



LEADING INTERCESSIONS

A Practical Guide

What is Intercession?

Intercession seems the most natural and instinctive kind of prayer. Jesus himself prayed for other people in his ministry, and there are many examples in the Old Testament, too, of people praying for their families, their communities and even for their enemies. In intercessory prayer we bring the world with all its joys and sorrows before God the Creator, and look at it through His eyes, aligning ourselves with His will for its salvation or 'wholeness'.



Descriptions of how the first Christians worshipped tell us that intercession was always part of the Eucharist, as it is today. But there are many other kinds of worship when intercessory prayers may be offered. For example, there is space for such prayers in Morning and Evening Prayer, after the set prayers or Collects. In less formal worship also, such as an All-Age or Family Service, intercession is likely to play an important part, and several people, including children, may be involved in leading the prayers.

Leading Intercessions in Worship

Leading the prayers of a congregation is what it says - *leading* people or enabling other people to pray. Regrettably, the intercessions sometimes sound more like someone praying their own personal prayers in public, or sharing their favourite prayers, or even their hobby-horses! Preparing and leading intercessions well, so that you enable other people to pray, takes quite a lot of skill and sensitivity.

The purpose of this booklet

There will probably be very little 'new' information for you here, rather pointers along the way which you might find a help in your preparations for leading the prayers of the faithful.

This booklet aims to be a point of reference for finding further materials and resources which might help you in your ministry as an intercessor in our community of faith.

Leading the Prayers of the Faithful - the *Intercessions*

This is an important ministry - it is part of the whole offering of the sacrifice of the eucharist. As such (just like the sermon) it needs careful preparation. Some of you, I know, will find it necessary to spend a significant amount of time getting the phrasing right - others will feel more able to work on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, 'in the moment'. Both are fruitful and good ways of working - you will need to find the way that best suits you.

*'When the time comes, the words you will need will be given you;
for it is not you who will be speaking; it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking in you'*

Matthew 10: 19b-20

All effective ministry depends above all on the combined sense of being *both called and equipped* by God to discharge it.

The advice and resources offered here are intended to be practical and some may find it too obvious to think about or too tedious. However, what is obvious and tedious to some often remains a mystery to others.

About You.....

This ministry will inevitably depend on some key qualities of those called upon to exercise it:

- you will depend on and seek personal growth in your own prayer life and developing spirituality and sensitivity.
- Remember that you are part of a team and be able to work alongside others who are involved in the leading of worship - COMMUNICATION is vital.
- you will need to develop a sense of leadership which is representative rather than individual - it is quite a task to be 'in touch' with those for whom we pray, and to avoid praying only what is on our own agendas.

About the Prayer of the Faithful

Intercession is one aspect of the **pleasure of being in God's company**. When we enjoy being in God's company, dialogue can happen - 'let your requests be made known unto God' says St Paul.

St Augustine had this to say about intercessory prayer:

'God does not ask us to tell him our needs that we may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.'

St Basil said this:

God sees into the hearts of those who pray. What need then, someone will say, that we should ask God for what we need? Does he not already know what we need? Why then should we pray? God does indeed know what things we need, and with generosity provides all we need for the refreshment of our bodies, and since he is good, he sends down his rains upon the just and the unjust alike, and causes his sun to shine on the good and the bad (Matthew 5: 45), even before we ask him. But faith, and the power of virtue, and the Kingdom of Heaven, these you will not receive unless you ask for them in labouring and steadfastness.

St Basil the Great, 'Sermon on Prayer'

Do our intercessions really 'work'?

Prayers for others are not *static* - just standing or kneeling there, listening, wondering what, if anything will happen as a result of our prayers. It is *dynamic* - at the very least as a form of genuine conversation with God and with give-and-take on either side; it is also dynamic because it is a form of participation in the divine activity itself. God shares his work with Jesus, who in turn shared it with us - we are called and sent to do this.

