

PLAN FOR

Family Prayer

in

2020

GRAB 'N GO

PARENT WORKSHOP



South Mecklenburg
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Getting Started

Prayer as a family. When I was young, I always dreaded breakfast time. Every morning, my mother insisted that my brother and I wake up early enough to sit with her at the table to eat our Cinnamon Toast Crunch and listen to her read a Psalm. Mostly, I just didn't like getting up that early, but also, I couldn't understand *why* I had to listen to these old words being read over and over and over. I'd heard them all! Whenever I complained, Mom replied, "You never know when you might need one."

Years later, I understand what she meant. The Psalms are like a book of prayers, full of voices crying out to God from the best situations and the worst; crying out in despair or singing with joy; crying out with hope or that they've given up. When I can't find words to share with God, I look for a psalm. What I love about them is their honesty: the words might sound old, and they might feel a little wooden on our postmodern tongues, but they taste of the same feelings of hope, fear, desire, distress.

One of the questions we wrestle with as people of faith is, what is prayer? What does it *do*? It's okay, even good, to have these questions. For some, prayer feels comforting, helpful. But we must acknowledge that, for others, there are questions. That's not surprising, considering the ways we might see prayer used. Too often, we have seen prayer look like some version of a "Honey Do" list we send up to God, with our fingers crossed that something might get done. Other times, prayer is offered when a miracle is needed to avoid tragedy—and what do we do when that prayer seems to go unanswered? What about all the times we've offered words to God, and we feel like all we've gotten in response is silence?

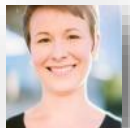
We don't have all the answers about prayer, but here's what we know: prayer, most simply defined, is how we communicate with God. It's a conversation. Like any conversation that nurtures a relationship, conversation with God is meant to help us grow with God, to build trust with God, and to love God. It's not bad to make requests of God, but that should only be a part of our relationship with God. The people who wrote the psalms didn't hold back *any* part of themselves from God, because they knew: "God, you have searched me and known me" (Psalm 139). Why hold back anything, from our Creator who already knows us?

Our hope is that this guide can get you started in exploring your curiosities and questions about prayer, so that you feel supported and encouraged to begin the practice as a family. Because prayer is so personal, praying together can be unexpectedly intimate. Your relationship with God will grow, but so will your relationships with one another. Prepare yourself for some awkwardness, sure, but prepare yourself for holy moments, too.

Like with any practice, a plan for consistency that works for you will help tremendously! Use this guide to think through your own prayer practices first and then to have a conversation with your children about prayer practices. Make a plan on how you will pray together. Check out the resources on the back for deeper digging and more creative ways to connect with our loving God!

Jessica Tidwell, Director of Youth

Jessica @smpchome.org



Before you begin a conversation with your child/children about family prayer, you'll want to have an idea about where you're going. In order to prepare for this conversation, here are some questions and thoughts to consider. If you have a partner, you should discuss these together. If you do not, either ponder them alone or ask a friend to talk with you.

- Recall the way your family of origin taught or did not teach you about the practice of prayer. What was helpful? What was not?
- How do you feel when you think of the practice of prayer as an individual? As a corporate practice (with another person or with a group)? As a family?
- If you have a partner, how does each of your feelings affect the family unit and the way you talk about prayer or the way you practice prayer together?
- What is your comfort level around talking about prayer? What thoughts and feelings does it engender?
- If prayer is already a practice for you, what led you to practice prayer? What are your hopes for praying together with family?
- Review your own way of practicing prayer as an individual. This is something you will want to share with your children—be honest. How does prayer help you? What is challenging about prayer for you?
- What is your desired outcome for this conversation with your children? How can you tailor the questions to help you achieve this goal? Helpful Hint: The goal is probably going to be about faith in the family, communication, listening, values, and honesty. And, this should be one of many conversations around prayer and faith!
- The most important thing to remember is that the practice of prayer is always a work in progress. We are all always working out how to live out our faith, and none of us are perfect. This conversation is not meant to shame anyone (adults or children); the hope is that all of us will become more intentional about how we practice our faith as a family. Small steps are ok... actually, they're great!

The next page contains a Conversation Guide for your family, but before you begin that conversation...take 15-25 minutes to complete the Family Examen (pages 6-7) on your own. You'll want to do it a second time with your child/children after your family conversation.

Conversation Guide

I. **Pray.** Use this one, or write your own:

God, you are the One who is the source of everything we have, and you walk with us through all of our experiences. Help us, as we seek to learn how we can talk to you more and listen to you more. Hold us close, as we begin to trust you more, love you more, and know you more. Amen.

II. **Question for kids (parents ask this):**

How would you describe your family's relationship to prayer? How important do you think prayer is to your family, and when do you think it is practiced in your home?

Question for parents (kids ask this):

How would you describe your family's relationship to prayer? How important do you think prayer is to your family, and when do you think it is practiced in your home?

III. **Explore what the Bible has to say about prayer.** *Google and smartphones are allowed, but you might have to do a little digging. Suggestions: (Bible character) talks to God, Jesus + prayer, Jesus talks to God.*

Let various family members read aloud what they find. After you've heard several different verses or Bible stories, write out a few things you noticed about how prayer looks in the Bible — how is prayer described, and how is it used by followers of God? What surprised you? What challenged you? What questions do you have about prayer?

If you struggle, here are a couple of Biblical text suggestions to look into:

Book of Psalms, Daniel:1-11, Matthew 6, Luke 3:21-22, Luke 9:28-36, Luke 11:1-13, Exodus 3

IV. Talk about prayer.

- a. Think back over your past month. Where have you seen prayer?
What did it look like?
- b. Why do you think people pray?
- c. What do you think prayer does? What about what prayer *doesn't* do?
- d. Do you ever pray as an individual? If no, what holds you back? If yes, how do you feel about prayer?
- e. How would you contribute to family prayer time? How could prayer help reflect our family's values?

