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Prayer Practices

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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: Prayer Practices

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: ______________, Faculty Mentor

Date: 12/3/04

Comments (Optional):

This is an excellent project, useful for secular and religious settings alike. I look forward to seeing it published sometime soon!

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Prayer Practices

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Senior Honors Project
University Honors Program
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
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Abstract

Throughout the history of Christianity, prayer has been an integral part of expressing one’s faith. This project begins by examining prayer’s place in the history of Christianity then continues with the creation of a curriculum for experiencing Christian prayer with children. The curriculum, designed for children from preschool to fifth grade, will allow children in a Christian setting such as Sunday school to explore what prayer means and has meant to a variety of Christians, to experience new styles and methods of prayer, and to foster the growth of a prayer community. This dialogue will strengthen the understanding of how prayer relates to participants as individuals and as a Christian community. The education also extends beyond the children, as parents and teachers are equally challenged to consider how prayer relates to the overall Christian community, particularly in respect to the ongoing history and traditions of Christian prayer. Although rooted in the reformed tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA), this curriculum includes elements from many Christian traditions, and could easily be used in a variety of settings, from religious schools to individual churches. More than simply educating about prayer, however, this curriculum teaches diversity and enhances the understanding and appreciation for the differences of others, encouraging self-expression and personal growth as participants learn more about others and about themselves.
Christian Prayer, Past and Present

They are said before meals, after receiving a promotion at work, in the context of a worship service, or in the final moments before one drifts off to sleep. Prayer is an integral part of Christian ritual, and has been since the beginning of Christianity. As early Christians in the first century sought to define themselves from Gentiles and Jews, developing a specific doctrine was essential to their survival. A key component of this doctrine was how Christians should express their faith, often through worship and prayer. When Christianity emerged as a politically viable religious option in the fourth century, many leaders sought to convince others that their doctrines were the correct ones, leading to debates over many theological issues, including prayer. With an examination of the foundations of the discussion of Christian faith, one can better understand the development of Christian doctrine, and also the continued debate and discussion over faith issues over fifteen hundred years later.

Just as it is difficult to define when Christianity began, it is equally difficult to define the beginning of the religious practice known as prayer. As Christianity began to develop in its doctrine in the first century C.E., it became necessary for believers to identify themselves through written texts and ritual. Oftentimes, the texts included instructions for the proper way to carry out a ritual, or at least a discussion of how the ritual should be done. As one reflects on the evolution of prayer over time, it is necessary to focus on texts that remain as focal points for specific communities. In the case of Christianity, texts are the most effective point at which to start an exploration of the origins of prayer. Prayer is included in almost every book of the New Testament, from Jesus’ instructions on prayer in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, to the praying disciples in the Upper Room in Acts, to the descriptions of heavenly worship in Revelation 4-5. The authors of the New Testament describe prayer in a variety of ways, leading to a diversity of
practices with differences in place, timing, posture, and purpose. This diversity indicates that prayer can easily be classified as an expression of individuality in an ongoing conversation with God. Prayer can be anywhere, from jail (Acts 16), to a secluded hilltop (1:35), to a rooftop (Acts 10:9). Prayer can be anytime, whether it is in the morning (Mark 1:35), evening (Luke 6:12), or at a specific time for prayer (Acts 3:1). In the early Christian traditions, prayer was a routine part of daily life, with groups practicing prayer from three to seven times a day through rituals similar to our bedtime prayers today. Prayer is also described with several postures, from standing (Luke 18:9-14) to lying on the ground (Mark 14:35). Ultimately, the Bible describes prayer as many things, with the essence being “a lifelong and whole-person response to the divine reality, a posture of the will oriented toward the divine majesty.” It is this definition of prayer that continues throughout history, along with a continuation of the diversity of how this response is demonstrated.

In discussion of the foundations of Christian prayer, it is important to include the connections with Jewish prayer and liturgy. For many early Christians, particularly in the first century C.E., the rituals of Judaism were the most familiar, and were likely a part of daily life. These first Christians transitioned gently into their separation from Judaism as a religious group, as some of the first Christians continued to worship in the synagogues, and “[offered] their daily prayers individually,” making it likely that this practice would have continued after conversion, even with modifications. In fact, many biblical references include converted Jewish followers of Christ continuing to pray at the times prescribed by Jewish doctrine. Although the first-century Christians sought to distinguish themselves from Judaism, they inherited many of the liturgical traditions of prayer. One clear example comes in the idea that prayer begins “directly with an

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3 For a more detailed discussion of the hours of prayer in early Christianity, see Bradshaw 26 and Smith 866.
anamnesis of God's mighty works, without any introductory formula, and may then proceed to petition and intercession⁴." The Lord's Prayer reflects this progression, beginning with the adoration of "hallowed be they name" before continuing to the request to "give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins," and so on. As Christians inherited these traditions from Judaism, they continued to develop them into a liturgy and prayer practice of their own.

The most distinguishing element between Jewish and Christian prayer served to be a defining point in the emergence of Christian prayer. Christian prayer was made in Jesus' name, although "there is no strong evidence that it was ever used as an actual liturgical formula in this way⁵." It is clear, however, that prayers referenced Jesus in some way. Furthermore, the inclusion of Jesus changes the nature of the prayer itself, as components of the prayer such as praise and thanksgiving are done not to God, but to God through Jesus Christ⁶. As Christians continued to explore how their faith differed from Judaism, Christianity as a religion developed.

By the second and third centuries, Christians had developed the idea of what it meant to be a devout Christian in prayer. Although nothing was definitive, many authors such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen spoke about prayer⁷. These writers spoke about prayer not only as an individual's ritual, but as a guiding force for one's life, utilizing 1 Thessalonians 5:17 ("pray without ceasing") as the basis for their argument. In addition to theological discussions over the nature of prayer, these writers addressed the specific rituals for prayer to be followed at various times of the day. Although the writers generally agreed on the importance of prayer as an interaction with and response to God, there was a great variety among their instructions for how prayer was to be done. For example, texts differ in specific times at

⁴ Bradshaw 33-34.
⁵ Bradshaw 36.
⁶ Bradshaw 36.
⁷ Bradshaw 47.
which one should pray and the number of times one should pray each day. Texts also differ in the position of prayer, with some referring to early Christian traditions of standing, and others in the second century including the idea of kneeling out of penitence. Origen recognized these differences, yet attempted to persuade readers that one was better than the other, writing “although there are innumerable dispositions of the body, that which involves the stretching out of the hands and the uplifting of the eyes is to be preferred before all.” Although Origen was later declared a heretic, his leadership of the church at the time greatly impacted the debate on Christian prayer. Another writer, Tertullian, supported another position of prayer, arguing “who would hesitate to prostrate himself before God . . . no prayer is to be performed without kneeling and the rest of the attitudes of humility: for we do not only pray, but also make supplication and satisfaction to God our Lord.” Debates like this are common in early literature regarding Christian prayer, indicating that not only was Christian doctrine diverse and constantly developing, but also that prayer was a central issue to many Christian writers at the time. These writers opened the discussion to the nature and technique of Christian prayer -- a discussion that still continues over fifteen hundred years later.

In some ways, modern discussion on prayer is not very different from that of the second century. In fact, many of the same elements are debated among theological writers as they struggle to provide an exact definition of prayer. It is clear that Christian prayer has always been diverse in practice. Despite this diversity, Christians have communicated with God through prayer to God in the name of Jesus Christ for over two thousand years. With debates over prayer in school and prayer in our government, it is essential to study how prayer has played a role in politics and religion throughout time. For those living in the United States, the Christian-centered

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8 Bradshaw 65.
9 Bradshaw 65.
nature of our current government makes an understanding of the history of prayer extremely useful. If one understands the diversity of Christian prayer throughout history, one can better understand the varying debates that still occur in modern discussions.

