



Prayer Groups

a “**how to**” booklet

**Anglican
Fellowship of
Prayer (Canada)**

www.anglicanprayer.org

INTRODUCTION

Why must we have a "how to" booklet on prayer groups?

Because there are, at times, delicate matters involved in the formation of these groups, and this pamphlet may help correct false assumptions and prevent unhappy results.

Why do we need prayer groups?

There are two ways to answer that question. One way deals with the need of the Church (as the Body of Christ in the world today). The other way deals with the needs of individual people. The first way involves the need for prayers; the other way involves the needs of pray-ers.

Our congregation, the people within it, and the world around us, all need prayer. One of the effective ways of carrying on prayer activity is in small groups. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18: 20).

Prayer groups meet another need which the Church today recognizes more and more. People may be regular in worship, of which prayer is an integral and essential part, and they may exercise personal prayer continually. Yet they hunger to be part of a smaller group in which personal concerns may be expressed and prayed about. This hunger to be part of a group much smaller than the worshipping body--the hunger for growth, for deepening our spiritual life--leads one to seek out other Christians who feel the pull of prayer. In a small group Christians can come together to share what each has learned, and to seek to learn and experience more about prayer, as well as to provide prayerful support for one another and the needs of others within the congregation.

No more eloquent testimony could be offered than the following one attesting to the value and efficacy of a prayer group.

"Becoming part of a prayer group opened a whole new life for me, and I've been strengthened, taught, and healed within the circle of love therein, and I know I too have strengthened, taught, and healed as I became an active part of that loving circle."

On the other hand, no matter how much a congregation may need a prayer group or groups, much care and consideration must be given to their formation. They must be a part of the total ministry of the congregation, and they must have the support of the clergy. That support may not be instantly forthcoming.

Clergy, with their leadership responsibilities, must consider several factors before a prayer group is planned. At a particular point in time, a prayer group may seem to be a divisive rather than a supportive element in the congregation. Other plans and programs may doom a prayer group to an early demise. Perhaps preliminary teaching about prayer is necessary to insure the group's success. These are matters which the clergy must decide.

For a variety of reasons, some clergy may initially appear to be 'cautious' about supporting the idea of a prayer group. They may not have any experience with such a group and are not sure how a prayer group would function in the parish. If we are truly people of prayer, we will have faith that clergy support will come. Pray for the clergy (not at them), and furnish them with material which will help them understand and encourage prayer groups.

Assume, now, that clearance has been obtained from the clergy. Where do we go from here?

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

We have decided to form a prayer group. Now we must decide what we wish to accomplish and how best to accomplish it.

The purpose of our prayer group should be our preliminary concern. Some groups wish to experience group prayer and the empowering which comes when "two or three are gathered together." Others may desire fellowship and sharing, and see prayer as an important part of the process. Still others may want the benefits of group study (perhaps Bible study), and see the prayer group as the proper vehicle for this work. Each group must understand in the beginning what its purpose is to be.

The size of the group is another important matter for preliminary consideration. There must be enough members to sustain the group when some members are absent because of illness or other emergencies. Yet the group must not be so large that members are intimidated by numbers and unable to share their thoughts and feelings.

If study is a purpose of the group, numbers are important. There must be enough members to provide a "rich blend" of thought and experience, but there must not be so many that some are deprived of the opportunity to contribute. Six to twelve is a good range for a prayer group. As a group grows beyond twelve people, the opportunity exists to create two groups instead of one, thus increasing the prayer of the congregation.

Composition of the group must be considered, and that may depend on when and where the group will meet. Generally speaking, it is best to have a mixture of ages and backgrounds

of married, single, widowed and divorced. A microcosm of the world itself will enrich our prayers. However, working people cannot meet on weekdays, and older people may be afraid to go out at night. Common sense should be the guideline.

Above all, to whatever extent possible, there must be unity of purpose within the group. Those who participate reluctantly with "chips on their shoulders", those who have critical spirits and will constantly "nit pick", those who doubt the validity of prayer are best left out of the prayer group. A group must be composed of people with a heart for God, who will love and understand one another as they seek to grow spiritually and to serve God joyfully.

