

BEGINNING TO PRAY



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beginning to pray.

**Anglican
Fellowship of
Prayer (Canada)**

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What is prayer?

Christianity teaches that God, the Creator of all that exists, knows each of us by name, loves us without limit, and longs for our love in return. God's love does not depend on whether or not we are "good". It is given to us freely. When we respond to God by loving life as a precious gift and looking beyond ourselves to those in need, we are beginning to pray. Someone said that prayer is to help us love life and enjoy it more. In John 14: 23 there is an extraordinary verse in which Jesus says that when we do follow God's imperative to love, we are God's home, God lives with and in us.

How can I learn more about prayer?

Every happening in life, large or small, positive or negative can be an opportunity to turn to God. A bird singing, a tree in bloom, a car that won't start, a child's sickness, a boss in a bad temper, a generous gesture that moves us to gratitude - God is in all of life. We can tell from their prayers that our Celtic Christian forebears believed that God was their dearest friend and companion, intimately concerned in every moment of their lives.

Beginning the journey

We can turn spontaneously to God with our failures, loves, hopes and fears in our own words at any time. If we are churchgoers we may naturally use prayers we hear in church. But, we may also say directly to God whatever is in our hearts and minds, ask for what we need, acknowledge God's presence briefly and often. Be persistent - look constantly towards God, and you will find and be found. Keep asking for God's help, expect a response - a door will open. Trust in God for help and sustenance when you are alienated, angry, or ashamed as well as when life is going smoothly. Throughout our lives, whether they are difficult, happy, stable or tragic, the Christian message is that God is with us.

God is with us

The assurance we are given is not that misery, pain, war, famine, oppression and other catastrophes or trials will suddenly disappear and life be made easy, but that God is with us through all, adversity included, and will not desert us.

How do I address God?

Jesus addressed God as "Abba", which translates as "Daddy", a term signifying the closest kind of loving, trusting, child/parent relationship.

Those who are uncomfortable with confining God to one gender may want to use inclusive names. Some possibilities are: Loving God, Holy One, Father-Mother God, (or Abba-Amma). Christian literature and hymns contain an enormous range of inclusive titles for God, from Loving Wisdom, Merciful God, Loving Creator, to the traditional Friend and Redeemer, as names for Jesus. Some titles for the Holy Spirit are Gracious Spirit, Eternal Spirit, Spirit of Wisdom. The hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* contains the term *Blessed Trinity* for the triune God. Some people have an inner sense of the persons of the Trinity, and without needing other names, address them directly as You, or Thou. Others may find that one person of the Trinity is usually in their hearts when they pray. To enlarge your sense of who God is, read psalm 139, vs 1-18. It offers a perspective on a Creator who chooses to create and to be involved in the lives of beings like ourselves, who are less than a speck of dust in a blink of time.

Making space for God

Although we can turn to God while we are going about our daily lives, we also need to make space where we give God undivided attention. The Gospel records speak of Jesus getting away from the crowds to be alone with God (Luke 6: 12). A further brief instruction says "go into your room, close the door and pray to God in secret; you will be rewarded openly" (Matt 6:6), with a further injunction not to be ostentatious in prayer or try to look holy. Through Jesus' example we recognize the need for quiet space with God alone, learning, resting, being in God. Prayer is both being and doing. Some people find it easier to "be", others prefer to "do". A balance of both in our lives is needed; ideally "being" is the wellspring of "doing", so the first essential when we come to our space is to slow down, to relax as much as possible, to become still, to be present to God in our bodies, as well as our minds and spirits.



Present yourself

In his book *Becoming What I Am*, Harry Williams reminds us that what happens in the time we set aside for prayer is up to God. Our business is to present ourselves. If we can manage ten minutes twice a week or half an hour once a week, we should begin with that. Williams suggests we be realistic and start small rather than being over-ambitious, and that our effort should be directed to keeping faithfully the time we have set ourselves.

Think of prayer as the breath of another life.

Without breath there is no life. Most of the time I forget that I am only alive because I continue to breathe. Think of prayer as the breath of your spiritual

life. The **Collect** at the beginning of the Eucharist echoes this; it says, "... God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the **inspiration**, (i.e. **breathing in**) of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you..." (BAS, page 185) Our physical selves are active partners in our prayer.

Silence

Choose a way of entering your quiet time. One way could be to say the **Collect** mentioned above. You may find it enough to say to God "*Here I am.*" After this, be silent, aware of your breathing and of the presence of God the Holy Spirit in your desire to pray. Silence can be prayer without words. You need not be afraid that God will force you to do anything against your will when you open yourself in this way. Offer God *all* your thoughts and feelings.

Learning to practice the presence of God

Learn a simple method of being attentive to God's presence. One way is to repeat gently a brief phrase or sentence which contains a truth about God. Examples: "*Be still, and know that I am God: (psalm 46:10); I am life (or love; wisdom; strength; health; peace) within you,*" or an affirmation; "*I will give you My Spirit and you shall live*" (Ezekiel 36:27)(NRSV). Or, use the phrase "*Be here now*".