A true understanding of prayer involves not only an understanding of its place in the historical context of Christianity, but also its place in the theological development of Christian doctrine. As one observes the foundations of Christian prayer in history, it is impossible to ignore the theological discussions. The two work in tandem with each other, pushing both Christian history and doctrine forward. Ultimately, it is this doctrine that influences Christians as they discuss issues involving faith and liturgy, specifically prayer, in a secular setting. Through an understanding of history, one can better comprehend and account for the tremendous diversity that still exists within Christianity today, rather than simply assuming that from one “true form” of Christianity these variations later occurred. Liturgical study of prayer offers great insight into one example of this variety, encouraging Christians today to recognize the many traditions that have been a part of Christianity since its early stages, and also to explore the traditions that were sometimes lost or forgotten in favor of the dominant doctrine of the time. Through this study and exploration, Christians will not only develop their own faith, but will have a greater appreciation for the discussions around them regarding that faith, and can actively participate in the continuation of intellectual and spiritual contemplation of what it means for a Christian to bow his head and fold his hands, or to open her eyes and raise her arms, in prayer.
Prayer Practices

A guide for experiencing prayer with children

Introductory Guide
Overview

The “prayer practices” program includes three parts: an explanation and discussion of what prayer is, the ongoing creation of a community prayer journal for each class, and an exploration of different ways to pray.

An explanation of what prayer is:

The most important element of this program is for all involved to gain a better understanding of what prayer is. On the most basic level we will convey that prayer is simply a conversation with God. In conversation, we both talk and listen to God. Going deeper, we will structure our discussion of prayer around four + one components of prayer- ACTS + I. “When we pray, we adore God, we confess our sins, we give God thanks, and we pray for the needs of others and ourselves” (Supplication + Intercession).¹⁰

The Prayer Journal, titled “Our Conversation with God”:

Each class will have a journal in which to record and remember their prayers as the year progresses. As children arrive, the community builder and other leader will engage them in conversation. Through this conversation, joys and concerns will be shared as other children join in the gathering activities. These will be “collected” by the community builder and written in the prayer journal. As the departure time nears, these requests will become part of the community prayer time. During the week, the community builder and other leaders can add these prayers to their own prayers. The prayer journal also introduces an example of a spiritual “prayer practice” that the children can do on their own as well!

An exploration of different ways to pray:

From a circle prayer sharing joys and concerns to silent meditation in the lectio divina style to prayer through song and movement, we will pray in many different ways throughout the year. The diversity will reaffirm the idea that there is no one way to pray; we can dialogue with God in many different ways! The diversity of "prayer practices" will encourage children to communicate with God in their own ways and will empower them to develop into the wonderful person whom God created.

Prayer 101 - Where to Start

What is Prayer?

Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Remember, in a conversation there is both talking and listening!

Why do we pray to God?

Because we were created to live with God, who desires the prayers of our hearts. Our hearts long for God, for we need God's help and guidance every day.11

Who should pray to God?

Prayer is open to anyone, anytime, anywhere. As children of God we are all encouraged to converse with God through prayer.

How and when should we pray?

Sometimes prayer is silent. Sometimes prayer is screaming at the top of our lungs. Sometimes prayer is at specific times, such as before meals or at bedtime. Sometimes prayer happens in unplanned moments, as we notice a beautiful sunny day or spend time with a friend in need. Sometimes prayer is in a group. Sometimes prayer is one-on-one with God. Sometimes prayer is with eyes closed, hands clasped, and heads bowed. Sometimes prayer is open eyed, with hands and faces raised to Heaven. Sometimes prayer is in a single breath. Sometimes prayer lasts for hours. There is no right or wrong way to pray. Through prayer we continue our lifelong dialogue with God, wherever, whenever, and however we are in the journey.

What exactly is "prayer practices"?

A program which will incorporate intentional prayer in every children's Sunday School class, every week. This is done through an explanation of what prayer is, the creation of a community prayer journal for each class, and an exploration of different ways to pray ("prayer practices").

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Why is it important to have this program for children?

It is never too early to start a personal relationship with God. By incorporating an intentional prayer track to the Sunday School hour we affirm the mission of children's education, which "envisions a church where every child . . . is on a path of spiritual learning and discovery which draws them closer into a loving, trust-filled relationship with God and which creates in them prayerful hearts of service, compassion, devotion, and generosity." This focus unites all ages in children's ministry with one common goal - to help children be in conversation with God. Just as we learn to tie our shoes and ride our bikes through practice, we develop our relationship with God through conversations, prayers. As we become more comfortable with prayer and discover different ways to express our prayers, we move toward a closer relationship with God. We are creating a community of prayer. Each Sunday, all classes in the Children's Education Program will come together in a prayer of illumination at 9:55 to start the bible lesson time. Also, each class will come together in prayer at the conclusion of the Sunday School hour as they experience different prayer practices!

How do we "teach" children to pray?

First, pray yourself. Open yourself to the power of God and let the Holy Spirit move through you as you explore different styles and types of prayer. Let your mind and soul be transformed. Just as children learn in different ways, they experience God in different ways. Consider yourself a fellow traveler on this spiritual journey. Rather than lecture and "teach" children to pray, encourage children to meet God where they are, with constant reassurance that God is with them and is listening to everything that is in their hearts. Recognize that your time together is planting the seeds for all of you to become more comfortable with prayer, strengthening your personal connection with God.

What if I've never prayed in this way before??

With some of the "prayer practices", you may find yourself in new waters. Don't worry: we have included everything you need to get started! First, pray. Take time before Sunday morning (or Saturday night) to explore the different types of prayer on your own; share the experience with your family and friends. Don't just get a taste of it, really dive into it. With prayerful "practice," you will become more comfortable in prayer and in guiding others through this style of prayer!
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Prayer Practices - Lesson Goals

Fall 1 - What is Prayer?

In the first lesson of the curriculum, the focus is on an explanation of the basics of what prayer is and the introduction of the idea that prayer is simply a conversation with God. This is a time of community building as a new year starts, using the creation of a class prayer journal as a relaxed way of generating conversation, specifically about the prayer experiences in the class previously, and the prayer experiences the class will have in weeks to come. The closing prayer practice in this lesson utilizes the familiar "Here is the church," finger prayer. This prayer is a reminder that we come together as a family of God in prayer at church. At the conclusion of this introductory lesson, each child will receive "Prayer Practices for Parents," a guide for parents to share the curriculum and encourage families to continue their faith development at home using these prayer practices.

Fall 2 & 3 - Prayer Parts - Adoration

The study of prayer begins by answering the question “What is prayer?” To answer this question, the definition from Belonging to God: A First Catechism is broken down to study each component of the ACTS + I acronym. The focus of this lesson is to understand that prayers of adoration are simply our “I love you” prayers to God. The prayer practice is through song, as the class joins together and sings the “Gloria Patri,” just as congregations join together to sing during worship. Prior to singing, the teacher will lead a discussion on the meaning of the words, particularly in relation to the theme of adoration. The lesson concludes with enthusiastic singing of this song of praise, repeated several times to allow the class to focus on the words of the song as a prayer of adoration.

Fall 4 & 5 - Prayer Parts - Confession

The focus on the ACTS + I acronym continues with a discussion of confession. The goal of understanding this component of prayer revolves around the idea that prayer is simply our “I’m sorry” to God. Yet the discussion cannot end here, as through Jesus Christ we are assured that God will forgive us. As a physical reminder of what it means to pray a prayer of confession, the prayer practice for this lesson is a body prayer of confession, in which the participant uses physical movements of the hands to represent the components of confession, from clinging to the sins to the release of these sins through confession, through the assurance of forgiveness as God’s blessings are received. This body prayer is an excellent
prayer for children to repeat during times of silent confession within a worship service as a reminder of their “I’m sorry” to God and the resulting “I forgive you.”

