



Breathing life into the intercessions

TN47 Training Notes series: Communication

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“Let us pray.” But in the next few minutes after a bidding such as this, do we actually do any praying? How many in the congregation pray by proxy, leaving it all to the leader? Are we brave enough to ask questions such as these?

These notes form one section of a training event for those who have the privilege of leading intercessions in church services. They do not in themselves focus on prayer as such. Instead they apply the idea of creative communication to the task of leading a whole congregation in prayers for others.

The focus here is public intercession, praying for other people in a church service, even though some of these ideas lend themselves to other forms of prayer and praise as well. The ideas in this list will not appeal to all and may not be appropriate in all circumstances. They are presented to try to help you consider new ways of helping people to enter into the reality of praying for others.

Some churches are in danger of downplaying intercession today. I have been to services where there is no opportunity given to pray for others at all. But it is my belief that if we gripped people with the value and power of public intercession, we would be training an army of Christians who will pray.

The key point that an intercession leader needs to keep in mind is that the role is not to do the praying but to enable the whole congregation to pray. Think about that carefully; it is a vital lesson to learn and should impact the way prayers are led.

It helps to have a system so that every group in the church is prayed for on a regular basis, but make sure that the leaders have wide horizons so that your intercessions sweep the world, not just your small corner of it. Here are 14 ideas arranged under four headings to add creativity to what can too easily become predictable. The aim is to draw people into the experience of true prayer.

Intercessions from Scripture

Churches use biblical passages (often the Psalms) to introduce praise, but rarely as a basis for intercession. Scripture has much to teach about how to pray for others. Here are two ideas to make a change from a leader's choice of well-worn phrases.

A1 **Use Bible praying**

There is depth and richness in many of the prayers that are provided for us in Scripture. Use them as they stand or take them phrase by phrase and use each one as a base for one topic for prayer. The obvious example is the Lord's Prayer, but check out some of Paul's passionate prayers for the churches he wrote to (eg. Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-12). Use these phrases to pray for various aspects of the world and for the Church.

A2 **Theme the prayers from one verse**

You can try a similar idea focusing everything on one verse, perhaps one linked to the theme of the service or taken from one of the Scripture readings (and not necessarily connected with prayer). If a suitable verse was Matthew 5:13 ("You are the salt of the earth"), pray for each person on the list that they may be salt where they are. If Micah 6:8 ("What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy...") use this idea when praying for the world's governments. In each case keep coming back to the verse so everyone can see the source as well as the application.

The use of eyes and ears

To help people to pray there needs to be some means to enable them to participate. Simply listening to a leader droning on (and the right use of the voice is a vital issue in this role) is not going to inspire people to pray. So there needs to be real connection between leader, prayer topic and people. Here are some ideas to help such a process.

B1 **Keep eyes open**

An image on a screen or an object held by the leader can give everyone a focus for their mind. It can be as simple as a map of the country for which you are praying, a photograph of the person you are praying for (whether a member of the congregation or a world leader). or a jug of water when praying for a country in drought. Suggest people keep their eyes on the picture or object while you pray. This idea works well at all-age services but does not need to be restricted to these.

B2 **Show a DVD or listen to a sound clip**

If you have data-projection use a very short DVD clip of the mission family you are praying for, or a sound recording of them where they work, or of them asking for specific help in prayer. The ultimate is a computer link-up with sound and vision, but that needs a longer time than would be the norm in a short intercessions slot.

B3 **Listen to local sounds**

If you ask for silence, what are the noises that come through? Many of them can be an instant lead-in to intercession: traffic outside or aircraft overhead – to pray for people who pass your church building but have no idea of the life within; the ticking of a clock – for each person's use of time this coming week; the children's work next door – for the younger members of the church and their leaders.

Involving people

This takes things one step further so that the congregation are asked not just to look and listen but get involved in some way. Don't forget to include times of silence too.

C1 **Pray all together**

Have a printed prayer up on the screen. Let everyone have time to read it through to themselves. Perhaps even focus on or explain one phrase – but don't overdo this. Then encourage everyone to say it together as a means of praying for one specific need or person, especially if this is not normally done in your services. This can work for children too. You could use a Bible prayer in this way.

