



growth group prayer

the MINISTRY PAPERS

group prayer gone wrong

Picture the scene:

Leader: "OK, it's been a great study—I think we've delved deep into God's word and covered some pretty serious personal ground, now it's time to pray—who wants to start us off with a prayer point?"

What happens next will vary greatly depending on who's in your group. If it's a men's group there'll be an awkward silence and very little eye contact; if it's a women's group the next half hour will be spent recapping the trials and tribulations of the past week and, oops! running out of time to actually pray; and if it's a mixed group, everyone will be quickly mentally editing their prayer points so that the guys don't sound too much like guys and the girls don't sound too much like girls.

I know, they're stereotypes, but most of the time they're pretty close to the mark. Why is it so? Why is group prayer so difficult to do well? What is it about us that causes us to take something so good and simple as praying together and make such a meal of it?

The bottom line is that we make some unhealthy assumptions about groups and about prayer that have a massive impact on the way we pray in groups. In this ministry paper we'll be aiming to lay some of those assumptions out on the table and dissect them in order to find a better way. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to growth group prayer but there are some fundamentals that we've got to get right if we're going to improve our group prayer life so that we grow together and honour God in the process.

LEADERS:...before taking someone through this paper, review the two key introductory MINISTRY PAPERS: 'the ministry training church' and 'meeting one to one'.

Our church has two main 'arms': growth groups & ministry teams. This 'growth group prayer' paper relates to the **growth groups** arm. It's designed to help your growth group leader introduce you to a vital aspect of what it means to be part of one of our growth groups.



read **Ephesians 6:17-20**

1. What should always accompany prayer (verse 17-18)? What do these two activities have in common?

2. Who should we "always keep praying for" (verse 18)?

3. Who else should we be praying for? What should we pray for them (verses 19-20)?



4. Why is prayer such an important part of Christian fellowship?

5. Does your growth group value prayer highly enough?



What different kinds of "prayers and requests" can you think of?

-
-
-
-
-

Is your group better at some of these than others? Why is that so?

group prayer

There are really only 3 basic contexts for prayer: public prayer such as happens up-front in church, private prayer such as happens behind closed doors, and lying somewhere in-between is group prayer such as might happen in a family or in a growth group. Each one of these contexts has its own unique features that are worth considering if we are to tailor our prayers appropriately for our own good and for the good of others. Let's think about group prayer...



praying together

Whole books have been written on the subject of prayer in general but our focus in this paper is on prayer in the growth group context. To help us think through some of the issues let's look at the **who, when & how** of growth group prayer (for discussion on **what** we should pray together, see page 4).

who

In some groups only the leader prays, in other groups everyone prays. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to group prayer, an important principle is that no-one should be **forced** to pray but everyone should be **encouraged** to pray. Many groups have at least one reluctant pray-er and such people need to be lovingly accommodated. There may be many reasons that cause someone to shy away from praying out loud in the group context and in time these reasons should be lovingly explored in the hope that they might be overcome. In the meantime, it is important to remember that in the group, as one member prays, all are able to join in prayer and signify their agreement at the end.

when

How can we possibly need to talk about **when** we should pray in the group? Surely everyone knows: you pray at the beginning and you pray at the end. That's it! End of story! Well, yeah, maybe that's the way it is, but why? Who decided it had to be done that way? Here are some tips about when to pray in your group:

- any group member should feel the freedom to suggest prayer at any point in the meeting. This can be particularly helpful for resolving or moving on from a difficult issue
- prayer requires considerable concentration which can be lacking at the end of a meeting. Consider praying for each other first thing when minds are relatively fresh
- on the other hand, prayer should be our natural Christian response to hearing God speak to us in his Word. Time should be made after studying the Bible to converse together with our heavenly Father about the things he has been saying to us

In short, prayer is good at the beginning, during and at the end of our time together. No wonder the Bible writers so often talk about prayer as a constant, all day, every day sort of thing!