Fall 6 & 7 - Prayer Parts - Thanksgiving

The next aspect of the ACTS + I acronym is thanksgiving. This is most likely a familiar form of prayer with children, as many are taught to say a blessing before a meal. The goal of this lesson is to reiterate the concept that prayer is our “Thank You” to God. Children have the opportunity to gain confidence in their understanding of prayer as they share their prayer of thanksgiving experiences with the class. There is also an opportunity for the children to share these favorite prayers of thanksgiving and pray as a class. The formal prayer practice of the week is a community prayer of thanksgiving. The class joins in a circle, with an individual sharing something he or she is thankful for that day, after which the class responds “Thank You, God!” Not only does this prayer facilitate the ongoing creation of a prayer community, but the litany-type response reinforces the idea that we can thank God both as individuals and as a community at the same time.

Fall 8 & 9 - Prayer Parts - Supplication

Supplication is perhaps the most intimidating word in the ACTS + I acronym. Through this lesson, this “big word” is explained as the idea of saying “Supply Me, God.” The discussion about this form of prayer includes the recognition of the relationship between the individual and God with the understanding that God is in control of our world and our lives. It is also important for teachers of this prayer part to address the issue of praying for things that we want. There is a clear distinction between asking for God to provide presents and asking God to be present in our lives. The prayer practice for this week is a simple “Breath Prayer,” which is a form of contemplative prayer in which the participant repeats a simple sentence to ask for God’s presence in his or her life. Younger children will use “Lord, be with me/us,” while older children have the opportunity to create their own breath prayer following a simple structure. Through this prayer, children are reminded that they can call on God at anytime through this simple prayer, confident that God is listening.

Fall 10 & 11 - Prayer Parts - Intercession

The final component of the ACTS + I acronym builds from the idea of supplication with the concept of praying for others through prayers of intercession. The goal of this lesson is to convey that prayers of intercession are prayers that ask God to “Be with others.” Just as in the discussion of supplication,
it is important for teachers to remind the children that these prayers are asking for God's presence in the lives of others, not demanding a particular result. Through asking for a specific outcome, such as healing, we are simply stating our faith in God as having the power to do anything. The prayer practice for this lesson follows another traditional form of Christian prayer with the laying on of hands as a blessing prayer. Children will connect to each other in a circle, lifting up prayers for the person on their right by name as the prayer progresses. For younger children, this may be simply by saying to name of the child to their right. Children are also encouraged to continue these prayers of intercession by praying for the person on their right by name throughout the week. This prayer practice continues to develop a community of prayer as children learn to pray for others.

Fall 12 - Prayer Parts - Putting It All Together

Throughout the curriculum, teachers have the opportunity to return to a basic discussion of what prayer means. This lesson is similar in structure to the first Fall lesson, focusing on the ACTS + I acronym and the idea that prayer is simply a conversation with God. Teachers lead the class in a discussion of the different components of prayer, referencing the prayer practices from the previous eleven weeks as they begin to “put it all together.” The prayer practice for the week is a combination of the previously introduced prayer practices, reminding students that some or all of these components may be a part of prayer.

Advent 1 - Hope of the Prophets - Prayer with Scripture

As the Advent season begins, the focus of the prayer practices shifts to prayers of preparation for the coming of Jesus. As a part of this preparation, the tradition of lighting the advent wreath carries into the classroom as students learn more about this familiar tradition. The prayer practices for this section involve prayer through the scripture that is read with the lighting of the individual candles, with a likeness to the lectio divina style of prayer and meditation. The first week reminds students of the Hope of the Prophets with a reading from Isaiah 9, focusing on the promise of the child to be born, named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, NRSV). Through a meditation on these words, children will begin to learn about how scripture can be used as a prayer of preparation for the Christmas season. Also, the teachers will include parts of scripture in the closing prayers for the weeks, a method often used within corporate prayers in worship, demonstrating how scripture can be expressed in a variety of ways.
Advent 2 - Light and Warmth of the Stable - Prayer with Scripture

The second candle of the advent wreath represents the night when Mary and Joseph could not find a room in the inn in Bethlehem and had to find light and warmth in the stable. The prayer practice for this lesson continues the theme of prayer through the scripture. Luke 2:6-7 is read with the lighting of the individual candles, with a likeness to the lectio divina style of prayer and meditation. As the children hear a part of the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke, they will reflect and pray as particular phrases are repeated. Again, the teacher will close with a prayer which includes elements of this scripture passing, showing how scripture can be used to guide our understanding of our faith through prayer.

Advent 3 - Joy of the Shepherds - Prayer with Scripture

The third candle of the advent wreath represents the great joy the shepherds felt as they heard the news of Jesus' birth as proclaimed by the angels. The scripture for this lesson continues from the previous week with a reading of Luke 9:8-20. The longer passage is read once in its entirety, then the words of the angels are repeated in small phrases as the children reflect and pray on their meaning. As the teacher closes in prayer for the week, children are encouraged to join in the celebration and joy of the shepherds as they repeat the proclamation of the angels as a prayer of adoration, saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 9:14, NRSV). Through this closing prayer, children will see how prayer can be a combination of the practices they have been experiencing, as scripture is used as a prayer of adoration.

Advent 4 - Light of the Star - Prayer with Scripture

The fourth candle of the advent wreath represents the light of the star which the wise men followed to find Jesus. The scripture for this lesson is from the account of their journey in Matthew 2:1-12. As with the Advent 3 lesson, the longer passage is read, then a smaller section is repeated for reflection. The reflection section for this text is Matthew 2:9-11, which highlights the discovery of baby Jesus. As the teacher closes for the week, children are reminded that the Light of the World has come, and that the time to celebrate Christ's birth is almost here.

Christmas - Coming of the Christ Child - Prayer with Scripture

Designed to take place on the Sunday following Christmas, this lesson reenacts the lighting of the final candle on the advent wreath, the Christ candle. The lesson begins with a discussion of the meaning of the previous four candles as
they are lit, then shifts to the readings of the Christmas story from both the gospels of Matthew and Luke. As the Christ candle is lit, children are invited to spend several moments in silence as they remember the lessons from the previous week and reflect on the birth of Jesus Christ. The lesson concludes with a prayer of celebration for the birth of Jesus, the ultimate Christmas present.

**Epiphany - "Loud" Prayers - Celebration Prayer with Instruments**

As Epiphany arrives, the class joins together in celebration of the discovery of Jesus by the wise men. The prayer practice for this week is a celebration prayer in which the children will have the opportunity to pray with a greater volume than normal, showing that prayer does not always have to be quiet. In fact, there are times when prayer can be loud. This is especially true during prayers of celebration. Each child is given (or makes) an instrument with which they can express their prayers to God. For this lesson, the sounds are guided by the reading of Psalm 148: 1- 4 in the beginning of the prayer, with the children then responding to each phrase with jubilation and prayer through their voices and instruments. As children are taught to pray with sound and instruments, they learn another way to express themselves through prayer.

**Winter 1 & 2 - "Loud" Prayers - Celebration Prayer with Instruments**

The beginning of a new calendar year brings many opportunities for celebrating. As children return to church, this lesson encourages them to continue their celebration of God’s love through Jesus Christ in prayer. As with the Epiphany celebration prayer, children will each be given an instrument, and encouraged to use this instrument to express their prayers to God. The teacher will lead the prayer, allowing children plenty of time to express themselves through guided statements from the teacher such as “We love you, Lord!”. These statements follow the ACTS + I pattern, reinforcing the structure learned in the fall curriculum. The goal of this prayer practice is to encourage students to express themselves as they pray, whether it is quietly or with loud crashing cymbals.

**Winter 3 & 4 - Moving Prayers - Prayer with Upper-Body Movement**

Sometimes prayer happens outloud. Sometimes prayer happens in silence. Sometimes, prayer happens using movement to converse with God. The two weeks for this lesson involve learning a prayer in sign language, with varying complexity for different ages. Through this prayer, children will learn about another way of communication and how the church welcomes people who talk in a variety of ways.
Winter 5 & 6 - Moving Prayers - Prayer with Full Body Movement

Prayer can be still and silent. Prayer can be loud and moving. This lesson explores prayer that is moving and silent. Similar to the lectio divina style of prayer explored during Advent and the celebration prayer used during the first two weeks in Winter, the prayer practices for this lesson involve prompts from the teacher with time for the children to respond. After each statement of prayer, the children move their bodies into a position that represents that prayer to them. For older children, the eyes are closed, allowing them more freedom to converse with God without being self-conscious. This lesson especially appeals to the kinetic learners of the class, and allows all of the children to see that they can communicate with God in whichever way they feel led.