Intercession is not magic or manipulation by the one who prays. Neither is it a 'last resort'. Asking God for things is not panic or desperation - all the requests we make should be based on the regular, continuous activity of growing trust in God, whose purposes we believe are being worked out every day.

Very many people pray. And many joke about prayer—or they certainly do to some priests when they win the odd game of pickle ball or when the rain holds off for some particular event. The jokes assume that the purpose of prayer is to **swing things 'my way'**. Of course that is a false start. Even asking for things to go God's way is only one kind of prayer. The central meaning of prayer is an expression of love—for God and other people. In prayer we reach out to God, and we are open to God's presence and encouragement. Nevertheless we do pray for things to happen. Some things prayed for are plainly wrong and there is no reason why they should be given to God. If we pray for trivial things like, 'help me find a car parking space', we are in danger of turning God into little more than a kind of second rate errand boy.

We must pray in the light of 'Thy will be done.'

So does God answer prayer? Well, Jesus coupled his teaching about prayer with the words, 'not as the world gives, do I give to you.' Thus our prayers of asking are held firmly within this framework - God's agenda - not ours; his will - not ours. We pray regularly for the coming of the Kingdom - and there is an incredible juxtaposition of ideas here - the Kingdom is both now, but not yet - it is here, but not yet here in its fulness. This will be reflected in the 'answers' we receive to prayer. What Jesus is anxious to teach about intercession is that we should be brave enough to ask constantly, and trust enough to believe that whatever God gives will indeed be what we require, rather than something inappropriate or harmful; even though the answer we receive can only be a foretaste, as it were, of what is still to come. However much our prayers are answered, there always remains within them, for the present, that which will remain 'unanswered'.

God speaks to us in many ways:



- **Through the Bible.** The Bible is God's living Word. We should not be surprised that when we read a passage there is something in it which jumps out at us, that is particularly relevant to our situation. Particular verses come into our minds as we pray, and God will use some of them to speak to us.

Hebrews 4:12 reminds us that "*the word of God is living and active*" and "*sharper than any double edged sword.*" Clearly we need to be reading the bible regularly if God is to use it to speak to us.

- **Through Others** God can use others in unremarkable ways such that they themselves are often unaware that they are being used. We can recognise significance in their words or actions, or in their timing. A series of coincidences becomes God-incidences!
- **To us, in our hearts.** When God speaks to us as we pray it can be similar to the "voice" of our conscience. Over time we come to recognise God speaking in our thoughts and placing things onto our minds. This will take practice, and there will be times when you are unsure whether it is God or your own thoughts.
- **Through words and pictures.** Through the Holy Spirit, God can give us certain pictures, visions or words. We may understand the meaning of these immediately, or they may require sharing with others, so that someone else can explain them to us, or God may reveal it to us over time.

Ways of doing the task

There are many ways to lead intercessions.

Sometimes there are **brief biddings** (directions addressed to the congregation) followed by a collect:

Eg. We pray for those we know who are ill or suffering at this time.....
(pause)

O God, your eye is over all your children, wherever they may be;
surround them with your healing presence
and bring good out of their troubles,

We ask our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

We pray for peace in our world....(pause)

O God, the giver of peace and lover of concord.....etc. Amen.

Sometimes there may be a form of litany with responses.

There are many, many **creative** ways of praying. Please try to avoid falling into the trap of always having to use the same old formulas and same old style. The Spirit calls us to be **vibrant, fruitful and creative**. And remember, please don't try to pray for **EVERYTHING**! Jesus offers us a picture of God for whom the fall of a sparrow does not go unnoticed, and this was the God to whom he prayed.

It is best to be clear in your mind which sort of format you are trying to use, and be consistent with it - try not to confuse them and use all the different styles in one service - it only confuses people. So, is it going to be:

- **biddings** with collects?
- a form of **litany** with a response after each group of prayers?
- or some other structure?
- Remember to be clear to whom your prayers are addressed...are you guiding the congregation (and so talking to them) or are you praying to God? Confusing them is an easy mistake to make.

