



Prayer sessions that engage

TN154 Training Notes series: Communication

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These notes form a group with Training Notes TN47, *Breathing life into the intercessions*, TN69, *Creative prayer diaries*, and TN150, *Prayer at church business meetings*, to provide a set of four resources that take an innovative approach to different aspects of corporate prayer in church life.

A church that gathers for prayer, with people bringing their praises and petitions to God, is powerful. What could be more inspiring?

And yet church meetings for prayer can be, dare I say it, just a fraction dull. Many I come across are not particularly well attended. If we are not careful, they easily default to a worthy but fixed agenda of prayer for the world, the Church, our church and each other. Not only is this format, when repeated each time, less than exciting, the people who pray can be somewhat predictable. It all lacks the passion that it should have. It should not be like this.

So, to add to earlier notes on creative approaches to intercessions in services and printed prayer diaries, here are some innovative ideas to vary the pattern of prayer meetings (a term it might be a good idea to avoid). I have used all of them myself in my own church.

Each of the following works best if a large meeting splits down into groups of six to eight people. This then needs someone overseeing each group or some other means of dividing the time up evenly and moving groups on to a next section.

All of these assume there has been some form of introduction with everyone all together which has probably included a short time of worship or a Bible reading and comment to focus everyone's mind on our listening Father.

So here now are four possible ways to structure the session. We start with a very straightforward idea.

1 **Pray through your church prayer diary**

If your church print or email a monthly prayer diary, this can be a useful way of helping people to pray for all the themes covered there.

Print enough copies for each person present to have one. If the items are arranged by day of the month (so a total of about 30 items for prayer), break this into weekly groups, encourage everyone to read the seven items for that week and then use them as the basis for their prayers.

It is best to allow a couple of minutes of silence for each week's group so there is time to read the items. But then it is not necessary for those present to pray through the list in order. They can just pick any item in that week and pray.

For those not used to praying out loud, encourage them simply to use the words in the prayer diary. This can then become a helpful way of encouraging new people to pray aloud.

If your prayer diary (for Anglicans) has the Sunday collects included, why not say these together as you come to each group of items. This gives some variety to the structure and gets everyone saying something out loud. There is no harm in everyone praying the same prayer aloud together – and many of the Collects have beautiful turns of phrase.

Break the time available into about four equal sessions with group leaders suggesting a pause to read the next week's items at regular intervals.

For churches with a weekly list of seven items for prayer on the notice-sheet or email newsletter rather than a monthly publication, follow the same plan but either list the four weeks' of items onto one sheet and distribute this, or give everyone the four notice-sheets and take one at a time.

2 **Use today's newspaper**

This is similar to my idea of using a newspaper for Sunday intercessions (see Training Notes TN47) but in this case everyone has a go. It is a powerful way of leading into prayer for the world and its needs – including the UK and its political scene.

Buy copies of one of that day's newspapers. The Mail is fast becoming the most popular daily in the UK so that might be a good one to use. You do not have to share its political standpoint! Have enough copies for one per group of about six to eight people. Take the paper to pieces and hand out a news or comment page to each person in the group (you can use the entertainment and sports pages too if you wish but it may be more straightforward to use just news pages).

Explain what is going to happen like this, and ensure everyone understands;

Each person to pick one headline/story that catches their attention from the page they have been given. Tell the group the headline and first sentence or so, and then turn what you have read into a simple, short prayer.

Repeat if you have been round as many people as want to pray.

Please do not use this as an opportunity to comment too much on the item you have chosen. We are here to pray and not to have a discussion!

For people who feel self-conscious about praying at prayer meetings, this can draw them out because they are given the basis for a prayer and only they have that

particular news item. This method can lead to richer and more varied prayers for the world.

Someone might say, "I've found a piece here about (a current news or political issue). It says (reads headline and opening paragraph)". Then they offer a brief prayer.

Someone else might choose a photograph (do encourage this as an alternative) and base a prayer on what that shows. If using a picture, encourage the person to show the picture to the group so everyone has a visual image in mind. When I used this recently one person chose an advertisement for spring bulbs and then prayed for environmental issues.

It's fine to keep your eyes open for this if you want to. Once people get into this, it can turn a normally sticky prayer time into people wanting to share what they feel needs prayer from the stories or pictures in front of them.

Hint: if you choose a newspaper that has its pages stapled together, take the staple out first!

You can use a similar idea if praying for mission partners by sharing out their prayer letters to the group.

3 **List local streets/roads**

For my third idea, take an area around your church that you feel covers the homes you seek to serve. This might be a parish for some churches, but otherwise take your village or small town, or simply the streets adjacent to your church building.

Print on a sheet the names of all the main streets or roads (I omitted cul-de-sacs last time I did this to save the list getting too long), perhaps divided up into groups of roads to form four or so geographical groups. Then divide your prayer time so that you can cover each of these groups (for example, you might allow quarter of an hour for each geographical group).

As you come to each group of roads, ask those present to list between them church members living within this area. If some of those people are present, pray for them and their witness to their neighbours. Go on to pray for other church members living in the group, for needs that are known to you and in the public domain. Then pray for everyone else living in those roads, that they may in some way hear God speaking to them and link up with a church or your church.

This is a useful means for enabling people to learn where the congregation live but especially to pray for outreach in these roads. It enables the group to focus tightly on each road or area and can build a real sense of mission. You might like to give added value to this idea by providing a map of the area on a board or projected onto a screen and help people see where each road lies.

The idea could also work for the listing of people's workplaces rather than homes – though that would need careful handling if you have people out of work or retired.

Another variation would be to have a map of the area showing schools, shops, community centres, other church buildings, health centres, etc. and then pray for each of these facilities area by area.

You can use the same idea with a map of the world for world needs, listing countries rather than streets.

4 Pray Bible prayers

Finally, many of us are very limited in our choices of words or ideas for prayer compared with Bible prayers which often use colourful phrases and deep concepts. So one idea, which can also be combined with some of the above, is to encourage people to pray in phrases from Bible prayers. In these cases have the relevant Bible passage available to everyone, whether in print, copied onto typed sheets, or on people's phones.

Encourage people to pick phrases from the passage and use those words to pray for the item they are bringing to God.

Passages to use:

- Many of the Psalms – for praise, for lament (which might be a new idea for some) but also for intercession
- Matthew 6:9-13 or Luke 11:2-4 – use the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase, as a pattern
- Paul's prayers as recorded in the epistles in passages such as
Ephesians 1:17-22
Ephesians 3:14-21
Philippians 1:9-11
Colossians 1:3-14
- And many others for specific needs in both Old and New Testaments.

Like other ideas in this list, this can help those new to corporate praying because they can just list a need and then use some of the wording from a Bible passage.

The meeting might be introduced by the leader speaking about the passage to be used that day.

Of course if you use one of these every time you fall back into a predictable prayer meeting. They are suggested here as occasional variations on your normal pattern. It should also be said that changing the format cannot in itself turn a session into an inspirational time of prayer. That needs the work of the Holy Spirit and the openness of those present to labour in prayer for the needs of the world.

If you have other ideas you have used in your church, please let me know and I might add some to updates for these Training Notes. Thank you!

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN154. See also Training Notes TN47, *Breathing life into the intercessions*, TN69, *Creative prayer diaries*, and TN150, *Prayer at church business meetings*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN154 under Communication.

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