Lent 1 - 5 - “Quiet” Prayers - Meditation Prayer with Candle Cross

Much like Advent, Lent is a time of preparation, specifically the preparation for remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. As classes prepare to remember the journey to Jerusalem, they will experience a similar meditation as that of the advent wreath. A wooden cross with tea light candles is used in place of the wreath, with more candles lit each week as Easter Sunday approaches. The passages from the gospel of John are very brief, with some only one verse. The scripture used, in order, will be: John 8:12, John 5:24, John 3:16, John 6:38 - 40, John 12:1 - 8. The focus of this prayer practice is a more quiet contemplation and meditation prayer as the children think about the words of Jesus regarding his death and resurrection.

Lent 6 - Palm Sunday - Celebration Prayer

Palm Sunday is a time of celebration as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Through the prayer in this lesson, the children will mirror this celebration. After the teacher has read Luke 19:28-40, the teacher will lead a discussion about what it might have felt like to be in the crowd that day. As the people in the crowd shouted “Hosanna!,” they were praying to God and rejoicing. Just as the onlookers did on that day in Jerusalem, the children will have the opportunity to pray prayers of celebration as they use movement, instruments, and voices. As the celebration comes to a close, the teacher uses scripture as prayer and proclaims: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38, NRSV). The class ends with a celebratory “A-men!”
Easter - Easter - Celebration Litany Prayer

This lesson continues the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the teacher reviews the events leading up to Easter, the class reflects on the events surrounding Jesus’ death. As the teacher reads the story of Jesus’ resurrection, he or she lights all of the candles on the cross as a reminder of the joy of Easter. In response, the teacher then leads the children in a prayer of celebration using Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26. The structure of this poem is excellent for a litany response, as the teacher reads the first phrase of each verse and the children respond with ”for his steadfast love endures forever” (NRSV). Through this prayer practice, the ideas of celebratory prayer, prayer with scripture, and litany prayer are combined, demonstrating that the children can use a variety of ways at once in their conversations with God.

Spring 1 - 4 - Praying with Objects - Sacred Beads

The use of beads or pebbles in prayer dates back to the third century with the desert Fathers who carried them to keep track of how many of the required prayers for the day had been said. Today, many traditions still utilize prayer beads as a way of remembering prayer. For this section, the children will each make a prayer rope with ten knots or beads to use as they explore this method of prayer. The result of this practice is described by Joan Hutson, who says “the feel of the bead in the fingers helps to keep the mind from wandering while the ordered rhythm of the prayers leads one into stillness. Sacred beads are used to slow down the mind to a new level of consciousness where we reclaim our relationship with God.” Younger children will use their prayer ropes in prayers of thanksgiving, thanking God for everything they can think of that corresponds with the color of the prayer beads on their ropes. For older children, the prayer of thanksgiving is a more open prayer of thanksgiving as they move along the rope and generate their own words of thanks.

The structure of this section is slightly different from previous sections, as the first week and part of the second week is devoted to an explanation of what sacred beads are, and what these prayer ropes are in relation to prayer. The final two weeks of the lesson are devoted more strongly to the children experiencing the prayer on their own, without the direct guidance of the teacher. Ultimately, the goal of this lesson is to introduce a new method of prayer to the children and allow them to integrate their own forms of expression with this technique.

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As with the Fall 12 lesson, these two weeks focus on putting it all together and talking about the variety of ways the children have experienced prayer throughout the year. It is also a time to review the community prayer journal and see how the class has developed in sharing their prayers, and also to see how God has been at work in answering some of the prayers throughout the year. Children are reminded of the ACTS + I acronym, and also the many different prayer practices that have been experienced during the year. There is also time for a discussion about other ways the children might express themselves through prayer. The prayer practice for this lesson is more open, as the class may select a favorite prayer from the year, or simply join together as a community of prayer and pray with each other in a circle. Ultimately, this lesson provides some closure and summary of the year while reinforcing the basics on which the children can continue to build their relationship with God.

This Sunday celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples as told in Acts 2. As they became filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages. In celebration of this event, the lesson for this week incorporates multiple languages into a common prayer. To illustrate what it might have felt like to be in the presence of the disciples in Pentecost, each child or group of children is taught a one sentence phrase such as “I love you, God!” in another language. As the teacher begins the prayer, each group repeats their phrase. Then, as the celebration of prayer continues, the groups say their phrases at the same time. In addition to recreating a Pentecost moment, this lesson shows how people can talk to God in a variety of languages through prayer! God hears more than just English. Understanding that individuals talk to God in their own ways, whether it is through their language or posture, is an important element in understanding what prayer is, and in feeling comfortable to explore other ways to converse with God.
Prayer Practices

A guide for experiencing prayer with children

Teacher Guide - Fall
Overview

The “prayer practices” program includes three parts: an explanation and discussion of what prayer is, the ongoing creation of a community prayer journal for each class, and an exploration of different ways to pray.

An explanation of what prayer is:
The most important element of this program is for all involved to gain a better understanding of what prayer is. On the most basic level we will convey that prayer is simply a conversation with God. In conversation, we both talk and listen to God. Going deeper, we will structure our discussion of prayer around four + one components of prayer—ACTS + I. “When we pray, we adore God, we confess our sins, we give God thanks, and we pray for the needs of others and ourselves” (Supplication + Intercession).13

The Prayer Journal, titled “Our Conversation with God”:
Each class will have a journal in which to record and remember their prayers as the year progresses. As children arrive, the community builder and other leader will engage them in conversation. Through this conversation, joys and concerns will be shared as other children join in the gathering activities. These will be “collected” by the community builder and written in the prayer journal. As the departure time nears, these requests will become part of the community prayer time. During the week, the community builder and other leaders can add these prayers to their own prayers. The prayer journal also introduces an example of a spiritual “prayer practice” that the children can do on their own as well!

An exploration of different ways to pray:
From a circle prayer sharing joys and concerns to silent meditation in the lectio divina style to prayer through song and movement, we will pray in many different ways throughout the year. The diversity will reaffirm the idea that there is no one way to pray; we can dialogue with God in many different ways! The diversity of “prayer practices” will encourage children to communicate with God in their own ways and will empower them to develop into the wonderful person whom God created.

Prayer 101 - Where to Start

What is Prayer?

Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Remember, in a conversation there is both talking and listening!

Why do we pray to God?

Because we were created to live with God, who desires the prayers of our hearts. Our hearts long for God, for we need God’s help and guidance every day.

Who should pray to God?

Prayer is open to anyone, anytime, anywhere. As children of God we are all encouraged to converse with God through prayer.

How and when should we pray?

Sometimes prayer is silent. Sometimes prayer is screaming at the top of our lungs. Sometimes prayer is at specific times, such as before meals or at bedtime. Sometimes prayer happens in unplanned moments, as we notice a beautiful sunny day or spend time with a friend in need. Sometimes prayer is in a group. Sometimes prayer is one-on-one with God. Sometimes prayer is with eyes closed, hands clasped, and heads bowed. Sometimes prayer is open eyed, with hands and faces raised to Heaven. Sometimes prayer is in a single breath. Sometimes prayer lasts for hours. There is no right or wrong way to pray. Through prayer we continue our lifelong dialogue with God, wherever, whenever, and however we are in the journey.

What exactly is “prayer practices”?

A program which will incorporate intentional prayer in every children’s Sunday School class, every week. This is done through an explanation of what prayer is, the creation of a community prayer journal for each class, and an exploration of different ways to pray (“prayer practices”).