Three Types of Prayer

The Rev'd Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, offers an insight into three types of prayer:

Prayer of Resurrection: such prayers might run along the lines of 'please make Diedre better again, take away her illness and restore her to health'. Resurrection prayers seek the *miracle* – it is the prayer of faithful risk.

Prayer of Transfiguration: such prayers might run along the lines of: 'Lord, help us, in all our sufferings, to see life in new ways that we might have grateful hearts for the care given and received, and see your hand at work, even in the most difficult situations.'

It is the prayer that seeks a deeper truth to life's experiences.

Prayer of Incarnation: such prayers might run along the lines of, ‘Despite the struggles Diedre faces we know, Lord, you are alongside her, always; give her the assurance of your presence.’ It is the prayer that acknowledges that Christ shares in our pain & our frailty – God suffers with us, & goes with us through it.

Getting on with the task

All Christians are beginners, in some way. None of us are ‘experts’. We will all, from time to time, experience poverty of Spirit within, even after considerable experience of undertaking this task. Those who are aware of being beginners in the exploration and adventure of praying, and are deliberately attempting to grow in prayer, will make good leaders. Those who have misplaced confidence will be less useful.

There are often all sorts of temptations when taking an active role in leading worship, especially the intercessions. For instance, there can be a strong temptation to turn the intercessions into a kind of mini-sermon. Or try to correct the preacher, if there is disapproval of what has been said, or to make up for what the leader of the intercessions thinks the preacher should have said.

A leader might even try to peddle private concerns and prejudices, sometimes coloured in a particular way politically, and obviously he or she will have to guard against the lure of the sound of their own voice.

Remember that intercessions, especially within the Eucharist are *an ingredient* in the whole mixture of the Act of Thanksgiving, not the whole itself.

We are challenged to enable others to worship and pray and not to get in the way of that. We must learn to listen before we speak, to balance words with silence.

Some easy ‘mistakes’ to make...

One of the greatest errors made by those who lead Prayers (lay and ordained) is to talk to the congregation about other people or even about themselves, instead of leading the whole congregation in prayer, with God.

Whenever intercession is mis-directed, it turns into a kind of sacred gossip shop used to pass on information to the congregation which should be communicated in other ways.

INTERCESSIONS SHOULD NORMALLY BE ADDRESSED TO GOD RATHER THAN TO THE CONGRGATION

An example of this might be:

A) Let us ask God to make us follow the commandment to love our neighbour

and care for them, especially the members of the XYZ Club who are in church with us this morning and who are desperately in need of more helpers and new accommodation following the (bad) decision of the local council to take over their premises for development

B) O God, pour your Spirit of love into our hearts that we may serve one another with compassion and care, and quicken our consciences that we may give the help so much needed by the XYZ Club.

In A, the 'prayer' is clearly directed only at the congregation rather than God and disguises recruitment, and probably political comment, as prayer, while B is a prayer to the Father to stir up the gifts of the Spirit within God's people.

There is one exception to this rule. When intercession is introduced with a phrase of bidding, it is addressed to the congregation. Eg 'Let us pray for.....' BUT whenever such a style is used, it **MUST BE FOLLOWED BY A PERIOD OF SILENT PRAYER** and not be mistaken for prayer by itself. If you invite others to pray for something or someone, space must be given so that they can do what the invitation asks.

Some Frameworks

Anglican Worship forms suggest the following:

- The Church
- Creation, world, society
- The local community
- Those who suffer
- The communion of saints (departed)

Other frameworks can be devised,

Eg the 5 marks of Mission

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Proclaim Good News | - outreach |
| Teach, baptize, nurture | - preparing for baptism, welcome, inclusivity |
| Respond to human need | - Aid Agencies, political action, care |
| Justice for all | - prophetic role of the Church, decision-makers |
| Integrity of creation | - environment, public policy, political leaders |

Based on the Collect for Purity (Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open...):

- Openness - receiving - longing
- Cleanse - forgiveness - healing - wholeness
- Inspiration - vision - hope
- Love and praise - adoration

Or

- Creation and the environment
- Nations in need
- Local community
- Individual needs

Praying for named people

Do we/should we always use people's family names, or Christian names only?
Titles should be avoided in intercessions.

