

Premier.

How to Talk to God



Contents

Introduction	3
Five ways to connect with God	5
Justin Welby: How to pray ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ and mean it	12
Three new ways to pray	17
Living on a prayer	23
Why the Church needs to recover family worship	29
Teach us to pray	35

Introduction

Are we setting enough time aside to talk to God? Are there methods we haven't tried before that could reinvigorate the way we pray? Can our prayers impact our communities in a meaningful way? This book addresses some of these questions, and we hope it will inspire you to pray like never before.

In 'Five ways to connect with God', Claire Musters shares her journey of exploring traditional prayer methods. If *Lectio Divina* is all Greek to you (or all Latin, to be more precise), Claire's tips could broaden your horizons and help to give your prayers new form and focus. Maybe there's something in the tried and tested prayer disciplines after all.

Justin Welby's 'How to pray "Thy Kingdom Come" and mean it' is a practical explanation of why we pray and what we can expect to happen when we do. He is convinced that if we ask God to send his Holy Spirit he won't hold back, and that this will have (and is already having) a significant impact on those who don't yet know him. The archbishop suggests that a commitment to prayer is essential if we want to see God's kingdom come. If that's not enough of an incentive, we don't know what is!

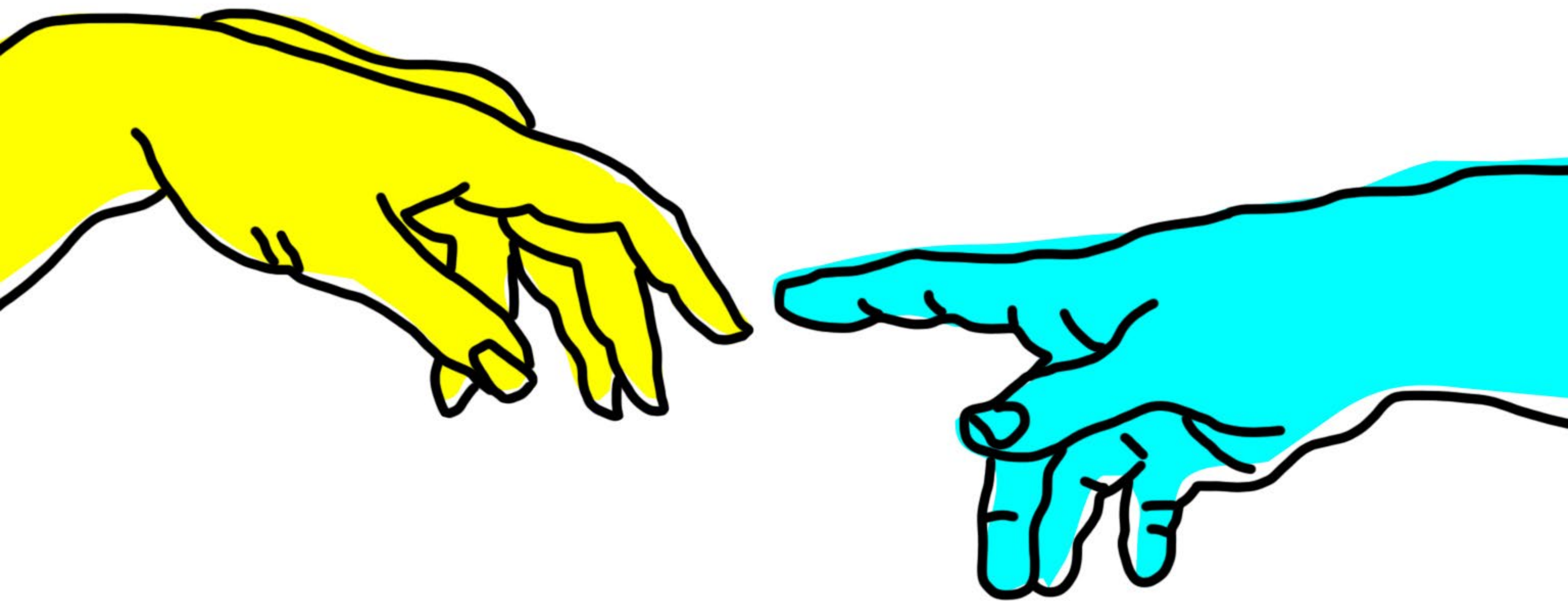
In 'Three new ways to pray', Miranda Threlfall-Holmes calls on prayer novices and experts alike to try out new creative methods that could work for the whole family. From colouring the Bible to making a jar of thanksgiving, her approach is fresh and full of life. Why not turn these ideas into daily habits that influence the way you live and interact with others?

Gerard Kelly gives some powerful examples of how prayer walking can change the local landscape and feed hungry hearts in 'Living on a prayer'. Not so long ago, Salford looked like it was destined for the scrapheap, but now it's a thriving media hub and a hip place to hang out. Might dedicated prayer have something to do with that? Read it, try it out and see for yourself...

Have you ever wondered what your kids actually learn at Sunday school or in their youth groups? Have you become overly reliant on church groups and youth pastors when it comes to your children's spiritual development? Ed Mackenzie's 'Why the Church needs to recover family worship' suggests it's never too late to turn things around. Family prayer and worship sessions are important, and they may be easier to implement than you think.

