



How do we craft the Prayers of Intercession?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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Background

When we gather for worship, we pray. The prayers can be spoken, sung, signed or silent. They can be led by an individual or expressed by the entire assembly.

One particular form of liturgical prayer is the Prayers of Intercession, sometimes referred to as the Prayers of the People. After hearing God's word proclaimed in scripture, in preaching and in the hymn of day, we pray on behalf of the whole world. The *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* companion resource, *The Sunday Assembly* explains: "If the readings followed by the preaching are together meant to bring us again to trust in God, to bring us again to faith, then one of the first ways we are invited to exercise that faith is by praying for the needs of the world."¹

The needs of the world are numerous and diverse. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* offers guidance for at least six categories of our prayer. Reminding ourselves of these many needs for prayer prevents the intercessions from being too inwardly focused. We certainly pray for the specific needs of our community, but our praying also "reflects the wideness of God's mercy for the whole world" (*ELW* p. 105).

Unlike a pastoral prayer, these prayers express the desires of a community before God. A communal response such as "Receive our prayer" or "Your mercy is great" knits the assembly together. The leader of the prayers is praying on behalf of, not in place of the gathered assembly.

¹ *The Sunday Assembly*, p. 167.

Practice

“The prayers [of intercession] are prepared locally for each occasion” (ELW. p. 105)
Your assembly knows the importance of praying, but how does it go about interceding for the whole world? What words are used? In what form? How are they prepared?
By whom?

By Whom?

Leading the prayers is often the role of the Assisting Minister, yet that is not the only option. Another individual or team may write the prayers, while the Assisting Minister, or another appointed individual, leads them. In addition to a spoken prayer response, the leader may provide space for names or needs to be spoken from the assembly. For example, the leader may offer a list of needs and then say, “and for these other needs for which we ask God’s mercy.” At that point, members of the assembly can add names or concerns. This may be readily embraced in some communities and less welcome in others. Perhaps such a form could be introduced at other prayer times in the community’s life such as education classes, music rehearsals, council meetings, or youth groups. If people are invited to add their concerns at these times, the practice might be more readily embraced as part of weekly worship.

How are the prayers prepared?

The process of preparing the prayers will vary depending upon who is writing them. It is preferable that those leading the prayers or others in the congregation with an interest in that ministry craft them for their local context. In this way the prayers can reflect both the wideness of the world and the particular needs of that time and place. To aid in this crafting, resources such as *Sundays and Seasons* offer sets of intercessions for each Sunday and festival that can be adapted for local use. Other helpful resources are suggested at the end of this FAQ.

To write the prayers, three resources are very helpful: a bible or lectionary, a hymnal, and the news. The list in *ELW* (p. 105) provides the general categories:

- for the church universal, its ministry, and the mission of the gospel;
- for the well-being of creation;
- for peace and justice in the world, the nations and those in authority, the community;
- for the poor, oppressed, sick, bereaved, lonely;
- for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit,
- for the congregation, and for special concerns.

As you read the scripture readings for the day, those lessons may call to mind specific prayer concerns. For example, hearing the story of the laborer in the vineyard could call to mind prayers for employers and the employees, for those seeking employment, for the earth and those who grow our food. Take time with those texts either as an individual or in a group. If you know the hymns and songs selected for that day, allow them to guide you. And finally, what is going on in the world? What and who needs our prayer? A very helpful, brief resource that outlines a weekly schedule for preparing the intercessions is *Praying for the Whole World: A Handbook for Intercessors* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

What forms do these prayers take?

One very common form is to write a petition followed by a phrase that signals a response from the congregation such as, “God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**” While this form can be very effective, care must be taken so that the petitions are not so long that we lose track of for what or for whom we are praying. Especially as someone is new to the practice of crafting prayers, they can simply be a list:

For the churches of Liberia; God, in your mercy...

For our siblings in Christ in the city of (your city/town); God, in your mercy...

For the farmers who are planting our crops; God, in your mercy;

For families awaiting the birth of children; God, in your mercy...

As *The Sunday Assembly* reminds us, “Such intercessions can be very moving and real. They can invite us all into the ministry of intercessions for others and such a pattern is never too simple” (p. 168). We often need fewer words, not more.