how

They say that variety is the spice of life and that a change is as good as a holiday, well both sayings apply to **how** we go about growth group prayer. Sometimes it will be appropriate for one member to lead the group in prayer while other times it will be important for every member of the group to have the opportunity to pray. If time is short, a group might break up into twos or threes to allow everyone to pray. If a significant issue facing one member has been the focus of the meeting then it may be appropriate to also focus prayer on that one person. The bottom line is that prayer should be tailored to the needs of the group and those needs will change from one meeting to the next.

prayer points

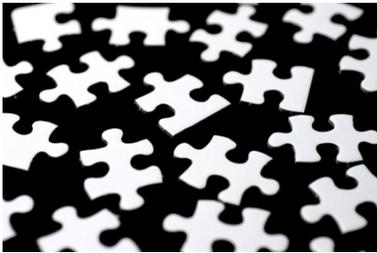
One reason that groups run out of time to pray is that so much of the time carefully allocated to prayer gets soaked up with sharing prayer points. Instead of being a quick exercise, going "around the circle" becomes the opportunity to unload about some trial from the week just gone. In fact at the end of such stories, it's often the case that no specific prayer request has been stated. At its worst, sharing prayer points is really just a spiritual-sounding euphemism for gossip! A few things can be done to make sure this doesn't happen.

Group members should:

- prepare prayer points in advance. Giving prior thought to the study questions AND prayer is a great way to serve the group. Think of your preparation as a gift that you bring with you to the group.
- aim to keep the length of prayer points to a minimum so that time for prayer can be maximized. In particular, it's worth considering "what am I actually asking/thanking/praising God for?"
- be encouraged to look for opportunities to share life outside the designated meeting time.

Believe it or not, it's even possible to pray together without sharing prayer points! In the group setting, as one prays we all pray, which means it's entirely appropriate for each member to pray for themselves, and overcome the need to share prayer points at all!

I know! What will they think of next!?



the real test

They say the real test of our character is who we are when no-one is looking. And it's true isn't it? We can all play to the crowd, or to the group as the case may be, but it's what we think and say and do when there's no-one "keeping us honest" that reveals the most about us. Time spent praying in the group is good but time spent praying for the group, outside of the sacred two hour timeslot, that's even better!

growth group profile

Faced with a mid-year growth group exodus, Jasmine was forced to think creatively about how to keep the girls in her growth group in touch while they were apart. Here's what she did...

Jasmine, how many people make up your growth group?

We have 12 in our group, 6 girls and 6 guys.

What proportion of the group would be regular email & internet users?

All but one, so over 90%!

So tell us, how have you sought to make use of technology to strengthen your group?

Well, The girls have started a Facebook group to keep in contact over the LONG semester break when we all go our separate ways. This group aims to discuss questions from the studies, share prayer points and give updates on what is happening in our lives, particularly on how we are living out the gospel. I'm hoping we'll continue using our Facebook group even after the break as a way of supplementing our face-to-face meetings.

Do you see any negative potential associated with this idea?

My big concern as I was setting this up was that we'd fall into the trap of foregoing REAL contact with each other—of exchanging care for convenience. It's much more convenient to just "shoot" off a quick email rather than taking the time to write and call a person. But my hope and prayer is that doing this will help our group to demonstrate more care and support for one another in our journey with Jesus.

praying apart

The biggest reason (humanly speaking) that we don't pray for each other as often as we should is that we simply forget to do it. Out of sight, out of mind, as the saying goes! So the best way to get better at praying for each other during the week is to invent ways of reminding ourselves and each other that we exist and that we need each other's prayers. Starting from the obvious and moving to the more creative, here is a long but far from exhaustive list of ways to jog your memory:

- use e-mail. E-mail is a terrible master but a great slave and we can put it to use for the gospel and to get each other praying. One group member can gather prayer points shared in the meeting and email them around to the rest of the group. Members can then "reply all" to add further prayer requests or to update the group on developments and answered prayer. If you choose to do this, make sure that you find ways to include any group members who don't have email access.
- use calendar software like Microsoft Outlook to schedule prayer into each day. Allocate each group member to a day and set up recurring appointments or reminders to pray for them. For the less technologically-reliant, just do the same thing using a wall calendar. You just have to be more disciplined because wall calendars don't beep annoyingly when you forget things!
- pray on your way to and from work. I know a guy who prays at red lights. Each set of lights is associated with a different person and if he has to stop, he prays for that person. It might even change your attitude to red lights! You could do the same thing with train stations or bus stops, allocating each station or stop to a different member of your group.
- carry a bunch of small stones in your pocket, each with a name written on it and pray for growth group members as you pull their stone out at random.
- It might feel weird at first, but you can even pray for each other over the phone or via email (just type out your prayer and hit send to the person you've prayed for)!