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Why is it important to have this program for children?

It is never too early to start a personal relationship with God. By incorporating an intentional prayer track to the Sunday School hour we affirm the mission of children's education, which "envisions a church where every child ... is on a path of spiritual learning and discovery which draws them closer into a loving, trust-filled relationship with God and which creates in them prayerful hearts of service, compassion, devotion, and generosity." This focus unites all ages in children's ministry with one common goal - to help children be in conversation with God. Just as we learn to tie our shoes and ride our bikes through practice, we develop our relationship with God through conversations, prayers. As we become more comfortable with prayer and discover different ways to express our prayers, we move toward a closer relationship with God. **We are creating a community of prayer.** Each Sunday, all classes in the Children's Education Program will come together in a prayer of illumination at 9:55 to start the bible lesson time. Also, each class will come together in prayer at the conclusion of the Sunday School hour as they experience different prayer practices!

How do we "teach" children to pray?

First, pray yourself. Open yourself to the power of God and let the Holy Spirit move through you as you explore different styles and types of prayer. Let your mind and soul be transformed. Just as children learn in different ways, they experience God in different ways. Consider yourself a fellow traveler on this spiritual journey. Rather than lecture and "teach" children to pray, encourage children to meet God where they are, with constant reassurance that God is with them and is listening to everything that is in their hearts. Recognize that your time together is planting the seeds for all of you to become more comfortable with prayer, strengthening your personal connection with God.

What if I've never prayed in this way before??

With some of the "prayer practices", you may find yourself in new waters. Don't worry; we have included everything you need to get started! First, pray. Take time before Sunday morning (or Saturday night) to explore the different types of prayer on your own; share the experience with your family and friends. Don't just get a taste of it, really dive into it. With prayerful "practice," you will become more comfortable in prayer and in guiding others through this style of prayer!
Prayer Practices in Action - What do I do?

Step One - In a Prayerful Place:

Pray with the other leaders in your class. If your child is a part of your class, invite him or her to join you! Set aside a few moments before the children arrive to join in community with each other. Read through the prayer journal and share your joys and concerns with one another. Give what you are doing to God and center yourselves for the week. Now is an excellent time to explore new prayer practices and listen to what God is saying to you.

Step Two - Prayers of the People:

The prayer journal is designed to generate meaningful discussion between all members of the class. Rather than simply creating a laundry list of prayer requests, we are building a community of prayer in which we share our lives with one another and, together, lift our lives to God through communal prayer.

As children arrive each week, greet them by name! Ask them how they are doing. What things made them happy this week? What things made them sad? What is happening next week that they are looking forward to doing? Remember, the goal here is not to create a list, but to get to know the children and build community. As more children arrive, include them in the conversation. Use this time to share with each other! As you share, jot down what is shared in the prayer journal. You may wish to put the child’s name in parentheses beside the comment to remember later. This is a relaxed time for conversation and relationship building.

This sharing is also a form of prayer. As joys and concerns are shared, turn them into statements to God. When John is happy because he went to Sarah’s birthday party, you may say “Thank you, God, for friends.” When Mary talks about her sick grandmother, you may say “Be with Mary’s grandmother and family, God.” Let the children see that prayer is simply a conversation with God. They may join you in talking to God this way.

Step Three - Prayer of Preparation:

Before the Bible Study for the week begins, invite the class to join you in a prayer for illumination. This is a prayer to prepare us to listen to God as we hear his Word. This prayer does not have to be complex or “perfect.” It is simply asking God to be with you as you listen for his Word.
Step Four - Pondering Prayer:
  Listen to how God speaks to you through the week’s bible study. Notice how God is speaking to the other members of your class. During the claim time, reflect on the shared prayers. Consider how these concerns fit into the closing “prayer practice” for the week. Where do these prayers fit into the ACTS acronym? If the claim activity includes a component of prayer, you may want to write this in the prayer journal as well.

Step Five - Prayer Practices:
  Integrate the shared prayers into the “prayer practices” closing for the week. There are many ways to do this. Some ideas include: a community sharing of requests by reading what you have in the journal and allowing the children to add to the list, reading parts of the list in an open prayer, or giving each child a slip of paper for the request and having them say it aloud during the prayer (then have them take it home and pray for that during the week). There will be more suggestions with the “prayer practices” instructions each week. Continue to create the community of prayer by focusing on having a conversation with God. With the new prayers shared, repeat the Step Two response by turning comments into statements to God. Steven is going to Disney World next week to see Mickey Mouse. “Thank you, God, for vacations and good times with family.” Let the children share as they are comfortable, reminding them that God hears all of our prayers, whether we say them aloud or silently.

Step Six - Perpetual Prayer:
  During the week, pray for your children. Read through the journal and pray specifically for the things that are on the minds and in the hearts of each child and leader. You may want to copy the journal for the other leaders in the class, or e-mail them weekly prayers so that together you are in community with each other. This is also an opportunity to involve the parents from your class, encouraging them to pray for all of you in this journey and to support their child in sharing the new “prayer practices” with them during the week. The “Prayer Practices for Parents” booklet will explain the different types of prayer and help link Sunday School to home. Remember, prayer is not just what happens in church or before meals and bedtime. It is a conversation with God that develops throughout life!
Fall 1 - What is Prayer?

For the first introduction to Prayer Practices, it is important to start with the basics of what prayer is. As these children reflect on their prayer practices thus far, many may have set times and routines of prayer. What prayer routines do you remember from your childhood? What about from your life now? As you begin to discuss prayer with your class, encourage children to continue their prayer practices, and also that "it’s not a particular posture or formula that catches God’s attention, but a sincere and humble heart . . . God listens and understands what they’re saying" (Agelevelinsights: Teaching Children to Pray, Robert Choun, Jr., Children’s Ministry Magazine, 2000). Remember that no matter where one is on the faith journey, prayer experiences are united by one key concept, that prayer is simply a conversation with God.

The first week together is a creation week as new faces are greeted and old faces are remembered. As you all come together to begin a new year, it is time to introduce an exciting new addition to Sunday School - Prayer Practices. Asking the children a few questions about their own prayer practices will be an excellent start. Your class may want to share the prayers that they have been taught, or when and how they pray. This sharing will not only help the children become comfortable with prayer, but also will give you an idea of where they are. As you begin to talk about prayer, use positive encouragement for each child’s contribution. Make each one a special part of your community of prayer. Encourage children to participate in their own ways. For some children, this means observing and listening!

Now, explain that we will talk a lot about prayer this year, and that we will share our prayers with each other. As we share, the community builder will write them down in a special prayer journal for us to remember our conversation with God. Continue your discussion of prayer casually as you work on the prayer journal together.

After you complete your prayer journal (or near the end of your time together), we will come together in prayer to close the week. You may want to tell your class that you will be praying different prayers in different ways each week, but that regardless of the kind of prayer, they are all conversations with God! For this week, we will use a finger prayer that many may know- "Here is the church".
Making the Prayer Journal - Making it your own with the decoupage method.
1) Place the "Our Conversation with God" sticker on your journal.
2) Coat one side of the binder with the glue/water solution.
3) Have the children tear the paper into small pieces (quarter or nickel sizes work well) and help you place them on the binder.
4) Every few minutes, "paint" another layer of glue/water solution over the binder to seal and set the paper. The pieces may move around a bit, but that is ok. Just as with prayer, there is no real right or wrong way to do this!
5) Repeat the steps until both covers and the spine (but not the seam!) of the binder are covered in paper. You can layer the paper, push it close together, whatever suits you and your class.
6) Brush a final coat of the glue/water solution and let it dry.

* Closing - Here is the Church

For this week and the next week we will use the traditional "Here is the church" finger prayer, reminding us that we come together as a family of God in prayer at church. Even though this is a "little kids prayer," the meaning is important for everyone. The younger the children, the more times you may want to pray this together. For older children, discussion can occur before, after, or even during the prayer with questions like: "what is the church", and "where do we pray when we walk away?"