To round things off, Rob Parsons' 'Teach us to pray' aims to help those who don't know how to pray or have lost their passion for prayer. He takes us back to basics, looking at the inspiring words Jesus prayed. If you're looking for a quick and simple breakdown of the Lord's prayer you've come to the right place. Rob encourages us to start small, but start now. Amen to that!

Five ways to connect with God



Many of these practices are hundreds of years old, but as Claire Musters discovered they are still hugely relevant for Christians today.

Growing up, I attended various lively evangelical churches, so I rarely engaged in the traditional spiritual practices. Yet as life has grown more hectic I've felt God talking to me about learning how to rest and slow down. In doing this I've discovered new ways to connect with him, particularly over the last year.

Finding an antidote to busyness has been a popular subject for writers in recent years, which is no surprise given our ever-faster-paced culture. Everyone is different, but for Christians who find

their walk with God has ground to a halt, or their prayer life has turned dry, the following spiritual practices may prove helpful.

1. Single-word prayers

At the start of 2017 I felt God say that he wanted me to focus on one word in the coming year. In my case, the word was ‘humility’. It’s a word that has stretched and challenged me, and there have certainly been times when I wished God hadn’t given it to me!

I have found myself in situations where I’ve felt the need to ‘fight my corner’ and God has simply whispered ‘humility’, stopping me in my tracks. Rather than going in all guns blazing, I’ve taken time to slow down and pray. Peace has come much more quickly as a result, and I’ve found that the overwhelming desire to react has disappeared.

This one word has impacted my marriage, in particular. Being humble also means being more generous, and there have been moments when the word has dropped into my head and changed my behaviour towards my husband and others around me. It has been hardest with the people in my life I find most difficult, whom God has still told me to treat with humility. This one word has certainly caused me to grow in a different way this year, and I will be asking God for a new word for 2018.

2. One-phrase prayers

I have discovered a range of different approaches that utilise simple prayers comprising one short phrase. For example, the small group I belong to was encouraged to pray these two simple phrases at different points: “Order my day” and “What’s the one thing...?” For someone prone to self-sufficiency, the simple act of praying “Order my day” reminds me that God is in charge of my life. As I pray I sometimes visualise taking my hands off the steering wheel and

allowing God to sit in the driver's seat.

I've also found offering up my daily to-do list to God and asking, "What's the one thing you want me to focus on today?" helps me lay before him all the things I might think are important, actively seeking his priority for my day. I have seen him open up unexpected opportunities to help others that I believe I would have missed otherwise.

Another way of using simple phrases can be found within contemplative prayer; an ancient way of resting in God to experience him more fully. The Desert Fathers practised and taught it, and there have been forms of prayers like this throughout history, many of which have their roots in monastic traditions.

Influential author and retreat leader Joyce Huggett passed away in 2017. I was sent the reissue of her classic, *Listening to God* (Hodder & Stoughton), and was drawn to the contemplative prayers she talked about. She recommended Jim Borst's *Coming to God in the Stillness* (Eagle Publishing), and it was through reading this that I began to use short phrases comprising just a couple of words in order to let go of tension, quieten my mind and become more aware of God's presence. One suggestion was to say "Be" on an in-breath and "Still" on the out-breath. This phrase can then be replaced with the words "Come" and "Rest".

There are twelve steps in Borst's guide to contemplative prayer, but I often lingered on the first few at the start of the day. Having always been taught that we can speak to God whenever we want, and however we want (which is an amazing truth), slowing down and deliberately keeping my prayers to a couple of words was certainly a new experience, but one that helped me relax and feel open to communicating with God.

3. The Daily Examen

It was reading the *Sensible Shoes* fiction series (IVP) that compelled me to try some other spiritual disciplines for the first time. Written by Sharon Garlough Brown, these books tell the story of four women who attend the same spiritual formation group at a retreat centre. Sharon is a spiritual director herself, and manages to weave ways to connect with God during everyday life into the women's stories. As the women are introduced to new spiritual practices by their course facilitator, so too is the reader. It was here that I first discovered the Daily Examen.

Ignatius of Loyola developed the Daily Examen during the 16th century. He firmly believed it was a gift from God to be utilised twice daily (at noon and the end of the day). It hinges around prayerfully reflecting on the day's events to discern God's presence and will for our daily lives.

As someone who usually sets aside time with God in the morning, it was interesting to switch to the end of the day and look back over its events. I was particularly intrigued by a quote from the character (and course leader), Katharine: "Pay attention to your strong reactions and feelings, both positive and negative. The Spirit speaks through both."

The Examen can be viewed as a way of sitting with Jesus to talk through what happened during the day. It is about slowing down to pay attention to the details of our lives that we might otherwise overlook, so it can be helpful to visualise snapshots of the past day in our minds.

1. Be still and become aware of God's presence. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance as you begin to look back over the day. It can be useful to clarify times of being particularly aware of his presence. Were there any times when he seemed absent?

2. Review the day with gratitude. Thank God for any special gifts he provided, looking out for the smallest details such as interactions with friends, food and nature.

3. Pay attention to emotions. We can detect the presence of God in our emotions, so it can be helpful to think about when we felt most alive and energised, and when we felt drained or anxious. Were there times when we resisted God? Why? He may bring to mind things that require confession. Once we have done that we can receive his grace and forgiveness.

4. Concentrate on one feature of the day. There may be something particular that seems to be highlighted, perhaps because God wants to teach us something. It could be positive or negative. The important thing is to stay with it and pray as God leads.