C2 **Ask the congregation to respond**

If your church does not do this regularly, break your prayers into reasonably short sections each ending with a standard phrase to which the congregation make a response. Keep both trigger and response very simple or people concentrate on a memory test, not on the prayer. The best known formula is probably 'Lord in your mercy – Hear our prayer'. But it may be better to devise something equally simple but different. You could have it up on the screen if that would help.

C3 **Bring people to the front**

If you are praying for a specific home group or a children's group, ask the members up to the front so that they form a visual aid and people can pray for each one of them as the leader leads. You can try the same with a specific leader, but it is better with those not normally at the front. How about praying for the cleaning team this way? Be careful not to put any sensitive person on the spot. You may prefer instead to ask people to stand where they are but so that people can still see them.

C4 **Invite everyone to suggest topics**

If you are trying this, give everyone advance warning that you will be asking for ideas of what to pray for. The leader needs a notebook (or an excellent memory) and the ability to turn requests into memorable prayers without preparation. One week specify that it is prayer requests for work-places and homes, another week that it is for schools and colleges represented in the congregation. Too rarely do we pray for our weekday lives. Or ask different groups in the church (including children) to suggest topics in advance. A simpler form is to ask for people to list out loud Christian names of those they know who need prayer at that time.

Ideas that are ... different

Finally, four ideas that need confident leadership but which seek to engage the congregation even more powerfully. As with every idea in these notes I have tried each one myself and found reactions can be very positive. One danger is turning these into gimmicks. If the leader is simply trying to show off, forget the idea completely.

D1 **Read a newspaper**

Take that day's *The Sun on Sunday* (the highest selling Sunday newspaper) and select four or five items from it. Read them out and pray them in: a headline of world significance, a celebrity story, a sports item, even use the horoscope column to pray for those who follow such things and those who write them. It will get you out of any ruts you normally follow and make the prayers come alive. You can do the same with a local newspaper.

D2 Combine intercessions and notices

If a notice is not worth praying for, it should not be given out. So bring these two parts of the service together into one and turn each announcement into prayer. If you have no spoken announcements pray through that week's notice-sheet with everyone following with you.

D3 Stimulate people's imagination

Ask everyone to close their eyes and then lead them through a scenario as if on a TV screen in front of them. "You are in Downing Street and just coming up to the door to No. 10. It opens and you walk in and there is the Prime Minister. You talk to them and (s)he tells you what is worrying them at this moment. Father, we pray....." Then on to the next scene, and so on. This draws people into the prayer in a fresh way.

D4 "You are"

Ask people to put themselves in the shoes of people you will name and imagine they are them today. You then pray: "You are (name)" – pause for people to connect – then pray something *that person* might be praying in I/me format, not they/them. Ideas: the Queen, Prime Minister, persecuted Christian, helper at a church event this week, child in a new school, someone in hospital, etc. You can be pretty informal in the wording you use to make it real.

D5 Have a conversation with God

This needs someone who can carry this off, but instead of neat petitions and Amen at the end, the leader has a conversation with God which the congregation eavesdrop. The conversation may follow events that occurred that week, and involve questions: "Why did you let that happen?" "How do you want us to get involved?" "Where are you taking us in this?".

One key point is simply to ring the changes. Intercessions are often too predictable in their form. If the congregation found that each week had a different approach, that in itself would arouse interest. So place them at different points in the service, combine them with notices (as above) or sermon, use set prayers one week, a Litany the next.

You will be able to think of many other ideas. Why not invite anyone interested to a session one day with the aim of building on this list and coming up with new thoughts? Then experiment in services. If some ideas clearly do not fit well, learn from the experience but carry on trying. Intercessions need to be set free from convention ... and given greater care and attention.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN47. See also Article A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, plus Training Notes TN1, *Preparing to read the lesson*, TN69, *Creative prayer diaries*, and TN93, *And now for the notices*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event for those who lead intercessions. This also covers priorities, preparation, and a range of practical issues from notes to nerves.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN47 under Communication.

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