"Here is the church (clasp fingers together inside fists)
Here is the steeple (extend index fingers pointing upwards)
Open the doors (open fists to reveal fingers)
And see all the people (wiggle fingers)
Close the doors (close fists to form "church" again)
And hear them pray (pause for a few seconds for prayer)
Open the doors (open fists to reveal fingers again)
And they all walk away ("walk" your fingers apart)"
Amen. (this means, "let it be so").

Remind your class that even though people walk away from church, we can still pray at home (or school, or play, or wherever!) just like we do at church. Make sure that each child receives a "Prayer Practices for Parents" booklet to take home with them this week to help share this new element of Sunday School at home.
Fall 2 & 3 - Prayer Parts - Adoration

The first twelve weeks of Prayer Practices will build a foundation of explanation on what prayer is using the ACTS+I acronym. "When we pray, we Adore God, we Confess our sins, we give God Thanks, and we pray for the needs of others and ourselves" (Supplication + Intercession). We will spend two weeks on each element, then one week in conclusion to see how it all fits together.

Obviously, some of these terms are ones that are not normally used by children (or adults!). They are useful because they fit into the acronym and make it easier to remember. However, the idea of the elements is what is key. Remember that developmentally not all of them will be able to grasp concepts like we do as adults. It is not important that they understand the intricacies of each element. It is important to introduce them to these ideas and allow them to develop them as they develop in their faith!

The first element is Adoration. Through this element we recognize that God is the supreme ruler of all who has great power and does marvelous things. The Bible is full of stories and psalms praising God. What are your favorites? Here are a few to get you started in preparing yourself: Psalms 145 through 150, Exodus 15:1-2, Deuteronomy 32:3-5, and 1 John 3:1.

Continuing the discussion of what prayer is, introduce the idea that there are different parts of prayer. When we pray, we adore God. But what does that mean? Through adoration, we tell God how much we love him. We can do this through prayer by simply saying "I love you, God!" Some times we do this more formally as a congregation when we sing the "Gloria Patri". This hymn is the prayer we will use for these two weeks, knowing that we can pray to God through song.

Before you sing your prayer, talk about what the words mean. Also, share prayers from the prayer journal for the children to remember others in their own prayers this week. You may sing through this song several times so that everyone can focus on the words as a prayer. Remember, this is a song of praise! Don't be afraid to sing it with enthusiasm!

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end, A-men, A-men."

Fall 4 & 5 - Prayer Parts- Confession

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9, NIV).

We all do things that we are not particularly proud of doing. When we do wrong to others, we are taught to say "I'm sorry." Confession is our "I'm sorry" to God. And we know that no matter what, God will forgive us. We have forgiveness because of the sacrifice of God's only son, Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we pray a prayer of confession together, knowing that we all make mistakes. Look at a bulletin from worship and point out this part of the service. Notice that after the prayer of confession that is printed there is a time for silent confession. This is the time for one-on-one conversation with God. Then, just as we sang our prayers of adoration, we sing a prayer of confession with "Lord Have Mercy." Finally, we receive the assurance of pardon, reminding us of God's incredible grace.

As our prayer of confession for these two weeks we will use a body prayer. In this prayer we will move with our hands to remind us of how we feel inside as we pray. The children can use this prayer on their own, or even during the silent prayer time in worship to remind them of what confession means. You may want to pray this one time with open eyes so the children can see their hands move through the prayer. The second time, pray with closed eyes, reminding the children that this is their time to talk to God one-on-one. Leave plenty of time for silence! A good rule of thumb is one second for each year a child is old. For example, five seconds for five year olds. After the prayer, remind the class that their sins are forgiven through the grace of God and our Lord, Jesus Christ!

Confession Body Prayer

1) Close your hands tightly. Imagine you are squeezing all of the things that you want to tell God you are sorry for are in your hands. Silently tell God about those things (allow for silence)
2) Open your hands and let God take it all away.
3) Spread your fingers and cup your hands to receive God's blessings.
4) Now, place your hands together in prayer to say "thank you" to God. Amen.

~from the 2004 Montreat Youth Conference Small Group Manual
Fall 6 & 7 - Prayer Parts - Thanksgiving

For the next two weeks we will be talking about a very familiar topic - giving thanks. Start your discussion by asking the class when the last time they said “thanks” was, or when are the times when we say “thank you” to others. Now, we are going to shift our attention to say “Thank you, God!” Why is it important to thank God? We thank God because it is through him that we receive all things! Just as we responded to God’s love with our adoration, we respond to God’s grace and generosity with our gratitude.

Chances are most of the children in your class will be familiar with this form of prayer. A good place to start is with a discussion about the blessings we say before meals. These blessings are our “Thank You’s” to God for the many gifts he has given us. What kinds of blessings do we say? Sometimes we may sing our blessings, sometimes we may recite one that we have been taught, and sometimes we can make our own as we go. This is the type of prayer of thanksgiving that we will be doing today! Before you begin your community prayer, let the children share their favorite blessings as time allows (this also depends on the size of your group, as you want to give all of the children who wish a chance to share). For older children, you may ask how their prayers of thanksgiving have or have not changed as they have gotten older. What are others ways that we thank God?

Today we will come together to thank God as a group. Join the class and teachers into a large circle as you explain that in today’s prayer, everyone will have the opportunity to talk to God out loud and share a few things that they are thankful for. After someone shares, everyone will say “Thank you, God!” and then the next person will have a chance to speak. Remind them that if they do not want to talk out loud now, that is ok, they can talk to God silently and he will hear their prayers just as loudly! Also, remind them that they can talk to God out loud anytime, whether they are with other people at church, or at home playing in the backyard! For older children, you may hold hands and “pass” the prayer around the circle as each person shares. For younger children, you may need to identify children by name when it is their time to speak. Not only does this prayer create community, but the litany-type response reinforces the idea that we can thank God both as individuals and as a community at the same time!
Supplication is a big word for many adults. It is an even bigger word for most children. Rather than simplifying and watering down the idea of Supplication, simply take some time to explain what the word means. A very basic was of viewing supplication is the idea of saying “Supply me, God.” By praying prayers of supplication, we admit that we cannot do everything by ourselves and need to enlist the help of something bigger than us, trusting that God is in control of our world and our lives. Through supplication, we create a partnership with God.

It is very important that as you talk about supplication you do not label it as simply asking God for something. Rather than mere persuasion for us to get our ways, prayers of supplication are prayers which ask God to be with us and help lead us down the right path. You should make a clear distinction between the idea that we ask our earthly parents for earthly things, such as a new bike or video game, but we ask our heavenly parent for more spiritual gifts, such as patience or understanding. We are asking God to be with us.

Our prayer practice for supplication is a method called “The Breath Prayer.” This is a form of “contemplative prayer,” or “prayer from the heart,” and is described by Thomas Merton as “a yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for capacity to hear and obey him.” This searching is done as one repeats a simple phrase such as the Jesus Prayer (“Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”), focusing on addressing God with your in breath and the supplication idea with your out breath. For older children, you can have them create their own prayers of supplication of about seven syllables. For younger children, you may wish to use one of your own, or simply “Lord, be with me/us.” Explain to the children that this is a slow, gentle prayer in which they seek to listen to God (remember, prayer is a conversation, and conversations include listening as well as talking). Allow a few moments for the room to become silent. Then lead the children in a repetition of the prayer. A good rule of thumb is one repetition for every year of the child’s age. End with a moment of silence, and close with a short prayer of your own or simply A-men. As you depart, assure the children that God is always listening, and will answer their prayers in HIS time.

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17 Betty S. Cloyd. Forms of Prayer to Use with Children. Workshop handout.
Fall 10 & 11 - Prayer Parts - Intercession

Since the very beginnings of Christianity, believers have lifted each other up in prayer. Paul began many of his letters with such sentiments, indicating that not only can we ask God to supply us, we can ask God to supply others as well. This is what a prayer of Intercession is, as we say "Be with others, God!" Most children will also be familiar with this type of prayer, as we are taught to ask God to bless our family, friends, pets, and anything else we can think of as we say our nightly prayers.