Many people find the 'Jesus prayer' helps them (*Lord, have mercy* or *Jesus, have mercy*). This is a cry to be drawn closer to the loving heart of God, as a child would be embraced by a loving parent. By repeating an affirmation of God's presence your mind is given a focus on which to rest. Choose **one** sentence, phrase or affirmation, use it for at least two weeks before choosing a different one. After you have become quiet by following your breathing, repeat the sentence you choose slowly, in your mind, or aloud if you prefer, as often as is needed to help you to keep looking towards God inwardly, for between five and ten minutes.

This practice is simple but not easy. Our minds are usually full of thoughts and half-thoughts which **Henri Nouwen** described as "being like a tree full of monkeys jumping up and down". Each time you realize your attention has wandered away from your sentence, bring it back gently to consciousness or return to your breathing. Leave the "monkeys" until later, don't attend to them. Don't be impatient or angry with yourself when you find you cannot do this simple thing. It is the persistent, gentle attempt to look in God's direction that is vital. Accept the fact of your wandering thoughts, keep returning to the awareness that you are breathing, and then resume your prayer.

If your prayer time is fifteen minutes and the initial entrance to it and silence takes seven, the remainder could be used for a brief reading (see book list), or some moments of prayer for others. End by thanking God for the opportunity of spending this time in prayer. You are not leaving God, nor does God leave you, but your immediate attention will now be turned towards your daily living. God is present in all of life, not just what are sometimes considered the religious parts.

No guilt trips

If you miss your prayer time, don't waste time and energy feeling guilty about it. Acknowledge the lapse to God, and, like **Brother Lawrence**, an 18th century lay brother of a religious order, ask for help. He said to God *"I shall always go astray when left to myself, it is you that must help me, and mend what is amiss,"* and then returned peaceably to his practice, giving himself no further trouble about his shortcomings.



Space and time

If it isn't possible for you to "go into your room and close the door" it doesn't mean you can't pray. Don't despair. Do what you can. Once you have felt the desire to pray, expect space to become available. Ask God for help in finding a place and time; explore your daily timetable, your home surroundings and your work place thoroughly. In our culture it is very difficult to find quiet space for prayer and to be regular about using it, and you will need patience, persistence, and reliance on God to help establish and keep your prayer time.

Intercession - praying for others

When some person or situation is very much on your heart and mind, ask God's help. Remember that God is with you, as well as with the person or issue which is affecting you. **Marian Dunlop**, a teacher of meditation practice, wrote that "worry is not a virtue". Worrying doesn't accomplish anything. We can waste a lot of time doing it. God is already present in the heart of any situation. When we join ourselves in prayer to God-who-is-there-already we are more likely to be able to act constructively as a result. God cares about each person, each situation, more than we ever could. Trusting God to make a difference, influences our prayer for the people involved and our own actions on their behalf.

Giving thanks

Give thanks to God at the close of each quiet time, whether or not you feel satisfied. The opportunity you have made to present yourself to God is enough to be thankful for. The idea of success has no meaning in prayer. Learning to pray is like peeling endless skins off an onion; there is always more. At times we may feel we've made progress, because we received some insight, or were able to keep our attention steady. But discouraging prayer times also lead to new growth and understanding, so value judgments, as to whether or not you have prayed well, are irrelevant. It's important to stay patiently with unsettled prayer times. If disruptions persist for no apparent reason, ask an experienced person for help. Any pattern of prayer we follow is a vehicle for our relationship with God, and from time to time we may need to change to a different one.

Expectations

God touches us during the times we set apart. We need not attempt to hide our weaknesses and failures from God. Our continually accelerating culture makes it difficult to grasp that it takes a lifetime to grow in prayer; learning what it means to love God, others and ourselves will take more than the rest of our life. Becoming aware of the continual presence of the One who loves us, and discovering how to give and receive are keys to finding God in all things. Prayer is a journey of discovery, and we are pilgrims. The journey is more important than arriving at a destination!



Resources

Books and other resources can be reliable guides and sources of reassurance and new thought, especially if you have no friend with whom you can talk about your journey. Please refer to the following pages for Recommended Books.

Bible reading programmes

- ✦ Your choice of a Bible translation - The New Revised Standard Bible is recommended
- ✦ Alongsider's Program -Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, Booklet G-17.
- ✦ Bible Reading Fellowship
- ✦ Forward Day by Day -subscriptions available to parishes and individuals from Forward Movement Press, Cincinnati. Contact your Diocesan Prayer Representative for publications pertaining to, or recommended by, your diocese.

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For further information or pamphlets please contact your Diocesan Prayer representative or the Resources representative for A.F.P. Canada.

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