If your assembly provides a printed worship folder or is aided by a screen, it is usually not necessary or advisable to print or display the full intercessions. An exception might be in bilingual services or when close captioning is used. Printing the leader’s phrase signaling the response and the assembly’s response is sufficient. This allows for greater flexibility, especially when recent events call for emendations to what had been prepared.

With what words do we pray?

The words we use will vary greatly across the church, but it is important that such prayers are worded so that they are indeed prayers addressed God, not words to ourselves. It can be tempting to make these prayers serve as announcements or mini-sermons. It is also tempting to really not believe that God is at work, so prayers become not about God, but ultimately about us: “Help us be a better congregation; Help us remember Aunt Sally; Help us provide more food in our food pantry.” Yes, God is at work through our hands, but it is “God’s work, Our Hands” Not, “Our work, Our hands.”

One way to avoid prayers becoming announcements is to use only use only first names in the prayers: “We pray for the sick, especially Sam, Barbara, Alberto....” If last names are needed, they could be printed in a service folder or on a screen.

As you write these prayers, strive to find a balance between “language that is both colloquial and formal, both accessible and profound.” (Ramshaw, *Praying for the Whole World*, p. 42). Also, consider how not only how the words look on paper, but how they will be read or heard aloud. Are certain phrases difficult to say (tongue-twisters or awkward alliterations)? Can the prayer be understood on the first hearing? Also consider matters inclusive and expansive language. Do the prayers use a variety of images and scriptural metaphors for God? Are they overly dependent on one image or name for God? Do they use strong verbs, believing that God indeed is at work, acting in the world?

When making language choices, consider alternatives that to language that too readily classifies a person/people by their condition. For example, “feed those who hunger” or “feed those who are hungry” instead of “feed the hungry.” Or “we pray for our unhoused neighbors” rather than “we pray for the homeless.”

For the assembly to participate in the responses (“receive our prayer” e.g.) fully, it is helpful to keep the responses to the intercessions consistent, perhaps for a liturgical season. If the response will be changed more frequently, the assisting minister will want to confidently lead the assembly in the response, perhaps by saying the response to the prayer as part of the introduction. For example, “Trusting in God who hears us when we call, we pray for the church, the world, and all of creation, responding with ‘hear our prayer.’” If printed service folders are used, including the prayer response is welcoming to visitors; we cannot assume all will know how to respond to the prayer.

Interceding for the whole world

Children are often taught the popular bible song, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” The prayers of intercession live into this truth as we pray for the needs of the world. Too often these prayers are too limited. Yet as we pray for those things beyond us, we are ever mindful of that world God holds and the hands and hearts we have graciously been given.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↳ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ↳ How do we lead liturgy with grace and confidence?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#))
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#))
- 📄 [ELCA Social Statement: Faith Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action.](#) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019.
- 📄 [“Here Other Intercessions May Be Offered.”](#) *Sundays and Seasons*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2021.
- 📄 [“A Template for the Prayers of Intercession.”](#) *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks: A Collection of Litanies, Laments and Thanksgivings at Font and Table.* Gail Ramshaw, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017.

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail. *Praying for the Whole World: A Handbook for Intercessors.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. (See especially 167-172)

- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
- 📖 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com. Both the print and online versions provide intercessions for Sundays and festivals. Intercessions specific to the lesser festivals are available online. In the Library, click on “Sundays and Seasons Resources” and then on “Lesser Festival Prayers of Intercession.”
- 📖 *All Creation Sings*, “Scriptural Images for God.” Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2020. (See pp. 268-271)
- 📖 *In These and Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 *Serving the Assembly's Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. See the chapter “Preparing the prayers of intercession” 49-56
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail. *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017.

Other Resources

- 📖 Gail Ramshaw, ed., *Intercessions For The Christian People: Prayers of the People for Cycles A, B, C of the Roman, Episcopal and Lutheran Lectionaries*. Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1990.
- 📖 Wells, Samuel and Abigail Kocher, *Shaping the Prayers of the People: the art of intercession*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014.

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