

Learning to Pray: A Leader's Workshop

by Janet S. Helme

The Inviting Word resources, in addition to being lectionary-based, worship-centered, and congregation-oriented, incorporate what many know as *spiritual disciplines*: meditation, contemplation, solitude, celebration, and *prayer*.

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Prayer may very well be *the most important thing* a leader does when using these resources. Prayer is to *The Inviting Word* as detailed blueprints are to a church building. Leaders who begin their preparation time with prayer, who pray at times during the process, who pray for their learners during every week, and who encourage the learners to pray for one another can expect to experience amazing things! In his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster wrote: "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us."

This workshop explores several aspects of prayer – what prayer is, when to pray, how to lead others to pray, and how to pray with the group. Prayer will be helpful to you as well, as you begin your time of preparation.

Here are some practical methods to make prayer part of your life.

Getting Ready for This Event

Low table, purple cloth, Bible, two sheets of newsprint, marker, a Bible, index card, one or two sheets of writing paper for each person, paper, pencils, posterboard, thin markers, masking tape, and, if possible, *The Inviting Word Audiocassette*, Year Two, a cassette player, and *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, volume 2

Place the cloth on the table. Open the Bible to Psalm 121 and set it in the center of the table. If you have *Imaging the Word*, open to *Girl Praying* by George Tooker (p. 120) and place it on one side. If you have *The Inviting Word Audiocassette*, Year Two and a cassette player, set them on the other side of the table. Be ready to play the first three songs on side B – "Transfiguration," "Create in Me a Clean Heart," and "These Things Did Thomas Count as Real" – when the participants begin to arrive.

On the first sheet of newsprint, write "Engaging the Word." List the following scriptures and directions:

1. John 3:1-17
2. John 4:1-42
3. John 9:1-41
4. Matthew 21:1-11
5. Read your assigned scripture passage.
6. Decide which persons in the passage might have prayed and what their prayers might have been.
7. If you had been the main character in your passage, what would you have prayed?

Set this sheet aside until you need it later in the lesson.

On the second sheet of newsprint write at the top of the sheet,
"How We Encourage Prayer in Our Groups."

Set it aside until later.

At the top of the posterboard print in large letters, **Prayer is . . .** Place it and the thin markers on a flat surface so that participants can add their ideas.

Set aside a few minutes for quiet prayer before people arrive. Ask God for guidance, understanding, and sensitivity to the needs of others. Be silent with God to hear where God may be leading you and the participants today.

As Participants Arrive

Play *The Inviting Word Audiocassette*, Year Two quietly in the background as participants arrive. Welcome them, and invite them to the worship area to listen, look, touch, and write their definitions of prayer on the posterboard, using words, phrases, or simple pictures.

Gathering for the Word

When everyone is present, bring the group together by reading Psalm 121 as a call to worship. Then offer the following prayer, or one of your own:

Prayer is an important spiritual discipline for leaders in *The Inviting Word*.

We gather together, God of all learning, to discern how you would have us pray. Guide us as we meet so that our eyes and ears may be opened to your Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Ask the group to think about when it is that they pray to God. Some might mention morning devotions, mealtimes, bedtime, in church, and before and after important events. If "when we are preparing the lesson from *The Inviting Word*" and "weekly for our learners" are not included, you can point out that these are also good times to pray for God's guidance and for the welfare of each learner who is in their groups.

Ask the group to think about the *what* of prayer. Of *what* do their prayers consist? *For what* do they pray? Responses might include giving thanks, praising God for who God is and what God has done, confessing their sins, and requesting God's care, blessings, and protection for self and others. If no one mentions *listening*, suggest that it is an important aspect of prayer.

Teach the following prayer, the "Jesus Prayer," to the group. First explain that this prayer has been prayed by countless people through the ages. This is an excellent prayer to say when persons cannot find the words to pray in a difficult situation. It has also been prayed as a way to relax during tense situations – a way of letting go of one's problems and giving them to God. A third way to use the Jesus Prayer is as a lead-in to sitting in silence in God's presence. The prayer is as follows:

Lord (or Sovereign) Jesus Christ,
 Son (or Child) of the Living God,
 Have mercy on me, a sinner.

Have the group say the prayer with you a couple of times. Then have them get into relaxed positions, concentrating on breathing slowly in and out, and pray this prayer in the above three phrases. Leave silence between each phrase. After saying the prayer about three times, leave a considerable silence so that leaders can begin to get the idea of "being with God in silence."