Take some time to discuss times when the children remember praying for others. Just as with prayers of supplication, it is crucial to realize that through prayers of intercession we are asking for God's presence in the lives of others, not demanding a particular result. This can be especially difficult for younger children to understand, as many times these prayers are illustrated as people praying for a loved one to "be healed." By asking God to heal someone or to assist in a personal outcome in someone's life, you are simply stating your faith in God as having power to do anything.

Another tradition in the history of Christian prayer is the laying on of hands. This is typically done as a commissioning service, but ultimately is a public blessing and prayer of intercession, asking God to be with the individuals in whatever they pursue. This week, we come together as a prayer community to bless each other. Encourage the children to remember the person for whom they prayed, and to add that person to their prayers this week!

A Blessings Prayer:
1) Gather the group into a circle and explain the Prayer Practice.
2) For younger children, have the circle join hands. For older children, have them place their right hands on the shoulders of the person standing to their right, forming a connected circle through touch.
3) As you pray, invite the children to say a blessing about the person to their right. For younger children, this can be a simple "God, be with [name]" that is said by the entire group going around the circle. For older children, this blessing could be more specific, stemming out of previous prayer requests. Allow the children to meet God where they are as they ask for his presence in the lives of their classmates.
4) Close the prayer by asking God to be with each of the children present, and with others as well. A-men.
Throughout the Prayer Practices curriculum, we will take a step back from the detailed descriptions about different types of prayer to look at what prayer is on a very basic level, reemphasizing that prayer is simply a conversation with God. These “review” sessions will also allow you to repeat your favorite prayers as a class, and remind the children that these prayers can be used at any time.

The most important element of this program is for all involved to gain a better understanding of what prayer is. On the most basic level we will convey that prayer is simply a conversation with God. In conversation, we both talk and listen to God. Going deeper, we will structure our discussion of prayer around four + one components of prayer- ACTS + I. “When we pray, we adore God, we confess our sins, we give God thanks, and we pray for the needs of others and ourselves” (Supplication + Intercession).18

Walk through with the children what they remember about how we have prayed to God together. What do they remember about:

1) Here is the Church, a prayer about community?
2) The Gloria Patri, a prayer of Adoration? ”I love you, God!”
3) The Confession Body Prayer? “I’m sorry, God!”
4) The community prayer of Thanksgiving? “Thank you, God!”
5) The Breath Prayers of Supplication? “Supply Me, God!”
6) The Blessings Prayers of Intercession? “Be with others, God!”

As you answer questions and hear comments about the various kinds of prayer, you will be able to see how connected these “different” prayers actually are. To close, lead a closing prayer that includes all of these components and ask the children to pay attention to hearing how we talk to God in all of these different ways as we pray together.

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Conclusion

Prayer is an integral part of Christian ritual, and has been since the beginning of Christianity. As a key component to the expression of faith, prayer has been debated since the foundations of Christianity were laid in the first and second centuries. By examining the place prayer has in the beginnings of Christianity, one can better understand the place prayer has in modern Christianity. Although separated by over two thousand years, many of the debates on prayer remain the same. This curriculum begins an exploration of these debates by introducing the variety of ways in which Christians have prayed in the past, and can pray today. As children discover new ways in which to express themselves to God through prayer, they also develop valuable skills in tolerance, understanding, and acceptance, as they realize that just as individuals are diverse, so is prayer. The education continues further with the components for the parents and teachers who are equally challenged to consider the questions raised about the nature and practice of prayer.

This curriculum could also be expanded to include sections on prayer in other religions, furthering the understanding of how Christian prayer relates to prayer in other traditions. This would be an ideal way to incorporate the Prayer Practices theme into a summer program. Furthermore, the curriculum could rotate through several years of material, allowing for the incorporation of many new prayer practices, and other examples of prayer practices for the basic elements of prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication and intercession. The application of this program is geared toward an individual church using it as a part of a children’s Sunday School program, but could easily be adopted for use in a religious school, or even for an adult study when combined with more of the historical background. The focus of this
program is to create a firm foundation on which Christians can deepen their own understanding of prayer and can use that knowledge to continue to develop spiritually.

Through this deeper understanding of Christian prayer, individuals can better comprehend and account for the tremendous diversity that exists within Christianity today, rather than simply assuming that the diversity resulted from a variation of the original “true form” of Christianity. Liturgical study of prayer offers great insight into one example of this variety, encouraging Christians today to recognize the many traditions that have been a part of Christianity since its early stages, and also to explore the traditions that were sometimes lost or forgotten in favor of the dominant doctrine of the time. Through this study and exploration, Christians will not only develop their own faith, but will have a greater appreciation for the discussions around them regarding that faith, and can actively participate in the continuation of intellectual and spiritual contemplation of what it means for a Christian to bow his head and fold his hands, or to open her eyes and raise her arms, in prayer. This dialogue will strengthen the understanding of how prayer relates to participants as individuals and as a Christian community.

The beneficial implications of this project extend far beyond a greater understanding of the nature and practice of Christian Prayer. Ultimately, this project is useful in both religious and secular settings, providing instruction and encouraging individuals to challenge themselves and search beyond the curriculum and into themselves for the answers. This curriculum teaches diversity and enhances the understanding and appreciation for the differences of others, encouraging self-expression and personal growth as participants learn more about others, and about themselves as they experience the connections between the past and present traditions.
Appendix A - Pictures of Prayer, Past and Present

St. Paul of Thebes, 18th c. Museum of Coptic Art, Old Cairo

A Service at Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Indianapolis\textsuperscript{20}

A congregation in Kent, England, influenced by the Pentecostalist-charismatic movement.\textsuperscript{21}


St. Bar Saumā, gospel book, 1054. Library of Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Damascus

Reverend Susan Shipp blesses the sacramental offerings of bread and wine during her first service as a priest in Bristol, England.  


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Gregorian Monks worshipping in Senegal

Prayer Practices for Parents

Fall

A Guide to experiencing prayer with children.

Elizabeth K. Lovell
prayer
is
simply
a
conversation
with
God!
Prayer Parts—Putting It All Together

Throughout the Prayer Practices curriculum, we will take a step back from the detailed descriptions about different types of prayer to look at what prayer is on a very basic level, reemphasizing that prayer is simply a conversation with God. These "review" sessions will also allow the children to repeat their favorite prayers as a class, and will remind the children that these prayers can be used at any time.

As you recall the ACT + I acronym, you may want to discuss the different ways you and your child have prayed over the past twelve weeks. What can you remember about:
1) Here is the Church, a prayer about community?
2) The Gloria Patri, a prayer of Adoration?
   "I love you, God!"
3) The Confession Body Prayer?
   "I'm sorry, God!"
4) The community prayer of Thanksgiving?
   "Thank you, God!"
5) The Breath Prayers of Supplication?
   "Supply Me, God!"
6) The Blessings Prayers of Intercession?
   "Be with others, God!"

As you recall these prayers, remember . . .

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"
~1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."
~Philippians 4:6 (NRSV)

"Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you"
~Jeremiah 29:12 (NRSV)

"Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them: for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way"
~Matthew 19:13-15 (NRSV)
Dear Parents and Friends,

Just as we learn to tie our shoes and ride our bikes through practice, we develop our relationship with God through conversations, prayers. The Prayer Practices program unites all ages in children’s ministry with one common goal - to help children be in conversation with God. Your child will experience prayer in a variety of ways, from praying through song to praying with scripture. This program reminds us all that it is never too early to start a personal relationship with God. But we cannot do it alone. This booklet will help you understand the experience your child is having, and will give you the tools to incorporate these prayer practices into your life at home. We hope and pray that you will use this as an opportunity to talk about and experience prayer with your children, as we all seek to strengthen our relationship with God.

