
4. Pray with me.
God, we give thanks for this opportunity to reach out to you in prayer.
For this time of reflection and examination.
Make us mindful of your presence today and always. Amen.
5. Now feel your feet on the floor, your hands beside your chair, your heart beating, the hardness of the chair.
6. Remain in silence as you open your eyes and rejoin our circle.

Activity Option 4: **The Knots Prayer**

1. Ask someone to read 'The Knots Prayer' aloud. You might ask three people to read, each reading one section.

The Knots Prayer

Dear God,
Please untie the knots
That are in my mind,
My heart and my life.
Remove the have nots,
The can nots and the do nots
That I have in my mind.

Erase the will nots,
May nots,
Might nots that may find
A home in my heart.
Release me from the could nots,
Would nots and
Should nots that obstruct my life.

And most of all,
Dear God,
I ask that you remove from my mind,
My heart and my life all of the 'am nots'
That I have allowed to hold me back,
Especially the thought
That I am not good enough.
Amen

Unknown author

2. Find a partner and introduce yourself.
3. With your partner, share on these questions:
 - How do you relate to this prayer?
 - What knots do you hold in your heart?
 - What knots in your life hold you back?

Activity Option 5: A way into prayer – heart worksheet

Read: *Matthew 14.22-33*

Directions: These are printed on the sheet. You might provide a quiet time or soft music while people work on the sheet quietly. Or you might provide guidance, reading the lines aloud and offering time between tasks.

Inside the heart write all the things that you feel anxious or worried about.

Consider Jesus' words: 'Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid'.

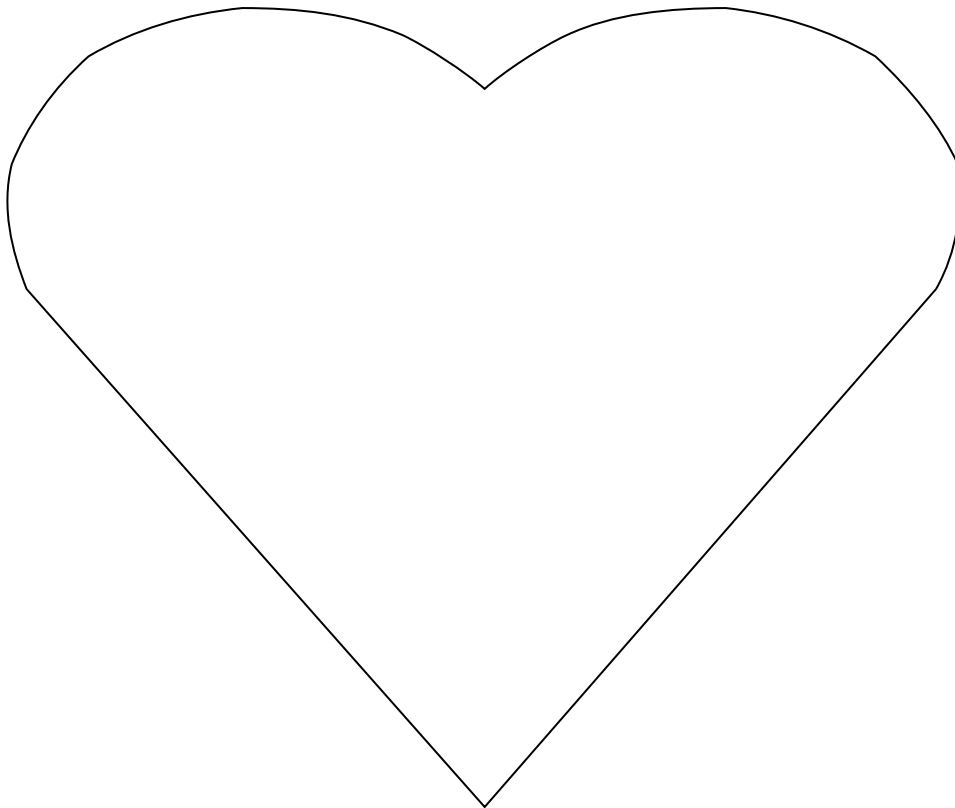
Ask yourself if you are willing to let God care for your anxieties and worries.

Write the words 'God', 'Jesus', 'Spirit' (or other word or name for God you particularly resonate with) around the edge of the heart, encircling your fears.

When you are ready, pray to let go of trying to be in control of those things listed inside the circle.

Release your grip. Let go. Trust God.

Closing Prayer: God, Thank you for taking our worries and fears from us. Grant us a deeper trust in you and a looser grip on the things of the world. Amen.



Sharing & Caring – praying for our world

With this service's focus on prayer, consider a fresh approach to this time of sharing & caring. Read through the options and choose one.

We join together in a community/circle of prayer, bringing our concerns and joys before one another and before God. As the psalmist writes in Psalm 54.2, 'Hear our prayers, O God; give ear to the words of our mouths.' We will take turns, with each person lighting a candle and sharing a prayer. If you prefer to light the candle in silence, that is fine.

Option 1: Sharing Gratuities

Bring to mind things for which you are grateful. When you light your candle, I invite you, in an attitude of gratitude to God, to share one thing for which you are grateful. After your prayer, we all will respond saying, 'God, for all your gifts, **we give you thanks.**'

Option 2: Intercessory Prayer

Bring to mind a person or concern in the world you feel called to pray for. When you light your candle, I invite you to say the name of the person or describe the concern, prayerfully lifting them to God. After your prayer, we all will respond saying, 'God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**'

Option 3: Hopes for Today

Bring to mind a hope for today. It might be a hope for yourself, for someone you know or for our world. When you light your candle, I invite you to say aloud your prayer of hope. After your prayer, we all will respond saying, 'God of hope, **hear our prayer.**'

After everyone has had the opportunity to light a candle, close the time of sharing with a prayer. If you are comfortable, start with the song, 'O Lord, hear our prayer' or 'Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me (us)'. If you just start singing, both of these songs are familiar enough that others will likely join in.

