

General Intro: Welcome to the fifth of Eastern Synod's mini-sessions on leading worship. In the last session our Moderator Paul talked about some of the pitfalls and practicalities involved in leading worship. My name is Lindsey, I am the Synod's Mission and Training Officer, and in this session I will be talking about Corporate Prayer, or how we pray together, as a body, in church.

Corporate Prayer

- Praying alone v. praying together

What does prayer mean to you? How good are you at praying? Where do you pray, and when why and how? These questions do not have one-word answers, but they do perhaps have two: it depends. It depends on what's going on for me in that moment, who I'm with, where I find myself. It depends on how my relationship with God is right now. But whatever the answers to these questions prayer on your own, or in a small intimate group, is very different to corporate prayer: praying together in and with the body of the church. A personal prayer life is a well-modelled, important part of our discipleship, but so is praying together, as part of worship. Neither is more important than the other; both are vital to our Christian lives.

There are obvious linguistic differences: mostly you will use 'we' rather than 'I' for example, and it helps to have a structure and direction to your prayer, as we will discuss later, rather than an issuing an inarticulate cry into the dark, as a private prayer can sometimes be. As with other elements of the service, you are *leading*, in this case leading the congregation in their prayers, and your focus and direction is what will engage them and enable real communication with God.

- Prayer in the early church

Looking back at the early church, as its establishment is recorded in the Book of Acts, there are many references to Jesus' early followers praying together: in at least six places it is said that they are 'devoted' to prayer. Does this reflect how we feel about prayer in the services that we lead? Are we devoted to it? It might be time for some of us to rethink what prayer looks like in our church services.

- I like this comment by Megan Hill, an American writer and editor:

"the church at prayer is not a passive, half-drowsy, group of listeners; the church at prayer is a body at work, an army at war, and a congregation at worship. Whether we stand or sit or kneel for prayer, we must understand that when one person prays aloud, every person in the assembly is actually praying alongside him." (Megan Hill)

- Why pray together? Examples in the Bible

1. So why is praying together so powerful? We can see some great examples as we look through scripture... worship is about giving God his worth, as reiterated throughout this series so far.

Part of that is communicating to Him our love and awe for him, praising Him and what He means to us as a community. As we can see here in Isaiah, God's people have put time, things and places aside for Him as precious, as they prayed together; and in Revelation God's people's prayers are themselves offered as precious things with incense.

2. In Joel we see God's people gather to offer a whole community confession, and in Genesis 4 – I think the first recorded prayer meeting – His people gather to give thanks. Paul entreats the Church at Colossus, as he does other churches, to 'sing with thankfulness in your hearts'.

3. We also have many examples of God's people praying intercessory prayers together: both for their own communities and the individuals amongst them, from the watchmen and their 24/7 prayer in Isaiah, to healing in James, and for the wider world, as seen in 1 Timothy.

- Pitfalls

1. There are a few pitfalls in corporate prayer: Prayer needs to be clear and purposeful from the outset: announce whether you are coming before God in order to worship him, in order to humbly offer your confession, in order to give thanks for his abundant gifts, or in order to pray on behalf of the church and others. Make it clear to your congregation, because this is their prayer too: they need to know where they're going.

If you want responses in your prayers then again, this needs to be very clear, and preferably printed or projected: the congregation can end up spending the prayer trying to ready themselves for the response, rather than being present in it. The same can be said for prayers that everyone joins in with: is their focus on the pace and keeping up / slowing down, or on the words of the prayer itself? Using these sort of prayers have huge benefits, in joining everyone together, but they generally work best when explained: we're using responses because... we're saying this well-known prayer together, and I want us to focus particularly on these words '...' because...

2. A second potential pitfall is to do with style: if you're 'good' at praying freestyle, for example one-to-one or with a gathered few, it might be tempting to use the same style to pray when you're leading worship. A word of warning: Free prayer on your own or in a group often flows with the Spirit and can end up in unexpected and sometimes very personal places; equally it can dry up and become hesitant and fall away. While there are of course some excellent exceptions, and free prayer is a wonderful way of listening and responding to the Spirit, corporate prayer generally needs planning differently in order to make it truly corporate, including everyone. Experience will help with this: there are those who can lead prayers with a few bullet points to guide them, and others who need the whole text written out. I would recommend if you're new to leading worship that you go with the latter.

- Sourcing

A quick note also about sourcing prayers: there is a wonderful world out there of beautiful, meaningful prayers, there are many great books and devotionals (Paul mentioned a few in Session 4) and there are of course huge amounts online. Do try and choose according to the wider theme of your service: a general intercessory prayer might be fine, but how much more powerful if you can find one that draws in some of the theme of your talk, or if you can adapt or write one that does? It can also be helpful either in advance or during the service to jot down the names of people or situations that the congregation would like prayed for, and the things they would like to give thanks for, and insert those into your prayers. In Session 6 Nicola will be talking about Praying Creatively, which will give us lots more ideas.

- What and when to pray: slotting it into the structure

To consider slotting your prayers into a structure I'm using here the order that I used in Session 2, and the order of the biblical examples above, but you may have come up with your own structure: the elements will be similar in any service. For some worship leaders the Call to Worship will take the form of a prayer, calling on us as a community to come before God and set aside this time and place to worship Him together. As part of your Call, or after a hymn, you may want to build on that in a formal prayer approaching God. I would also see as essential an invocation of the Spirit to be present in the service: God and the Spirit come by invitation, as we see for example when Solomon's temple is dedicated. We want to be able to truly sense His transforming presence in our service.

We also want to come before God in a right state, and so leading the congregation in prayers of confession early on in the service is important for many. And don't forget the absolution or pardon: the congregation needs to be left with the reassurance of grace, rather than in the depths of their sin!

The time of thanksgiving might be an opportunity for others to contribute, whether on the spot or in advance, and can cover personal things, church life blessings or whole-wide-world abundance. In 1 Thessalonians Paul exhorts us to give thanks in all things: let us do this with joy!

We gather together too to pray on behalf of and for others in our intercessions. It is important to pray for the church community: this one where you are worshipping together, as well as the wider church. Often in God's people's prayers through the Bible there is an element of the desperate, we don't know what to do: our corporate prayers can become more dynamic, strangely, if there is a measure of desperation in them: is there something going on in your church community, in the area, in the country, in the world that currently has your congregations' attention and seems insurmountable? Pray about that. When you can openly pray "we can't solve this, God, we need You" then more people will become engaged, and with more passion. If we think we can fix it all then why are we gathering to pray about it? Hand it all over.

We talked in session two about the blessing and the sending out: make sure you make the distinction. And this **is** a prayer: that He might bless the congregation; that He

might be filling them with His Spirit to send them out into the world with His message in their hearts.

What might look like less important features, at the bottom, aren't intended to be: they are important parts of the service that we almost always mark with a prayer. It will help to have these prayers prepared. Although they are usually – but not necessarily - brief, it is easy to freeze or not have the words spring to mind as expected. Be prepared to bless any children in the service if there comes a point when they leave to go to their groups.

The Lord's prayer is considered essential in many churches, not in others. The prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples, it is an all-in-one. Whether you use it or not might be decided in conversation with the church where you are leading worship.

- Summing Up

Prayer with the people of your church can be many things, but it should never feel like the congregation are passive in it: these are their prayers that they are joining in with – silently or not. Prayer is the one thing we can enable all to participate in equally in worship: no musical talent, beautiful voice, great learning or analytical skills, or public speaking abilities are necessary; no one is too old or too young: one simply needs a heart to talk with God and hear Him speak to us: enjoy!