Additionally, and perhaps as a way of eliminating some of the problems mentioned above, a time commitment--say of three to six months--could be decided upon at the time the group begins meeting on a regular basis. Then, after the designated period of time has elapsed a decision could be made as to the future of the group. This will also provide a natural opportunity for those who feel the group is not for them to drop out gracefully.

How often should a prayer group meet? The group should meet at least once a month, the year around, although many groups find it helpful to meet more often. Less frequent meetings may not be fatal to a prayer group, but continuity is broken and effectiveness is substantially reduced.

HOW TO FORM PRAYER GROUPS

Someone must assume the responsibility for forming a prayer group. The clergy may encourage the formation of a group, but if they do not, someone else must broach the subject and obtain clergy clearance and support. Someone must give thought to the factors discussed in the last section. That someone may be you!

Prayer groups may be the major thrust of a particular congregation. Some congregations have ten to fifteen groups. In the congregations which have prayer groups, the clergy--through teaching, preaching, and discussion--have shown their people the vital importance of prayer groups. In those congregations, there is a place in a group for virtually anyone who wishes to join one. If a person is not in a group, he/she knows that it is because of his own conscious choice.

But if the groups are not the program of our congregation, and the Lord is prodding us to form one, where do we start?

A first step is to approach people who appear to be interested in a prayer group. We tell them we have clergy support and talk with them about prayer groups. We ask them to pray about it.

Next, we ask our clergy to recommend people who may be interested and approach them. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to place a notice in the church bulletin or make an announcement at a coffee hour or parish meeting. When people express interest, we take time to talk with them to make sure they understand the purpose of the group and to see if they will fit in.

If we have no preconceived idea of what the purpose of the

group should be and if we do not know of anyone who is interested, we ask the clergy for clearance and issue an invitation. Through personal contact or an announcement or bulletin notice, those who are interested are invited to a meeting at a set date, place and time. At the meeting we discuss the ideas and options presented in this booklet. We may wish to listen to a teaching about prayer on a CD, DVD or cassette. Through discussion, we will arrive at a consensus on the purpose, composition, time and place of meetings.

Once our prayer group is formed, what format will our meetings follow?

FORMAT

Where should a prayer group meet?

We want relative quiet, and we should be comfortable.

Some groups meet in the church because of the convenient location or because the clergy and prayer group members wish the group to be a visible demonstration of the church's ministry.

Most often, prayer groups meet in members' homes. As a group gets under way, it is best to meet in the same home for several weeks. The members will be sure of the location and familiar with the surroundings. Meeting in the same place gives support and security to the members. Each move to another location requires some psychological adjustment. If the group moves frequently, the break in continuity and subsequent confusion can result in members falling away.

However, there is some value to moving the meeting place from time to time once the group has been established. In that

way, the same person does not have the responsibility of serving as host week after week.

The length of each meeting must be determined when the group is organized and then adhered to. The members then know what commitment they are making. Normally, a prayer group should meet for at least one hour but not for more than two. Even if the group activity is limited solely to prayer, an hour is needed for getting settled, for praying, and for parting in an unhurried manner. If study and sharing are also involved, two hours will be needed. More than two hours will drag things out unnecessarily, however. And it may be too great a time commitment, especially for members with children at home.

Prayer groups can involve a great deal more than praying. They may engage in Bible study or other forms of Christian study, sharing of spiritual victories or concerns, or various outreach projects or ministries of the church as discussed below. Such matters should be resolved at the outset, although adjustments may be appropriate as time goes by.

Praying should be central to a prayer group. There can be spontaneous prayers of intercession, thanksgiving, and petition. Prayers of adoration (praise) and confession may be appropriate depending upon the closeness of group members and their commitment to one another.

Written prayers are suitable, and silent prayer should be an option for anyone who is not at ease praying aloud.

Initially, the group leader should set some ground rules. If there are to be spontaneous prayers, one person should be appointed to begin the prayers and another to end them. In this way, "silent spots" will not be awkward; and the group

will know that things are under control. If, however, the members are to pray around a circle, those with no verbal prayer to offer should say simply "Amen" when their turn arrives.