PRAYING FOR THE SICK

Know your church's policy about praying for individuals: **in our church we ALWAYS to seek the permission of the person prayed for BEFORE praying publicly for them**, so be sure the person is agreeable to their name being used. Otherwise, pray in general terms for the sick, dying, deceased or bereaved, and include something like, '.... and in a moment of silence we remember those known to us personally'. Always respect confidentiality. Intercessions are not the time to give news casts or gossip! The names of the ill, those recovering from illness and the departed will usually be printed on the weekly Bulletin. These people will have already given their consent to being named publicly in worship.

Suggested formats

Format 1 - this form may be used either with the insertion of specific subjects between the paragraphs or as a continuous whole, with or without brief biddings addressed to the people before the prayer begins. **Not all paragraphs need to be used on every occasion.** Individual names may be added in the places indicated. Responses may be used at appropriate points in the text. At the end of this form of intercession, silence may be kept and a Collect or other ending may be said.

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father.
Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
you promised through your Son Jesus Christ to hear us when we pray in faith.
Strengthen our bishop and all your church in the service of Christ,
that those who confess your name may be united in your truth,
live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world.

A Response (R) may be used: Eg Lord hear us: Lord, graciously hear us

Bless and guide all who lead and govern; give wisdom to all in authority;
and direct this and every nation in the ways of justice and peace;
that we may honour one another and seek the common good.

R

Give grace to us, our families and friends, and to all our neighbours,
that we may serve Christ in one another and love as he loves us.

R

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind or spirit...;
give them courage and hope in their troubles;
and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Hear us as we remember those who have died in the faith of Christ.....;
according to your promises, grant us, with them,
a share in your eternal kingdom.

R

Rejoicing in the fellowship of [N and N and of] all your saints,
we commend ourselves and the whole creation to your unfailing love.

Silence may be kept and a Collect or other ending may be said.

Format 2 - This form may be used either with the insertion of specific subjects at the points indicated or as a continuous whole, with or without biddings addressed to the people before prayer begins. Responses may be used at appropriate points in the text. In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father.

O God, the creator and preserver of all,
we pray for people in every kind of need: make your ways known on earth,
your saving power among all nations....

Response (R) Lord, in your mercy: **Hear our prayer**

We pray for the good estate of the catholic Church;
guide and govern us by your good Spirit,
that all who profess and call themselves Christians
may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of Spirit,
in the bond of peace and righteousness of life....

R

We commend to your fatherly goodness
all those who are in any ways afflicted or distressed, in mind, body or spirit;
comfort and relieve them in their need, give them patience in their sufferings,
and bring good out of all their afflictions....

R

We remember those who have gone before us in the peace of Christ,
and we give you praise, Father, for all your faithful ones,
with whom we rejoice in the communion of saints....

All this we ask for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Book of Alternative Services also sets out a range of suggested “Forms” or Litanies, but these should not be used unedited or un-adapted for local use.

Other Resources

Paul Iles, *The Pleasure of God's Company*, Kevin Mayhew (1990)

Susan Sayers, *Living Stones*, Kevin Mayhew (1997)