5. Look forward to tomorrow. We can take the lessons from one day into the next, bearing in mind how we have responded and worked with the Holy Spirit today. If we know we will face certain challenges tomorrow we can prayerfully bring them before God, asking for hope and a sense of his love.

4. Cultivating thankfulness

I was first challenged in this area by a friend leading a session at a parent/toddler group I attended when my son was younger. I found it useful then, particularly when I was struggling with postnatal depression as I often awoke with a feeling of hopelessness. Having the goal of thanking God for the day as soon as I woke up helped to shift my perspective, even though it was difficult at times. The challenge also included thinking of five things to be thankful to God for daily. I couldn't always think of five, but I didn't get hung up on that. The point is, it helped me remember to thank God and gave me a much greater awareness of his hand of grace.

As the years have passed, this is something I haven't kept up religiously, but I do go back to it every so often. At one point I realised my attitude wasn't as positive as it had been. I was busy writing a book and was grateful for the time I had to do so, but I was beginning to get anxious about the fact that I didn't have much paid work and the lack of income weighed heavily on my mind. I found that taking the time to intentionally thank God for what he was doing in my everyday life shifted my focus away from the 'what ifs?', making me more grateful, and generally more at peace, as a result. Now that work is busy again I look back at that period with great thankfulness that I had the time and space to write without distraction, and that God supplied all our needs even when I wasn't earning much!

5. Lectio Divina

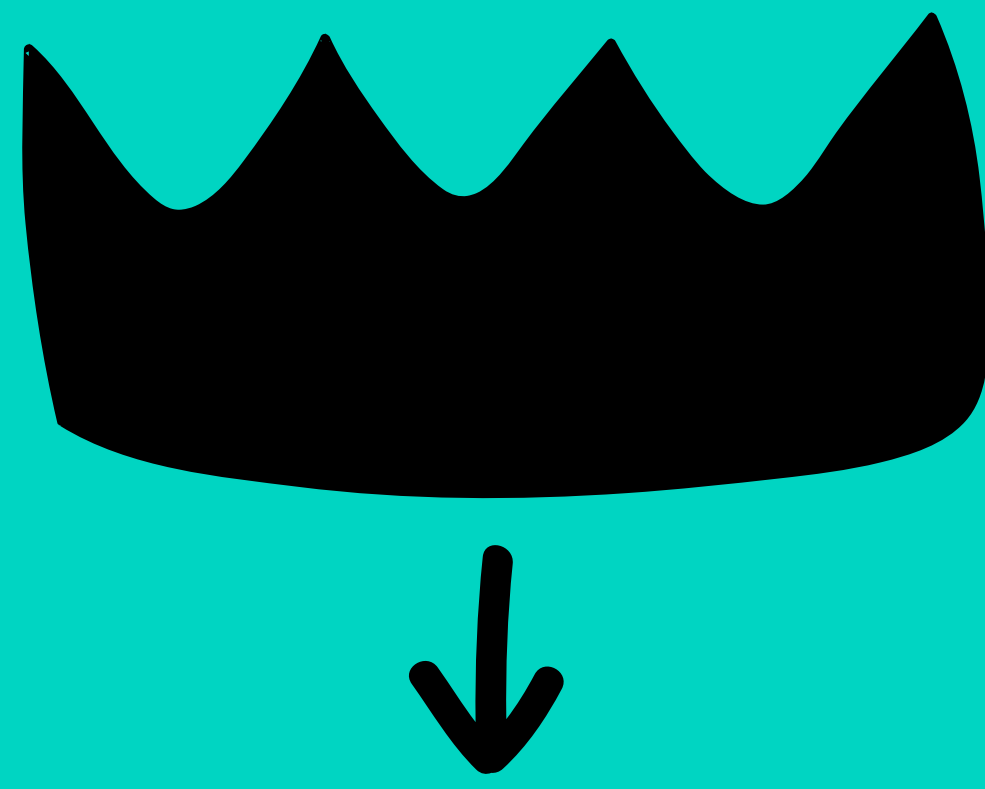
Lectio Divina is a Latin term meaning 'divine reading'. It is a traditional way of reading scripture, giving time and space to really connect with it. During the twelfth century, Carthusian monk

Guigo II formalised this approach into four steps: read, meditate, pray and contemplate. The emphasis is on lingering over a passage and allowing it to impact us. It isn't about theological study; rather it is about encountering Jesus and allowing him to speak directly into our lives.

Sharon Brown explains why Lectio Divina is still useful for us in modern-day society: "Many people study the Bible without ever being shaped by the text. When we come to the Word with our own agenda we put ourselves in the position of control. We may look for what we get out of it rather than ever allowing the Word to get into us. We so easily forget that reading the Word of God is meant to be a supernatural act of cooperating with the Holy Spirit. We're meant to be listening to the Word with the ears of the heart."

I run a women's book study group at our church, and we are currently working through the first book in the *Sensible Shoes* series. Each week there is a passage given for Lectio Divina, so we now start each of our meetings in this way. None of us had done it before, and we found it a little strange and uncomfortable to begin with as it was suggested that we simply sit in silence while one person read the passage out. Then another person would read it, and finally a third.

During this time we were encouraged to focus on the word or phrase that spoke to us most as individuals, then take some time to journal about it before coming back together to share our experiences. It was when we fed back to one another that we discovered that, whether our group was as small as three or as large as ten, we very rarely focused on the same phrase, even if it was a fairly short passage. It was wonderful to be reminded of the richness found within scripture and how God has a personal message for each one of us.