What other ideas can you think of?

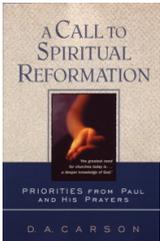
-
-
-
-

Finally, when you pray for another group member, tell them about it—and not just **that** you prayed for them, but **what** you prayed for them too.



follow my example

Because we usually think of prayer as a “spiritual” and “personal” activity—something between us and God—we often make the mistake of thinking that there’s no such thing as a bad prayer. Not true! People can and do pray bad prayers all the time. So what then is a good prayer and how do we learn to pray good prayers? Let’s take a look at some of the ways that we can learn from God and from each other about how to pray good prayers...



Paul’s school of prayer

The Bible has so much to teach us about prayer. How can we learn its

lessons?

A great place to start is with Don Carson’s very helpful book, ‘A Call to Spiritual Reformation—Priorities from Paul and his Prayers’. This is a book that changes both the way we pray and what we pray. Too often our prayers are limping, fragile things that fail to be caught up in the great plans and purposes of God. Because of this, we lack motivation, passion and direction.

Don Carson’s solution is that we should pattern our prayers on the prayers of Paul. Chapter by chapter, he discusses the content and character of the Apostle’s prayers. Showing clearly the gospel priorities of Paul’s prayers, he calls us to make those priorities our own.

Against the backdrop of so many books on prayer that have a pre-occupation simply with technique, this book reminds us that the main issue of prayer isn’t *how* -to but *who* -to. When we engage with the God of the gospel of Jesus, we are given motivation and direction for our prayer from God himself.

prayer for our relationship with God
prayer for our relationships with other believers , especially those in our growth group
prayer for relationships within our family/household
prayer for our relationships with unbelievers
prayer for our relationships with the whole church in mission

what to pray for...

As we’ve already seen in the study on page 1, the Bible gives us some great guidance on the sort of things that should fill our prayers. First we need to appreciate that prayer is no more and no less than one half of an ongoing conversation between us and God. As God speaks to us in his Word, he is shaping us by it and filling our hearts and minds with his thoughts and concerns. Our prayers should reflect this. How rude it would be to pretend to have a conversation with someone but to interact with nothing they said! In the growth group context, this means that our prayers should show that we’ve been listening to God as we’ve studied the Bible together. And because of the activity of God’s Spirit among us and within us, we will be able to make connections between what God has said to us and what is going on in our lives. God’s Word is always relevant!



We also saw from Ephesians 6 that our prayers should be for each other and also for the spread of the gospel. In short, prayer should be about life and life is about relationships. The table in the sidebar outlines the five main relational spheres that make up the life of a Christian. In our growth groups we should use these five spheres as a template for what we pray about together. Any given meeting may focus on one or more of these spheres, but over time we should be covering all of them so that our prayers don’t become lopsided. Praying together is a great way of keeping each other accountable for our growth in each of these relational spheres.

...and what NOT to pray for

We all know that the Bible says we can pray about anything. But we also know that God wants us to pray according to his will. How often do we do the former at the expense of the latter!



One way that we’ve already seen to make sure we don’t pray outside of God’s will is to let his Word shape us and shape our prayers. Another thing that we can do is listen to the prayers of godly men and women we know and model our prayers on them. The important thing to listen for is not *how* they pray, their style and intonation and how round their vowels are, but the *content* of their prayers. In every area of the Christian life we should always be humbly searching for godly mentors who can lead us, even unknowingly, by their example.