In another manner of praying in a group, the leader asks the members for their prayer concerns and writes down the name of the person or situation to be prayed for. After an opening prayer, the leader presents the names or situations for prayers as members are led to offer them. "Lord," the leader may say, "we lift up to you Mary who has had a heart attack." Members may be led to pray for Mary, for her family, for her doctors, etc.

It is also a good idea if the leader indicates that we will pray for the world and any concern on our hearts in regard to it, for the nation, for the church and then finally ourselves and our sick and troubled friends who need our prayers. If we follow this kind of a format we will find that our prayer groups will not get stale because there's always more than enough in the world requiring our prayers. It's a very rewarding and exciting adventure to know that we are, through our prayers, part and parcel of the solution of world problems because our prayers go where we can't go and they open doors that we could not possibly open ourselves.

There are many ways of praying as a group. The suggestions above are offered only as examples.

There are ways of supplementing prayer, and they are an appropriate part of a prayer group's activities. Christian study, especially Bible study, can aid the group in several ways. Praying people should grow spiritually and become more and more attuned to what God is saying to them. The Bible is the best source of spiritual education, and it can teach a great deal

about prayer. It can be used for meditation, leading to group prayer. Above all, regular study can provide a discipline which will hold the group together when praying hits a dry spell. We learn a great deal from each other's inspired insights into a Bible passage or a passage in a book which we are studying.

But caution must be taken so that a prayer group is not changed inadvertently into a study group. Praying should remain the priority of a prayer group with other activities serving simply to enhance prayer.

Prayer groups can be the place where members share those things which are vital to their lives. As the bond of fellowship grows among group members, sharing becomes natural. The members should be concerned if this does not happen. Again, however, caution must be taken that sharing not become the object of the meetings with prayer relegated to a subsidiary function. If sharing becomes the primary function, the group probably will die.

It is not unusual for prayer groups to become involved in outreach. That may be through a church project or it may be a project of particular interest to the group members. We should "put feet" on our prayers, and if a group is led to social service or evangelical out reach (e.g. visiting newcomers to the church), such activities are entirely appropriate.

Again, caution must be taken so that the group does not lose sight of its primary activity: prayer. If we are engaged in the ministry of intercession we discover that our united prayers often go where we can't and we accomplish things we couldn't possibly accomplish on our own strength.

THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

Normally, a prayer' group does not function properly under what we generally perceive as a "chairman" or a "director". However, there must be one person responsible for seeing that the mechanics of the meetings transpire as they should, to make the arrangements, to assign tasks, and to guide discussion.

Leadership may be shifted from time to time, even from week to week or for some other specified period of time.

In group study, the leader should not be expected to do all the teaching and know all the answers. All the participants must look for answers, search for insights, and share fully in the discussion. The leader makes sure that this happens.

A leader should:

1. Encourage participation by all members of the group;
2. Keep discussion from wandering from the subject;
3. Help avoid conflicts;
4. Help resolve differences;
5. Call time on inappropriate or unprofitable discussion;
6. At the appropriate time, bring the group to prayer and guide the members through it;
7. See that the group achieves its purpose for the meeting;
8. Assign responsibilities and make arrangements for the next meeting.

The leader sees that the meeting begins and ends on time. A good group leader does not dominate the meeting, but rather brings forth the best from each member, politely quieting the talkative, and drawing out the shy.

DO'S AND DON'TS

Additional guidelines for prayer groups are:

1. Group meetings should start promptly and end at the designated time. It is better to bring an exciting meeting to a close than to allow it to stretch out to the point of exhaustion.
2. A meeting's length of time is not as significant as the way in which that time is used. However, since prayer is the primary purpose of the group, prayer should come before study and discussion.
3. Group members must not repeat outside the group the confidences and experiences shared within it. Members must be vigilant in observing this rule. Outside the trusting relationship in which these confidences are shared and out of the context of the total discussion and prayer, they can be misunderstood. Nothing can destroy a group more quickly than the violation of this rule.
4. The meeting place must be as free as possible of distractions and interruptions.
5. The meeting should begin with a time of silence to allow people to "quiet down" in preparation for what will transpire.
6. If Scripture study or reading is to be part of the meeting, the lighting should be adequate but not so bright as to distract or disturb the members.
7. There should be a circular seating arrangement, or something similar, so that each person in the group can see all the others.
8. The group should decide if beverages and food are to be served. In varying circumstances, food and drink can be a

helpful support to the group, a distraction, or a time consumer. The matter depends upon the particular group, the time and place of meeting, and the manner in which the refreshments are handled. In any event, remember that a prayer group meeting is not primarily a social event.