Justin Welby: How to pray 'Thy Kingdom Come' and mean it

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, recently introduced a new prayer movement. Here's what he had to say about it...

Lately I have found myself constantly talking and thinking about prayer. This is not because I am an expert on it, or even particularly good at it. Nor is it because it's the kind of thing I am paid to do. It's because I see ever more evidence of the need for it.

These words of Jesus in Luke 11:9 offer us a good foundation for why we pray: "So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Prayer begins by acknowledging that we don't have what we need, we aren't who we want to be, and we don't see what we long to see.

In 2016, the Archbishop of York and I invited people up and down the country to pray for the ten days between Ascension Day and Pentecost. The prayers had just one focus: a request to God for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit so that those who don't know the love of Jesus might turn, hear his call and themselves becomes his followers.

We called the movement 'Thy Kingdom Come', and were utterly astonished at how it took off. Many tens of thousands of people across denominations – Methodists, Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox – came together and prayed, "Come, Holy Spirit." I can hardly remember anything that I've been involved in which I have sensed so clearly the work of the Spirit.

While I remain adamant that the Church doesn't need more initiatives, projects or resources, it was obvious that we should do this again. But the only reason is the sense that God is leading it and, when the wind of the Spirit is blowing, you just have to hoist the sails and go where you are taken.

Come, Holy Spirit

Pentecost is, of course, the time when we remember the sending of the Holy Spirit. It is, perhaps to our shame, that the prayer, "Come, Holy Spirit", has been judged to be a bit self-indulgent; gathering together to pray for a fresh infilling for our own sake.

Scripture teaches us something different. The gift of the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence with us, isn't given to us for our own sake. The reason we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit", is not so that we

can feel good. It is so that we may be empowered to be his witnesses.

Every Christian is a witness, whether we like it or not. Read these words of Jesus in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

We cannot witness on our own. So for these ten days we ask, knock and seek for a fresh empowering of the breath of God for this calling.

Of course, we all know what it is to pray for things and not to know how our prayers will be answered. We all know that sense of disappointment and bewilderment when things we had desired haven’t come to be. So how can we know praying, “Come, Holy Spirit”, will make any difference? If we put it like that, isn’t the question really: will the Holy Spirit be given to us if we ask?

I can make a few guarantees because of some unchanging truths I know about the unchanging God we worship. God always, always listens to our prayers. He doesn’t always give us everything we want. But if we sit in a room, or in a church, or in a cathedral, or in the middle of a field and pray, “Come, Holy Spirit”, we can do so with total confidence that the Spirit will come.

“Which of your fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13).

There are no preconditions laid out in that promise. If we ask, the Spirit will be given.

The question, then, is this: Are we prepared to pray such a prayer? Are we prepared to have our lives turned upside down, rearranged and reshaped? Are we up for all God might call us to

as his witnesses? Are we ready to see God at work in ways that we can't predict or control?

Evangelism

As well as praying, there is a second thing to do. We step out and do something. We put ourselves in God's hands to be used in answer to our prayer. It could be in your church, in your home, or as an informal group of friends, but plan something that invites people to explore the good news of Jesus Christ and God's love for them. Do it with the intention of inviting those people to make a decision to follow Jesus.

Last year I met with a group of people who wouldn't call themselves Christians. We met a few times and read Bible stories together. We saw incredible movement in their lives and in their understanding of God, and it was beautiful. We weren't doing anything special; just opening up space for people to ask questions and encounter God.

So that is my encouragement and my urging. Get together and pray, and then make space for people who don't know Jesus to find out more.

This isn't just something else to add to the 'to-do' list. Many of us aren't in need of more things to do. Lots of us live life fairly overwhelmed. We're aware of our frailties and inadequacies, of our sinfulness and our failures. Believe me, I truly know all those things.

But just think back to a time you've seen God's love and goodness bring transformation to someone's life. It is one of the greatest privileges to see the love of God in action, and it is worth stepping out for.

In Luke 11:5-8, Jesus says: "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have

no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.”

Our cupboards might be bare when it comes to how we live, and how we tell the gospel. In prayer we come before God and ask him to give us what we need to put before others.

If you get together with friends and pray, “Come, Holy Spirit”, and invite people to come and explore who Jesus is, then for certain, by the end of your time together, some things will have taken place in those people’s lives.

Seeing God move is the biggest encouragement you could ask for, and, in my experience, when we get a taste for it we want more. When we hear stories of people becoming Christians, we think, ‘Brilliant, this is what it’s about. This is what we want.’ And so we are encouraged to pray more, to expect more, to act more.

We are the Church of Jesus Christ, called together by him, made for his glory and empowered by his Spirit. We exist for God’s sake and for the sake of others. And, in Jesus’ name and in his power, we witness to the one who was dead and is alive again. Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the lives of your faithful people!

Three new ways to pray



Miranda Threlfall-Holmes suggests three creative prayer experiments to try.

Do you feel like a prayer expert? No, me neither. Luckily, God doesn't call us to be prayer experts; 'just practising' is good enough.

I've long believed that becoming a Christian isn't something you can learn about purely on an academic level. Don't get me wrong, I have always loved academia. I was converted at Cambridge University, then became a historian, and I loved learning about theology. But Christianity isn't something you can just learn about; it's something you have to experience from the inside.

