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leading corporate prayer at church

What is corporate prayer and why do it?

Corporate prayer is when Christians speak to God in prayer together, often in the context of a formal time of worship. During our Sunday service we offer a number of short prayers to God, and we also have one main ‘corporate’ prayer which is led by someone up the front of church. But why pray at all? We pray because we are God’s children who long to speak to our heavenly Father (Gal. 4:6). We pray because we believe that prayer is powerful and effective (James 5:16). We strongly believe that God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20), so we love to ask!



It’s clear from the New Testament that the first Christians prayed together when they met (Acts 1:14, 2:42). But why have only one person audibly praying from the front of church? A key reason is that it’s practical—in a large gathering of Christians it’s helpful for the person at the microphone to pray on behalf of the congregation. This means everyone (especially our elderly members) can hear the prayer clearly and give a hearty “amen” at the end.

If you’ve kindly offered to lead our church family in prayer, it’s worth giving some thought to what you’re going to pray about and how you’re going to say it. Leading the congregation in prayer is not the same as praying on your own at home. You’re not praying your own private prayers out loud at church, but praying in a way that makes it easy for people to hear, understand and agree.

Who are you praying to?

When you pray remember that you’re praying to God the Father, as per Jesus’ example (Matt. 6:9). The only reason you can pray to your Heavenly Father is because of Jesus—who is the mediator between us and the Father (1 Tim. 2:5). But we do not simply pray using our own intellect; we are helped by God, the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26). While there’s technically nothing wrong with praying to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, the basic pattern set by Jesus and the Apostles was prayer to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3). The fact that we are praying to our all-powerful Creator should invest our prayers with a sense of respect – don’t be too ‘pally’ with God. While he loves us, he’s not our ‘buddy’ or ‘chum’. He’s almighty God.

What should I pray about?

There are heaps of things to pray about, so you’ll have to intentionally target specific things. While the prayer is not a sermon, it should in some way teach people about God and his character, and reflect the hope found in the person and work of Jesus. Your prayer should express thankfulness to God for his grace and the fact that he hears our prayers. It should mention sin, but not leave people wallowing in guilt – instead it should sound a clear note of mercy and love that is available to all through Christ.

But what should you actually say? Some people find the acronym *A.C.T.S.* helpful when preparing a prayer: “Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.” This means the prayer moves through a series of connected topics where God is praised, sin is confessed (in a general way), thanks is given for grace (and many other things!) and a variety of requests are made to God.

Others base their prayer on a passage of Scripture to give them a head start. One such prayer is the “Lord’s Prayer” (see from Matthew 6:9). Each line of the prayer is filled with ideas and concepts to base your prayer on. Another idea is to base your prayer on a Psalm, or a key passage in the New Testament like Paul’s wonderful opening in Ephesians chapter 1 (see also Colossians 1:3-23, Hebrews 10:19-39, 1 Peter chapter 1).

leading corporate prayer at church (cont . . .)

What makes for a good corporate prayer?

There are lots of things we could say about what makes for a ‘good’ prayer at church. Here are some ideas for you to consider:

- ☑ **Be prepared.** Our whole church family only meets once a week, and that meeting only has one main prayer. This means the corporate prayer is important and will require some preparation beforehand. Before you come to church, write down notes or dot-points to help you keep your prayer on track. Written prayers are no less from the heart than ‘off the cuff’ ones and, in fact, written prayers can easily include your own deep reflections on God and life as a Christian.
- ☑ **Keep it natural.** In the Australian context, being yourself is important when speaking up the front. Don’t put on a special ‘spiritual’ voice to sound different when you pray. Use a normal tone of voice, and normal words. Using archaic or complex words will make it harder for people to understand—especially children, and people whose second language is English. Remember, we want those praying with us to resonate with the prayer and make our words their prayer too.
- ☑ **Keep it (fairly) short and simple.** In our busy world people are often very tired by the time Sunday comes around, so be mindful how long you’re going to pray for. You should be able to cover most of your prayer points in 3-4 minutes at the most. There will be things you simply don’t have time to pray for, and that’s OK. If you are writing out your prayer in full (which is a very good idea), you might expect your prayer to be somewhere between 300-550 words. At an average rate of speech this should keep your prayer to a helpful length.
- ☑ **Keep it inclusive.** Because you are praying with and on behalf of the congregation, you will need to use inclusive language. Instead of praying “Lord I pray that we would . . .”, try saying “Lord **we** pray that as a church **we** would . . .” This kind of language ensures that every part of your prayer is just as much for them as it is for you.
- ☑ **Be gracious.** The Apostle Paul said “*as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*” (Col. 3:12). This is especially important when leading prayer in a worship service. At all times our words should show a gentle compassion towards all people. Harsh, mean-spirited words will only distract and offend. Using sweeping stereotypes which might devalue or slander people isn’t helpful.
- ☑ **Watch out for ‘hot button’ issues.** There are many topics such as creationism, sexuality, abortion, climate change, feminism, Islam and politics, which have attracted a lot of heated discussion in churches and the wider society. Be careful that you’re not using your prayer to promote your particular view on these ‘hot button’ issues. If you have a genuine concern that our church is not clear enough on a particular issue, please speak to the pastor or one of the elders. The corporate prayer is not the time or place to plug perceived ‘gaps’ in our church’s focus or teaching. Our focus is the life-changing message of Jesus Christ—what the Apostle Paul said was of “first importance” in the church (1 Cor 15:3).
- ☑ **Don’t eat the microphone.** In order to be heard clearly you’ll need to be careful how you use the microphone. The basic rule for using the microphone is to project your voice with clarity (speak up, but don’t shout) while keeping your mouth at a suitable distance from the microphone. Avoid being too close (say, 10cm) or too far (40cm) from the mic. See “Serving Wholeheartedly” paper #1 for more info.

Thank you for your interest in corporate prayer. We hope you found this helpful. If you have any questions, please ask.