Pray with me.

God, thank you for the power of prayer. Thank you for this opportunity to lift our prayers to you in faith and hope. May our prayers, empowered by your spirit, spread your light throughout our families, our work places, our sports clubs [add other common groups to which people belong] and our world. Amen.

Invitation to Communion

The table is set for our special meal. The bread, the juice, prepared and presented. Ready to be served and shared. We remember Jesus sharing a meal like this with his disciples, his friends. Today we are those disciples, those friends. Each one of us is welcome as we are. The bread is gluten free and the juice is non-alcoholic so that all may partake freely. No one is excluded from this meal.

Communion song

As we approach this meal of love and hope, we prepare ourselves with song.

Choose a song to lead into communion, ideally a familiar reflective song/hymn on the theme of communion. You might try new words to familiar tunes:

- *[Invitation to the sacrament](#), by George Stuart, Australia, Tune: St Peter*
- *[We are welcome](#), by George Stuart, Australia, Tune: Lauda Anima – Praise my Soul*

Prayer of preparation

As we approach this meal of mystery in the hope and promise of forgiveness and reconciliation, we prepare ourselves in prayer. Pray with me.

Spirit of Life, receive us as we are, faithful and questioning, trusting and doubting.

With this shared meal, this feast of love for the family of God,

renew us and strengthen us to live in gratitude and joy. May it be so.

The Jesus Prayer (Lord's Prayer)

Join me in the Lord's Prayer (using an alternative version written by _____).

Use a familiar version (which many people will know from memory) or introduce an alternative version. Alternative versions can be found below and on [Worship Words](http://worshipwords.co.uk/lords-prayer/) at

<http://worshipwords.co.uk/lords-prayer/>

- *A version of the Lord's Prayer by Stephen Best*
Great Love; the root and sap of our evolving fullness...
- *The Lord's Prayer — interpreted by Sam Alexander*
Those things that are good and right and true: I acknowledge them with honour and love...
- *Disciples Prayer by Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson*
Holy One whose name we honour and praise, When we laugh, you laugh with us.
When we weep, your tears wash over the earth.....By your creativity, the universe was born,
And in your love, we are sustained. Amen.
- *The Abba Prayer by Rex AE Hunt*
- *Earth Maker*, a modern version from New Zealand

Time for quiet reflection

As desired by the gathered congregation. Some groups appreciate times of silence; others are uncomfortable with too much silence. If you are not sure, ask those gathered.

Words of Remembrance: the communion story

Jesus is the host at this meal as he was at the First Communion, the Last Supper.

This is ordinary bread and ordinary juice. The bread, symbolic of the body of Jesus. The juice, symbolic of the life-blood of Jesus.

When Jesus shared the bread with his friends, he explained that he is the Bread of Life. As bread nourishes and strengthens our bodies, Jesus nourishes and strengthens our spirits and minds. When we eat the bread together, we are strengthened as a community to remember Jesus and to do the things Jesus would do in our world, to work for justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

When Jesus shared the wine, he explained that through this cup, we are nourished with forgiveness and love. We are made whole. Drinking the juice together helps us remember God's covenant with us and our responsibility to this suffering world, to be agents of healing where there is brokenness, of hope where there is despair.

When we eat the bread together and drink the juice together, something extraordinary happens which brings us closer to Jesus and to one another. We become the 'Body of Christ.' Our eyes and ears are opened to see and hear what Jesus would see in our world. Our arms and hands are empowered to do Jesus's work to help others. May this shared meal of mystery manifest the essence of the risen Christ in our midst.

Prayer to bless the meal

God, thank you for calling us together as community and for this time together around this table. Bless this meal, this simple bread and juice, that it might renew and strengthen us, with both the power and gentleness of Jesus. Amen.

Breaking of the Bread

Break bread as words are spoken:

Sharing the broken bread, we are renewed and made whole.

Pouring of the cup

Pour our juice as words are spoken:

Sharing the cup, we are reconciled with God and one another.

Prayer

Pray with me. God of hope and promise, thank you for gathering us at this table. May the grace of this special meal make us one body, one spirit, reconciled in Christ. Amen.

Sharing the meal

Ministering to you on behalf of Jesus, our host. All things are ready.

Sharing the bread

When you take a piece of bread, please hold it until everyone has a piece. Then we will all eat together. [or: Please eat the bread as you receive it.]

When everyone has bread:

This is the Bread of Life. Eat, and rejoice, for you are part of the Body of Christ.

Sharing the juice

When you take a cup of juice, please hold it until everyone has been served. Then we will all drink together. [or: Please drink the cup as you receive it.]

When everyone has a cup:

This is the Cup of Blessing. Drink, and rejoice that the life-blood of Christ flows through you with forgiveness and renewal.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Pray with me.

Source of power and life,

Transform us through this meal.

May our very veins overflow with your power, wisdom and love.

Empower us to serve your people and honour your creation.

Strengthen us to do your will wisely and in love.

Unite us as the living body and blood, we pray. Amen.

Preparing to go out into the world

Sing

Sing a familiar uplifting song/hymn, possibly one relating to the power of prayer.

See suggestions earlier in the service.

Closing Prayer

God, as we leave this gathering, renew us for a prayerful and active life of faith. May our conversations with you, our prayers, this week, be honest and constant. Amen.

Go empowered by prayer!

Closing Act

Have another cuppa?

Shake hands?

Slip away quietly?

Whatever is comfortable for the group and for the individuals.