I didn't become a Christian by reading about Christianity. I became

a Christian because I was desperate for God's help even when I was an atheist. I prayed and experienced God's presence. Then I read everything I could get my hands on to try to make sense of this strange experience!

It has always seemed to me that the way to encounter God and to find out about prayer is to give it a try: "Taste and see that the Lord is good", as the Bible puts it (Psalm 34:8). I believe that the living God always wants to encounter us, and is just waiting for us to make a move – however small – in his direction.

It was with this in mind that I entered a Christian bookshop. I was looking for a gift for two of the young people in our church who were getting confirmed. There were plenty of books of prayers to share with babies and toddlers. There were also many books about "what every Christian should know" designed for confirmation candidates, and a pretty wide selection of Bibles. There were even Celtic spirituality books for adults. But I found nothing on different ways to pray, or how a newly confirmed person can take their prayer life seriously. Neither was there anything that encouraged people to experiment with different types of prayer and see what might suit them as individuals. There was certainly nothing that even suggested there might be ways of praying that *wouldn't* suit them.

So, unable to find the book we wanted, my teenage son Noah and I ended up writing a blog, in which my son – and then other members of our church youth group, followed by people from all over the country – began experimenting with different types of prayer and sharing their experiences. As a result, *The Teenage Prayer Experiment Notebook* (SPCK), and the adult version, *The Little Book of Prayer Experiments* (SPCK) were born.

The word 'experiment' is important. These are not books telling

you how to pray properly. Think of them, perhaps, in a similar way to a recipe book: full of ideas to try, to put your own spin on, to taste and decide that you would prefer to tweak it a little. Don't just read these ideas; there's nothing to be gained by that. You've got to try them out!

Colouring the Bible

One of the oldest forms of Christian prayer is reading the Bible. That might not sound much like prayer if you're more used to thinking of the Bible as something you read for information or instruction. But reading the Bible prayerfully is a very important strand of the Christian spiritual tradition.

One way to use the Bible in prayer is to focus on a short passage, staying with it for quite a long time. Sometimes people say that when they read a Bible passage once, or even twice, it just stays as words on a page. But when you've read it three, four or five times, something about it might suddenly jump out at you. This is what people mean when they say the Bible has 'spoken' to them.

Mindfulness colouring books have become a publishing phenomenon in recent years. Millions of people have found that there is something relaxing, calming and meditative about spending a long period of time concentrating on something beautiful. There is an increasing choice of Bible colouring books around, but why not try making your own?

Choose a short passage from the Bible. Take a sheet of paper (A4 is fine, A3 is even better) and fill it with the words. Try to think not so much about writing it out, but of drawing each letter or word. Enjoy exploring the best way to lay the words out on the page and what style of writing fits it best. If you want to, illustrate it with

doodles. Make the writing hollow (like bubble writing), so that you can first draw the outlines of the words and then colour them in. Use the whole page and decorate every centimetre. Make the words the stars of the show. Alternatively, you could combine the process of writing out the Bible passage with the design from a mindfulness colouring book by adding the words of the passage to the design.

Approach this activity deliberately as a prayer, not just as a decorative activity. Expect the words to become part of you and speak to you.

Prayer walking

We often feel overwhelmed and confused by how much there is to pray for, and sometimes we don't know what is needed. This can be especially tricky when we want to pray for a specific area: perhaps the area in which we live, or where our church is, or somewhere that has had a lot of problems recently.

Prayer walking is a great way to pray for a particular area when you don't know exactly what the people who live there need, or even who they are. It combines two ancient traditions of prayer: intercession and pilgrimage.

In prayer walking, we aren't just saying prayers; we are physically expressing our care for the place we are praying for. We are putting ourselves to some effort, not just sitting comfortably at home. And the action of walking occupies part of our conscious mind so that prayer can flow more freely without us worrying too much about the exact words we use.

So, go for a walk!

As you walk, pray – not out loud, just in your head – for the places you pass. You might ask God to bless the people who live

in the houses you walk past. If you pass a school or offices, you could pray for the people who work or study there. A particular business might inspire specific things to pray for. For example, passing a supermarket might spark off a thought about fair trade, or struggling farmers, or those who can't afford food. A newsagent might make you think about people in the news. A florist might remind you to pray for people who will be buying flowers that week to celebrate or to mourn. Just let thoughts arise in your mind, and when you notice that you're thinking about something, turn that thought into a prayer.

As you return home, ask God to bless the whole area and to show you how you can be a blessing to it. You might like to end by praying for your own home as you enter it.

Jar of thanksgiving

“Say thank you!” we hiss at our children when they are given sweets by a doting aunt. Saying “please” and “thank you” is a basic element of the politeness that is hammered into us from childhood.

But strangely enough, having learned to be polite can be a problem when it comes to prayers of thankfulness. We don't say thank you to God for quite the same reasons as we thank other people. We don't say it just to be polite or to make God feel better. We say thank you to God mainly because of what it does to us. Saying thank you means we are doing two important things: choosing to look at the good things in our lives with gratitude rather than only focusing on the things that aren't right; and acknowledging that everything we have comes from God.

But our prayers of thanks can become quite repetitive and boring. People often find that when it comes to saying thank you

their minds go blank. Or we repeat ourselves, saying thank you to God for the same obvious things every time we pray.