9. When study is a part of the meeting, the group must stick to the item under discussion and not skip aimlessly to other topics. It is important that study time be used efficiently, and this can be done even as all members of the group are encouraged to participate.
10. Don't be afraid of occasional periods of silence, especially during prayer time.
11. An effective way for the group to develop as a community is for each member to pray daily for the other members of the group.

THINGS TO OBSERVE

The general guidelines set forth above should help meetings function properly. However, danger signs may appear from time to time. Any enterprise runs into occasional problems, and prayer groups are no exception. However, do not look upon them as signs of defeat but as indications of matters which can be dealt with positively and resolved effectively.

One thing to observe carefully is the quality of the matters under discussion. Is there a tendency to gossip or complain about the church? If there is, it should be called to the attention of the group and stopped.

Are there too many members absent too many times? The few who are faithful can be discouraged quickly by others' poor attendance. "They just don't care." And when a meeting is

too small, the scope of prayer, sharing, and discussion is greatly limited. If attendance is poor, an attempt should be made to increase the size of the group.

A similar problem occurs when there is not enough input from the group. This can be corrected by making an effort to draw out the quiet members, to help them realize that their thoughts and prayers are important. Sensitivity to some members' lack of participation can solve this problem. Ask their opinions and what prayer concerns are important to them.

Domination by a leader or other group members can cause a different problem. Then discussion is limited to only a few people. Just as it is important to draw out the quiet ones, it is equally important to restrain those who have a tendency to dominate. Talk to the individuals concerned and sensitize them to the need for every member to participate.

A subtle danger signal is the lack of spiritual growth among the group members. If prayers and discussion remain on a surface level, it is evident that there is a lack of trust within the group. For spiritual growth to occur, members must be able to share "from the tops of their heads and the bottom of their hearts" without fear of ridicule or criticism. If trust appears to be absent, the group must be made aware of this.

A group study program is endangered by members who do not prepare. When some work hard to prepare for the meeting and others do not, disunity can result. In effect, those who do not prepare insult those who do, and the matter must be dealt with. Meet individually with those who do not prepare, determine what the problem is, and try to help them recognize their responsibility either to be prepared or to drop out. Before new members are invited into the prayer group, it is

wise to seek confirmation about the prospective additions from the members who are already active in the group. This is not suggested as a way of being "exclusive", but to enhance the continuity and unity of purpose within the group.

Again, do not fear the dangers. Only recognize that all activities will encounter some problems which can be dealt with quickly and positively if they are properly diagnosed. Be observant and be guided accordingly.

"PICK-UPS"

Despite all the best care and effort, a prayer group may get bogged down along the way. Prayers may "dry up" or enthusiasm may wane. Don't panic. Be prepared to offer new insights, ideas, and experiments which will inspire enthusiasm and get things moving again.

An exhaustive list of possibilities for "pickups" will not be included here, only some suggestions.

One possibility which can be acted upon immediately is to bring in new members who can contribute new thoughts and experiences, shake the group from its lethargy, and get things moving again.

Get the clergy involved. Ask a clergyperson to conduct a worship service for your group, perhaps a house communion in the place where the group normally meets. Meet with the clergy once a month (or as determined by the clergy) for prayer in support of their ministry. Ask them for suggestions for renewing the life of the group. Give them the opportunity to become .a more vital part of the prayer group's ministry.

Introduce a new plan for study or devotion to the group.