Give each participant an index card and a pencil or pen. Explain that the index cards are for recording persons' names and joys or concerns; use these cards during the coming week to continue praying for them. Suggest that they place the cards in the area where they have their daily prayer time with God. (You cannot stress too much how *important* it is for each leader to develop his or her own daily quiet time with God!) Suggest that each of them create an altar space at home, using a candle or perhaps some special symbols or plants, and an altar cloth. A copy of *Imaging the Word* can add much to the altar space.

Invite members of the group to share their joys, and then their concerns. Say a prayer, giving thanks for the gift of life for each person who is present and for the opportunity to learn together. Include the joys and concerns that the group has named. Leave time for oral or silent prayers from the group, using an introduction such as, "Now we lift up to you, loving God, our reasons for thanksgiving and concern. Hear our prayers." Allow ample time for this; time for silent prayer within a worshiping community is always an excellent tradition.

Engaging the Word

Using masking tape, place the newspaper entitled "Engaging the Word" where the group can see it. Divide the group into twos or threes. Give each small group writing paper and pencils, and assign each group one of the scriptures on the newspaper.

Go over the questions together. Explain that as they read their particular scripture passage they are to keep these questions in mind. Next they will discuss the questions with their partner(s) and be ready to report back to the larger group with observations and learnings.

Allow about fifteen minutes for small group study, then call the groups together again. Ask for responses from the groups. You may choose to write summary statements on the newspaper. You can move the newspaper aside to make room for the second sheet.

Responding to the Word

Place the newspaper sheet entitled "How We Encourage Prayer in Our Groups" in front of the group. Explain that each of them may have effective techniques for encouraging prayer in the groups they lead. As participants share their techniques, record them on the newspaper. Some effective techniques might include the following, some of which you have modeled for them in this training event:

- ! In the group, pray rote prayers aloud, such as the Prayer of Our Savior, or a taught prayer, such as the "Jesus Prayer."
- ! As leader, model praying aloud for the group.
- ! Distribute index cards for learners to record joys and concerns of their group for prayer during the coming week.
- ! As leader, offer prayers of thanksgiving and ask God's help and guidance for the concerns of the group.
- ! Ask for volunteers to pray aloud for the specific concerns of group members.
- ! Leave a period of extended silence so each learner has a chance to pray aloud for self or others.
- ! Have learners say a sentence prayer for the person to their right, such as a simple, "God, bless (name) today."

- ! Remind the group that prayer is simply talking with God – "fancy words" aren't necessary.
- ! Include times of silence, for prayer is also silence – a time to let God speak to our hearts and minds.

Some of the leaders in your group may work with children and youth. Amazingly, young children are most often the least self-conscious about praying aloud. All they need are some directions ("We're going to tell God today how much we love God and others"; "God wants to know our needs, I invite you to tell God your concerns as we pray today"). The prayers of young children can be a very humbling experience, because they tend to pray from the heart and are very basic in the words they use.

Youth may respond differently. They tend to be the *most* self-conscious group in the church. In addition to the suggestions given above, youth seem receptive to "one word, one phrase" prayers said in a closing circle.

With both of these age groups, encourage the leaders to again share the things that have worked well with them. Be ready to offer additional suggestions.

Give each leader a sheet of paper and pencil. Remind them of the necessity of developing their own prayer life as a leader of *The Inviting Word* curriculum. Explain that they and you will experience a quiet time for the next ten to fifteen minutes – a time in which they can just sit and listen to God, when they can voice their joys and their concerns to God, or when they can journal their prayer thoughts on paper.

Begin this quiet time with the "Jesus Prayer" that you used earlier. You will need to be sensitive to the mood of your group as to when you should end this time of sitting in the presence of God. However, do not be too quick to abbreviate the experience. For some, this may be the most valuable time in the workshop. You might use the following words to bring the group back together again:

We thank you, O Listening and Speaking God, for this quiet time in your presence. Amen.

Going with the Word

Have the leaders gather in a circle as you lead them in a closing celebrator prayer, either one of your own or the "Night Prayer" on page 207 of *Imaging the Word*, volume 2.

After the leaders have gone, spend a few quiet moments reflecting on the things that went well and the things you would do differently another time. Then, rest in the silence of God, letting God's loving care renew you for the coming day.

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