Try making a 'Jar of Thankfulness'. First, get a clean, empty jar (a jam jar with the label removed would work well). Then cut some paper into strips. Coloured paper is good if you're using a glass jar. On each piece of paper, write one thing you are thankful for and add each piece of paper to the jar. Keep a spare supply of paper strips next to the jar, and whenever you think of something new to say thanks for, add it.

Keep your jar somewhere you will see it regularly: perhaps on your windowsill or bedside table, or in a prayer corner. When you sit down to pray, take out a handful of the contents at random and say thank you for those, adding to the jar any new ones you have thought of that day. Doing this will mean you keep some variety in your prayers, while also slowly building up a collection of more and more things to be thankful for.



Living on a prayer

Pray faithfully for your local community and expect transformation, says Gerard Kelly.

The closure of the docks in 1982 plunged Salford into decline and despair. For a century the port had served as the main access point for Manchester, linked by a ship canal to Liverpool and the sea. The advent of supersized container ships rendered the canal unusable, and following its closure the local economy collapsed.

Fast-forward 30 years and a different story is emerging. Salford Quays is now home to MediaCityUK, comprising more than 100 companies, including large segments of the BBC and ITV. An area that was the very picture of dereliction for many years is now buzzing with life.

Legacy of prayer

Local pastor David King grew up in Salford and pioneered a movement to unite its churches. His father, a pastor before him, prayed for 45 years for the renewal of the area; one of the most deprived in the UK. David took up the same challenge, regularly walking the streets to pray. One of his habitual walks took him through the wasteland where the thriving docks had once been.

During this process, David and those praying with him received an extraordinary promise. They felt God saying to them that a day would come when “the nations would again come to Salford and Salford would again go to the nations, from the very same place”. They believed God had called their city to be a “home of creativity”.

They held on to this word as they trudged the deserted roads among the rusted cranes in all weathers. Imagine their excitement when, in 2006, the BBC announced the move of 1,800 jobs to Salford. Others followed suit and the area the team had walked, calling out to God, is now the very epicentre of UK broadcasting.

Today's Abraham

Sound familiar? It may be difficult to spot the tents and goatherds among the newsreaders and *Coronation Street* cast members, but this is a 21st-century parable of the story of Abraham. Hebrews 11:8-10 tells us that Abraham lived as a foreigner in the land God had promised him. He wasn't hoping for some other destination, waiting to be whisked away to glory; he was driving his tent pegs into the soil of the land he had been promised. Abraham trusted God's word that a new city would be built on the very ground he walked. This is the faith that, as we are told in Galatians 3:6, was “credited to him as righteousness”.

I love David's story of transformation in Salford because I've engaged in this kind of prayer over three decades in cities and towns across Europe, standing with local believers to declare God's promises over their area. We have so much to learn about turning prayer from a tedious activity in a cold church hall into an adventure of hope and creativity.

Here are seven lessons we have learned about restoring hope and passion to our prayers:

1. Get yourself grounded

Jesus urged us to pray for the will of God to be done on earth. It's already being done in heaven; the angels don't need us there. We pray for real people in real places, using all the insight and resources available. Find out about the people and places you are praying for, and base your prayers on what you find. Be specific. Be determined. Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger probably didn't know they were creating a global prayer guide when they founded Wikipedia, but we should thank them anyway.

2. Walk your words

It's no coincidence that so many great prayer stories involve walking. There is something powerful about tramping the ground you are praying for. You can pray as you walk, or you can walk and then pray. Either way, your prayers will be shaped and informed by what you see and experience. You don't have to do all your praying outdoors, but you can use prayer walks to let the outdoors influence your indoor prayers. Prayer isn't about escaping your surroundings to dream of God's elsewhere. It is about seeking God's blessing for the territory he has placed you in.

3. Pray God's promises

At its most basic, prayer is a bridge between heaven and earth; between a realm where the will of God is done and a location where it isn't. As Jeff Fountain, director of the Schuman Centre, says: "It is always the will of God for the will of God to be done." If you don't know what that might be, go to scripture. Locate the promises of God in the Bible and apply them to your areas of concern. What does God want for your city or village? For your region? For the people you are bringing before him? God's kingdom is an aeroplane looking for a place to land. Maybe your prayers can build him a runway.

4. Learn to listen

As well as applying the broader promises of God to your area, you can listen for his specific word. You can't assume that everything you hear – in your head or from someone else's mouth – is from God, but you can learn to listen. When you sense God speaking, write it down. Keep a journal of God's words to you. Test them out with other believers. Learn to discern the voice of God. Over time, you will find yourself standing on promises you can fully trust.

5. Widen your world view

Alan Platt from Doxa Deo church in South Africa says: "If it takes a village to raise a child, we need to ask who is raising the village." At times, God may call you to pray for the growth or success of your church. This is good, but it is not enough. If we are praying for God's will to be done, there is no limit to what we can pray for. What does God want for your local schools? For hospitals? For business life? Start to ask for more imagination, and he will take you further. What issues in culture and civic life is God asking you to carry in prayer?

6. Practise persistence

So many of Jesus' parables about prayer focus on persistence. You don't just ask, you keep asking. You knock until the door opens. There is something here about a godly persistence; about patience that holds on and won't let go. Yes, there is a danger of becoming obsessive, pursuing an agenda beyond the point at which God has gently urged you to lay it down, but let's be honest here: this is not the most acute danger facing the people of God across the UK. We are not suffering from a wave of churches praying *too much*. Maybe the best way to find out where the boundary between persistence and obsession lies is to press into persistence a little more. Nobody ever found out where the deep end starts by cowering in the shallows.