Devotional Bible study is one. A Bible meditation, for instance, may be done as follows:

1. Read the passage you have chosen for meditation (or have someone in the group read it slowly).
2. Meditate upon it. Picture the people in the story, the circumstances. See yourself there.
3. Relate the people and circumstances to yourself and incidents in your own life.
4. Pray silently for guidance, that the Lord may show to you the thing or things He wants you to learn from the passage.
5. Resolve to begin practising the principle or direction shown to you through meditation and prayer.
6. Prepare your own prayer to use daily in keeping the resolve.

There are other available resources. Books on prayer and prayer groups by Herb O' Driscoll, Ronald Rolheiser, Joyce Rupp., Richard Foster and classics by Catherine Marshall, Helen Shoemaker, and are excellent resources. Bible study materials from the Bible Reading Fellowship are extremely helpful. Religious bookstores and libraries have inspiring, helpful books on prayer.

The important thing is to recognize that the group is bogged down and to revive interest as quickly as possible.

Other ideas might include: joining with another group for a meeting and home communion; having a purely "social" evening, including spouses who may not be members of the

group; having a meeting which includes newly confirmed parishioners as guests so they will know what a prayer group can be like.

RELATED MATTERS

In its total ministry of prayer, a group can reach far beyond its weekly meetings. There are a number of positive activities which can emanate from its members.

The first is an internal activity. The group can be an effective support group for the ministries of its members. All Christians--clergy and lay--are called to ministry. Our whole lives are opportunities for ministry. We can determine gifts God has given us for ministry and the particular ministry or ministries to which God has called us (which may be visiting the sick, working with the aging, teaching, counselling, or many more).

Prayer groups can support these ministries by praying for them and their work. A group can be in prayer (and in fasting when it is appropriate) when a member is engaged in a particularly sensitive act of ministry (such as an initial counselling session). Without revealing confidences and by using discretion, a member can share with the group the joys and pains of ministry and receive support and strength.

Several prayer groups, especially if they are within one congregation or community, can be vital links in a prayer chain. When a distress signal goes out for prayer for a person, a need, or a situation, a designated member within each group receives the information and relays it immediately to the other members of the group. The wider fellowship of prayer is brought to bear upon the situation, and blessings flow. Prayer partnerships can be established between individuals

with a particularly close relationship. Between these individuals, personal concerns and prayers can be shared on a deeper level and more frequently than they can be shared within the prayer group. Partners feel free to contact each other at any time of day or night to ask for special prayers, assurance, and advice. They have often been known to pray for one another over the phone when the situation has called for it.

Members of prayer groups can also serve as the "core" for prayer vigils, or to instigate such vigils. Prayer groups can join together to set up quiet days or retreats.

Prayer groups can be "receiving points" for prayers from members of the congregation and the community in general. This normally involves prayer lists on which people and situations are placed in categories (seriously ill, marital or emotional problems, crucial situations, etc.). The lists should be reviewed at each prayer group meeting with names deleted or added and victories shared. Also, individual members of the group may find it valuable to keep their own prayer journal.

There are a number of ways a prayer group can become a source of spiritual strength for its own members and for the world around it. Seek the Lord's guidance concerning such possibilities, so that the prayer life of the group reaches its maximum potential. But take care not to become involved in so many activities that the group bums itself out or becomes distracted by running in too many directions at once.

A FINAL WORD

A personal note by an anonymous contributor.

For several years I had the pleasure of participating in an ecumenical prayer dialogue. From various denominations, people who believed in the power of prayer came together each year to share experiences of prayer and to pray together.

The greatest lesson to come from the annual dialogue was that prayer unites. We had great doctrinal differences, but they didn't hamper our prayer or our conversations about prayer. We all believed in the same Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of our lives, we knew that He answered our prayers, and in prayer we find full, free fellowship.

In your prayer groups, you, too, can discover that prayer unites. All that is needed is a few people whose lives are turned toward Christ and who believe that "when two or three are gathered together in His name, He is in the midst of them."

May God ever bless your prayer group ministry.



For further information or pamphlets contact your AFP Diocesan Representative or the AFP Canada Resources Coordinator.
Internet Web Site: www.anglicanprayer.org

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G-22-2017