N Fawcett, *Prayers for all Seasons*, Kevin Mayhew

Summary Guidelines for Leading Intercessions

- Set the preparation in the context **of your own prayer**. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- When preparing prayers, **look at the readings and themes for the day**. If possible ask the preacher what the sermon will be about. Look ahead to see what events in the life of the church are coming up, and offer them to God in prayer.
- **Select** from all the above, and your local knowledge and awareness of what is happening in the world, what you want to pray for; and remember that intercessions should not be doom-laden: **REMEMBER TO GIVE THANKS FOR THINGS TOO!**
- Look at some of the available books for ideas - you may discover helpful ways of saying things.
- Remember how your sentences begin, and keep the pattern consistent: Eg God of Healing, we pray for.....
- Keep the prayers brief - let people have **time for their own thoughts and prayers**: a few seconds silence between each set of prayers (but before the responses) can be very useful.
- On the day, have a pen handy so that you can put in last minute requests, or respond to something the preacher has said - but don't re-preach the sermon or try to improve on it!
- When the time comes, please make your way to the lectern (or wherever you are leading the intercessions from) during the previous section of the liturgy (usually the Creed). Wait for the congregation to settle physically (if there is a change in posture) and leave a space for people to gather their thoughts before you speak.
- Breathe deeply, hold your head up and look towards the end of the place you are speaking in.
- **Speak slowly** - feel that your pace is slow: when it feels slow, you know you are at the right speed!
- Pause - let spaces develop between sentences - give people time to respond inwardly to what you have said.
- If you want to change the response to the petitions, make sure people know what they have to say. Always do this by saying, before the prayers start, 'The response to the words xyz is abc.' Then say, 'xyz' and everyone will say, 'abc'. Now you are ready to begin.
- **Leading prayers is your offering to God**. You don't have to worry about whether you are as good as other people - this week it is your turn. You may feel nervous, but breathing deeply as people settle down will help you to

settle too. People in the congregation value the freshness and variety of different offerings. So enjoy taking your turn.

- **Be open to feedback from the congregation.**

PERSONAL TASKS

What is your own model and discipline of prayer?

What are the challenges and joys of:

- *private prayer*
- *corporate prayer*

What are the particular responsibilities of someone leading corporate, public prayer?

Write some prayers for a special celebration:

- Eg
- Patronal Festival
 - Stewardship Sunday
 - Service of Healing and Wholeness

Phrases which demonstrate our own personal theology...

Imagine Adam is suffering from depression and has asked us to pray for him:

- We
- 'hand Adam over to God'
 - 'hold Adam before God'
 - 'hold Adam in the warmth of God's love'
 - 'stand with Adam in loving concern'
 - 'offer our care for Adam, and ask God to surround us all'

The words we use are really important. Discuss what each of these phrases might mean theologically and personally, both to you and Adam.

How might you give feedback to others in the ministry of intercessor?

Do we have to pray for everything, every week?

How might we best prepare for Sunday?

PRACTICALITIES

What is special or significant about today? Each Sunday has its own character—often summarised in the ‘Collect’ or Opening Prayer. What does the layout of church do for the intercessions? What will the ‘mood’ of the service be?

Know the congregation: what is likely to be on people’s minds and hearts? What concerns might they have about their lives outside church? What cultures are they part of? What linguistic culture are they from?

Pray about the real world, not a narrowly religious one: faith and real life need to connect; **prayer must be relevant to the 167 hours they do not spend at church.** Good intercessions help people to live out their faith with more confidence during the rest of the week because it can then be seen that God is Lord of ‘real life’ as well as church life.

Be particular: relate to the news (but do not become a news-reader!); paint pictures in words; use images—be in touch with what’s happening in the world.

Use vivid language: memorable phrases and well-crafted ideas are a joy to listen to and trigger thoughts and personal prayers—but don’t go over the top!

Have a clear structure: order and familiarity help people relax. Rehearse the response before you begin, and keep them short if you are using one of your own.

Address prayers to God, and biddings to the congregation: and don’t mix the two up. “Let us pray for people in Narnia that God will....” is not addressed to God and is therefore not a prayer. “O God we pray that those who lead and govern in Narnia may....” is quite different. Biddings usually introduce an idea, then a pause, then a prayer **addressed directly to God.**

Pray; don’t just read notes, and don’t try and hold 25 slips of paper and 4 books! People can tell the difference between read prayers gathered from books, and prayers delivered from the heart, addressed to God, which books may have helped to shape.

Look for feedback: the church expends much energy on training and maturing people in faith—but very little on how to actually pray! Look for help when you need to. Use people you trust to give you feedback (but only people who will tell you how wonderful and perfect you are!).