7. Fight fragmentation

A feature of every city-changing prayer movement I know is a commitment to unity. David King urges those who work with him to 'bless every church'. Our prayers are not on behalf of one group or congregation: they are the cry of the people of God for the places in which he has set them. Perhaps God is urging us to bless each other so that together we can bless the city.

I now live just outside the city of Caen, in Normandy. Nowhere have these lessons been more significant for me than here. We are working with a group of local believers to plant a church in the city, with a vision for transformation guiding us from the very start. We are small in number, with scant resources, but we have enormous confidence in God's plans for Caen. Why? Because more than 20 years ago God spoke specifically to us about this place. We were sailing into Ouistreham, the seaport linked to the heart of the city

by a ship canal. Praying on deck at dawn, we read Psalm 107:7: “He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.”

It’s hard to explain how deep our conviction was that God had spoken. We had good reason to take this moment seriously, and once we acknowledged the voice of God we were unmovable. Since that morning we have lived in Rouen and Paris, in the UK and in Amsterdam – until recently, everywhere but Caen – yet we have always known that we would one day minister in the city. Now that we are planting a church here, can we even doubt that God is on the move? Which people and places are you holding in your heart for the promises of God to be fulfilled?

Why the church needs to recover family worship



Are parents in danger of outsourcing the spiritual formation of their children to Sunday schools and youth groups? Ed Mackenzie explains how families can bring worship into the home.

The great preacher John Wesley is best known for helping to establish Methodism. He travelled throughout Britain sharing the gospel and testifying of the Spirit's work as the Church grew rapidly. But Wesley suggested that the revival would not continue unless families worshipped together, spending time in prayer and reading scripture in the home. For Wesley, family worship was the ordinary way for God to bring children to faith. Without it, he

believed the Church was bound to decline.

We know that many children who grow up in Christian homes later reject the faith. While ninety-five per cent of those born to ‘non-religious’ parents remain ‘non-religious’ as adults, 40% of children raised in Christian homes no longer identify as Christians in later life. In the Church of England, half the children of churchgoing parents stop attending church when they reach adulthood. The main reason for the Church’s decline is not its failure to evangelise but its failure to pass on the faith to the next generation.

Wesley was right to highlight the importance of family worship. Unless families regularly spend time engaging with the Bible and praying together, children are less likely to trust and follow Jesus for themselves. As sociologists show, modelling faith in the home – including through family worship – gives parents the best chance of helping their children come to faith. Yet many Christian parents have never heard of family worship, and those who practise it often feel alone.

In 2015, a friend and I interviewed a number of Christian parents about how and why they pursued family worship. A number felt that what they were doing was countercultural, even within the Church. One couple mentioned that their friends felt it was a little extreme to read Bible stories at the kitchen table. Another expressed their disappointment that so few Christian families seemed interested.

While Christian parents help their children in a range of activities – such as homework, sports clubs, and music lessons – far fewer set aside time to help them know and worship God. Many parents, it seems, have outsourced the spiritual formation of their children to youth or children’s groups at church.

It's not simply the fault of parents, however. With some notable exceptions, church leaders rarely speak about faith in the home. If Christian parents aren't encouraged and equipped to lead family worship, it's unsurprising that many fail to see it as a priority. And yet the Bible and history, as well as modern sociology, point to our need to recover family worship.

Not a new idea

In the Old Testament, God's covenant embraced children as well as adults (Genesis 17), and parents were given a key responsibility in encouraging their children to love God and know the Law (Deuteronomy 6). Children also took part in the key festivals of Israel (Exodus 12:21-28), and learned to pray and worship among their elders.

The New Testament assumes that parents – as well as the wider Church – have a role in helping children come to faith. In a world in which children were often undervalued, Jesus welcomed and blessed them, seeing them as recipients of the kingdom (Matthew 19:13-15). Paul instructed fathers to bring their children up in the “training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), and hints from his other letters point to the key role parents had in raising their children to follow Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:14; 2 Timothy 1:5; Titus 1:6).

As the early Church grew, key figures continued to stress the importance of family worship. One of the most significant treatments is found in a sermon delivered by John Chrysostom, the fourth and fifth-century Bishop of Constantinople. Chrysostom encouraged parents to consider themselves entrusted by God with the spiritual welfare of their children. He offered a range of advice for parents

in helping their children follow Jesus. Chrysostom suggested, for example, that parents should share Bible stories with their kids and help them draw connections between the stories and their own lives.

Family worship was also emphasised during the 16th-century Reformation. Martin Luther explained that helping kids worship and serve God was the “greatest good” of married life. For Luther, parents were “apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel”. To help parents teach their children, Luther and the other Reformers produced ‘catechisms’ – series of questions and answers about key Christian beliefs.

It wasn’t only Wesley who promoted family worship during the 18th century. George Whitefield, another famous preacher of the evangelical revival, all called on parents to lead worship within the home. In a sermon entitled “The great duty of family religion”, he encouraged parents to emulate the example of Joshua, who committed his family to following God (Joshua 24:15). For Whitefield, family worship was a duty within Christian households; something God commands. He asked: if Christians have been blessed so much by God, why would they not help their children know him as well?