Prayer Parts—Intercession

Since the very beginnings of Christianity, believers have lifted each other up in prayer. Paul began many of his letters with such sentiments, indicating that not only can we ask God to supply us, we can ask God to supply others as well. This is what a prayer of Intercession is, as we say “Be with others, God!” Most children will also be familiar with this type of prayer, as we are taught to ask God to bless our family, friends, pets, and others. We also come together during worship to offer our prayers of intercession as a community of prayer.

The prayer practice for this lesson follows another traditional form of Christian prayer with the laying on of hands. This is typically done as a commissioning service, but ultimately is a public blessing and prayer of intercession, asking God to be with the individuals in whatever they pursue. Children will connect to each other in a circle, lifting up prayers for the person on their right by name as the prayer progresses. For younger children, this may be simply by saying the name of the child to their right. Children are also encouraged to continue these prayers of intercession by praying for the person on their right by name throughout the week.
Prayer Parts—Supplication

Supplication is a big word for many adults. It is an even bigger word for most children. Rather than simplifying and watering down the idea of supplication, simply take some time to explain what the word means. A very basic way of viewing supplication is the idea of saying “Supply me, God.” By praying prayers of supplication, we admit that we cannot do everything by ourselves and need to enlist the help of something bigger than us, trusting that God is in control of our world and our lives. Through supplication, we create a partnership with God.

Our prayer practice for supplication is a method called “The Breath Prayer,” which focuses on a seven-syllable simple sentence in which one asks for God’s presence in his or her life. Breath Prayers can be created on your own using a simple formula. In the first phrase, choose an address for God. In the second phrase, choose a brief prayer of supplication. Some examples include “Lord, have mercy on me,” and the form used by younger children today of “Lord, be with me/us.” As you breathe in, say or think the first phrase. As you breathe out, say or think the last phrase. Through repetition of this practice you will be able to focus completely on communicating with God and asking God to be with you.

Prayer 101

What is Prayer?

Prayer is simply a conversation with God. Remember, in a conversation there is both talking and listening.

Why do we pray to God?

“Because we were created to live with God, who desires the prayers of our hearts. Our hearts long for God, for we need God’s help and guidance every day.” (Belonging to God: A First Catechism, Geneva Press, 1998)

Who should pray? And when? And how?

Prayer is silent. Prayer is screaming at the top of our lungs. Prayer is song. Prayer is at specific times. Prayer is in unplanned moments. Prayer is in a group. Prayer is one-on-one with God. Prayer is eyes closed, hands clasped, and heads bowed. Prayer is open eyed with hands and faces raised to Heaven. Prayer is still. Prayer is in motion. Prayer is in a single breath. Prayer lasts for hours. Prayer is led by children. Prayer is recited by congregations. Prayer is led by a pastor. Prayer is open to anyone, anytime, anywhere. People have conversations with God in many different ways. There is no right or wrong way to pray. Through prayer we continue our life-long dialogue with God, wherever, whenever, and however we are in the journey.
Prayer 101

How do we teach children to pray?
First, pray yourself. Open yourself to the power of God and let the Holy Spirit move through you as you explore different styles and types of prayer. Let your mind and soul be transformed. Just as children learn in different ways, they experience God in different ways. Think of how you learned how to pray. Who did you observe? Parents? Pastors? Teachers? Children learn through observation. As you observe and experience prayer together, talk with your children about what they see and feel about prayer.

Consider yourself a fellow traveler on this spiritual journey. Rather than lecture and "teach" children to pray, encourage children to meet God where they are, with constant reassurance that God is with them and is listening to everything that is in their hearts. Recognize that your time together is planting the seeds for all of you to become more comfortable with prayer, strengthening your personal connection with God.

Some prayer practices may be new to you. Don't worry if things are awkward at first. You don't have to be "perfect." Prayer is not a performance. It is an ongoing conversation with God, a work in progress. Remember the importance of these techniques is to explore the different ways we can communicate with God and to help us be more comfortable talking and listening to God.

Prayer Parts—Thanksgiving

The next aspect of the ACTS + I acronym is thanksgiving. We thank God through prayer because it is through him that we receive all things! Just as we responded to God's love through prayers of adoration, we respond to God's grace and generosity with our gratitude. Prayers of Thanksgiving are our "Thank You" prayers to God.

Chances are, this is a very familiar style of prayer for you and your family, as we say grace or blessings around the dinner table. Your child may have shared a favorite family blessing today during the discussion. The Prayer Practice for this lesson is a community prayer in which the class joined hands and shared what they were thankful for. After a child shared, the class responded with "Thank you, God!"

You can incorporate this way of prayer in many ways, from a more free response prayer around the dinner table to simply saying "Thank you, God!" throughout the week as you appreciate the many gifts we have been given.
Prayer Parts—Confession

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John:8-9, NRSV)

When we do wrong to others, we are taught to say "I'm sorry." Confession is our "I'm sorry" to God. And we know that no matter what, God will forgive us. We have forgiveness because of the sacrifice of God's only son, Jesus Christ.

As our prayer of confession for these two weeks we will use a body prayer. In this prayer we will move with our hands to remind us of how we feel inside as we pray.

1) Close your hands tightly. Imagine you are squeezing all of the things that you want to tell God you are sorry for are in your hands. Silently tell God about those things (allow for silence)
2) Open your hands and let God take it all away.
3) Spread your fingers and cup your hands to receive God's blessings.
4) Now, place your hands together in prayer to say "thank you" to God. Amen.

~ from the 2004 Montreat Youth Conference Small Group Manual

The Prayer Journal

As the children and teachers join together each week, their joys and concerns are shared and written in the journal. These prayers are then lifted to God during the Sunday School hour and throughout the week. Not only are the teachers praying for your children, but they are praying for what is on your children's minds and hearts!

The prayer journal is designed to generate meaningful discussion between all members of the class. Rather than simply creating a laundry list of prayer requests, we are building a community of prayer in which we share our lives with one another and, together, lift our lives to God through communal prayer.

This sharing is also a form of prayer. As joys and concerns are shared, rephrase them as statements to God. When John is happy because he went to Sarah's birthday party, you may say "Thank you, God, for friends." When Mary talks about her sick grandmother, you may say "Be with Mary's grandmother and family, God." They may join you in talking to God this way. You can help your child phrase their joys and concerns into prayers throughout the week in the same way. This spontaneous prayer reminds us that no matter where we are, God is listening.
Components of Prayer

The foundation of prayer is that it is simply a conversation with God. But where do we go from there with our explanation?

When we pray, we adore God, we confess our sins, we give God thanks, and we pray for the needs of others and ourselves (Belonging to God: A First Catechism, Geneva Press, 1998).

Using this statement we can create an acronym to illustrate the different components of prayer. For younger children, it may help to rephrase these terms into simpler phrases.

- **A**doration—“I love you, God”
- **C**onfession—“I’m sorry, God”
- **T**hanksgiving—“Thank you, God”
- **S**upplication—“Supply me, God”
- **I**ntercession—“Be with others, God”

The ACTS+I acronym is the structure of the first twelve weeks of Prayer Practices as we build a foundation on which to understand what prayer is. Two weeks are spent on each concept, with one week at the beginning and at the end to talk about how it all fits together. These are examples of the basic ideas we hope to convey when we pray.

Prayer Parts—Adoration

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised (Psalm 145:3, NRSV)

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! (Psalm 150:6, NRSV).

The Bible contains numerous stories and psalms of God’s people praising and expressing their love for God. Prayers of Adoration are our “I love you” prayers to God. These prayers are our ways of expressing how awesome God is and how much we praise and worship him!

We can do this through prayer by simply saying “God, I love you!”. Sometimes we do this more formally as a congregation when we sing the “Gloria Patri”. This hymn is the prayer that is used for the two weeks that focus on adoration. You and your children can listen for this song in worship, or use it anytime to tell share how much you love God! Remember, this is a song of praise, Don’t be afraid to sing it with enthusiasm!

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end, A-men, A-men.”
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