What we find throughout history is a repeated call from Christian leaders to take family worship seriously. Theologians and preachers have continually pointed to the responsibility of parents, under God, to bring their children up to know him. This was first of all a matter of faithfulness, but also helped to “start children off on the way they should go” (Proverbs 22:6). While a child’s faith development was guided by the work of the Spirit, parents were called upon to direct their children in the way of faith and pray for God to do the rest.

Family worship today

It's one thing to show that family worship was central in the past, but it's another to explore how families might worship God together today. Interviews with parents who lead family worship showed that while engaging with the Bible and prayer remain core, the 'how' of family worship can vary enormously.

Some families find that worshipping together at breakfast suits them best. Phil and Ruth have three young children (7, 5 and 1), and they start the day together with God over cereal and orange juice. Family worship involves reading through a children's book about God, with links to key Bible verses, and spending time praying for others. They've also put together a 'family prayer' photobook, with images of people to prompt prayer. Since their children aren't all reading yet, this means everyone can participate and also helps them pray for the needs of others.

Other families find that worshipping together in the evening works best. Irfan and Raheela gather with their children after dinner, and worship by singing songs, praying together and reading the Bible. With four children in their teens and 20s, family worship is a time for digging deeper into God's word, with each member of the family taking a turn to read and explain a chapter of the Bible. For Irfan and Raheela, worshipping with the children binds the family together and is a "spiritual investment" for the future.

Marina, Grant, and their three sons (aged 9, 11 and 14), come together for prayer and Bible reading over a weekly Shabbat meal. Reflecting Marina's Jewish roots, the meal provides time to talk and pray over the sharing of bread and wine (or juice!). They pray traditional Hebrew prayers, read scripture, and light a candle to acknowledge Jesus as the light of the world. The meal provides a

great opportunity for the whole family to explore questions of faith as well as sharing concerns for prayer.

While our interviewees varied in their practice, they were all honest about the challenges of family worship. One of the biggest hurdles was simply making the time, and interviewees agreed that family worship is likely to slip unless it's considered a priority. Another challenge is finding a style of family worship that suits different ages and stages, and parents spoke of the need to change this as children grow older.

Each of our interviewees agreed, however, that family worship is worth it. It's a practice that brings families closer together and centres them on God. It models faith within the home and lays foundations for our children's future, as well as for the future of the Church.

If we have tasted the 'riches of God's grace' (Ephesians 1:7), we'll want the next generation to know that grace for themselves. After all, knowing Jesus is more valuable than anything else in life (Philippians 3:8), and there is surely no greater blessing than seeing our children come to know him. If family worship helps with that – and it does – it's something the Church desperately needs to recover.



Teach us to pray



Rob Parsons explores how to pray based on the model Jesus provided, and explains the benefits of praying regularly

When I was a young Christian, a man came to our church and gave a talk on prayer. He said, “Why do you find it hard to spend ten minutes talking to God? You can easily spend an hour talking to your girlfriend.”

It struck me at the time that older people can impart incredible wisdom, but also have the ability to come out with absolute tosh. I think of two comments my mother made after Claire Tompkinson had finished with me and I was a heartbroken 14-year-old. She said, “Never mind! There are plenty more fish in the sea.” I didn’t want

lots of other fish; I wanted my dolphin, Claire. And then she added, “Anyway, cheer up. We’ve got jam roly-poly for afters.” My life was over, my love life ruined, and the best comfort she could come up with was jam roly-poly for tea.

Going back to that visiting preacher, what I wanted to say to him was, “But I can see my girlfriend. When I speak, I watch her reaction and I can hear her replies. Of course it’s harder to talk with somebody you can’t see, can’t hear and who – at least in my experience – never answers back so you can physically hear him.”

When I was asked recently to give a talk entitled ‘How to pray’, I thought about the occasion when the disciples woke early one morning to find Jesus’ sleeping mat already empty. They found him praying in “a solitary place” (Mark 1:35), maybe in the hills above Galilee. Moments like these must have had a deep impact on the disciples. They had attended the synagogue all their lives and had prayed thousands of prayers, but as they watched Jesus praying they saw something special; something that one day led them to say: “Teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

If you have lost heart in prayer, listen to the sheer simplicity of Jesus’ teaching: “When you pray, go into your room, [and] close the door” (Matthew 6:6). I suppose the modern equivalent of ‘close the door’ might be ‘switch off your mobile phone’. Next, Jesus tells us not to worry about the length of our prayers. And then he continues: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’”

This short prayer, which we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer, begins with the three things that God wants from us: reverence (“hallowed be your name”); allegiance (“your kingdom come”); and obedience (“your will be done”). And then it goes on to ask for the three things we need from God: food (“give us today

our daily bread”); forgiveness (“forgive us our debts”); and freedom (“deliver us from the evil one”). This is a prayer for the whole of our lives: our past, our present and our future.

I know some readers will find it easy to pray. But what if you are not one of them? What if, even though you serve God faithfully – and are, perhaps, even a church leader – you have stopped spending time alone with him in prayer? Is it possible that sometime this week you could go into a quiet room, close the door and say that simple prayer? Could you begin the day by saying that prayer from now on? Do you have a good friend with whom you share your deepest joys and fears, but never pray? Could you start to change that by saying the prayer Jesus taught together?

I know it won’t take very long to say, and because of the desperate need most of us have to prove ourselves – even to God – it won’t feel anything like long enough. But it is a start; and perhaps it will become more than that.

After all, it’s what Jesus taught about prayer.

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