V. Think about your plan together. Given everything that you have discussed, go around the room and let each family member give one suggestion for how you all could practice prayer as a family.

- a. How often would you all like to pray together? Is there a routine time that would work best for everyone? Write down a plan together for *when* you will pray together. Helpful hint: This could be a daily practice, a Tues/Thurs practice, a weekly practice....make an achievable plan to get started!
- b. How would you all like to pray together? Faith5, Prayer requests, journals, color, music? (See "Resource Page" for more ideas.)

VI. Close with the Examen.

On the next page, you'll find St. Ignatius's Examen, a prayer exercise where you simply take time to notice God. Typically, it is written for daily reflection, but the one provided for you is meant for an annual reflection.

Take 15-25 minutes to practice this version of the Examen as a family. Review and notice where God has been in 2019 for your family. You can give everyone a piece of paper to walk through it together, or you can do it out loud together.

A Family Examen

Below you will find an outline for a riff off of an ancient prayer practice, called an Examen. St. Ignatius of Loyola created this method of praying in order to help us to notice God, practice gratitude for God, and to help us seek transformation in God's grace.

First, work through this Examen for yourself as a parent/co-parents. Use a separate journal or piece of paper to follow the instructions. While the typical Examen is used for daily, routine reflection, the one below has been modified to help you look at 2019 so you can prepare for 2020.

Next, set a time for this week to sit down with your child/children and do this as a family. You can decide for yourself which tips to use as you go through it together.

Note: Keep your initial Examen prayer to yourself and do not share with your children until after you have done the Family Examen, so that their answers are not influenced by yours! Afterwards, you can decide if you want to share with your children your initial thoughts to compare/contrast.

Examen

Step One: Take a minute to remember that you are in God's presence.

To help with this...you can:

- Take deep breaths, breathing in for 4 seconds and breathing out for 8, and imagine you are breathing in God's spirit.
- You can breathe a mantra silently. Breathe in and think, "God is with me." Breathe out and think, "I am with God."
- Find a fixed point in your physical space of prayer and imagine God looking at you (a spot on the floor, at a chair, at a wall).

Simply invite God to be with you, as a reminder to yourself that God is always with you.

Step Two: Think of what you are grateful for. What are the wonderful things that have happened to you this year? Take your time. Even if you've had a bad year, still take the time to call to mind what you are grateful for – you might be surprised by how many wonderful things you've forgotten!

To help with this...you can:

- Write down the things that come to mind.
- Draw "pictures" on any nearby surface with your finger of the things that you are grateful for.

Simply visualize the things you are grateful for.

Step Three: Savor your gratitude.

Gratitude should not be quick or skipped over. Take your time to savor the things you are grateful for by looking at them in your mind's eye, observing all the most important details. Give thanks to God for these things!

Step Four: Review your year. Take your time.

You can't do this day by day, but you could go month by month. You could also do it by topic of faith life, family life, friendships or other relationships, work, etc. Think back over your year, through all the ups and downs – notice where you felt God's presence. Notice where you struggled to feel God's presence. Notice where you said yes to God's invitation to practice love! Notice where you felt God's love.

Spend time *noticing* God's movement, or where you struggled to feel God's movement.

To help with this...you can:

- Write down each month of the year *or* write down each topic you want to think through.
- Once you've decided, name two highlights and two lowlights at least about each.

Then, look back at the highlights and low lights and notice where you felt God's presence. Notice where you struggled to feel God's presence. Notice where you said yes to God's invitation to practice love. Notice where you felt God's love.

Step Five: Express your sorrow.

In 365 days, there have definitely been moments we have regretted. Take a minute to think of the places where you might have harmed someone or torn the fabric of community. Accept that you have done something you regret, confess this to God, and ask for forgiveness.

Give yourself 30 seconds to hold the pain of sin in your hands by gathering your fingers into a fist and squeezing; and then, at the end of 30 seconds, open your fingers and lift your palms to God to release your guilt. Remember that you are human, we all make mistakes, and *You. Are. Forgiven.*

Step Six: Ask God for support and strength to live 2020 with vulnerability and grace.

Jesus came as a baby, showing us that even God came in the most vulnerable form of all to live among us. We rarely see Jesus wield might and power as a weapon, but we often see Jesus open his heart and life to others with grace and a willingness to be vulnerable. It's not an easy way to live, but that is the path Jesus leads us on!

All of us have things we'll need God's support on in order to respond with vulnerability and grace: health problems, financial problems, family problems, relationship problems, work problems, school problems. So take this time to ask God for help. Be specific about what you need!! St. Ignatius often encouraged people to pray for what they want and need.

Closing:

Holy God, thank you for this time to talk to you. Thank you for always listening, and thank you for always speaking. Thank you for giving us the ability to listen for your voice. Give us the grace we need to be able to see your presence, every day, in big ways and small. Amen.



Resources on Prayer

Books

Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children, by Frank X. Jelenek

Anything by Traci Smith, including:

Faithful Families: Creating Sacred Moments at Home

Prayers for Faithful Families: Everyday Prayers for Everyday Life

Seamless Faith

Life of the Beloved, by Henri Nouwen

Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved), by Dr. Kate Bowler—**this book is particularly helpful when thinking about why to pray during hard times.**

Other

<https://forthefamily.org/praying-together-ideas-consistent-family-prayer/>

<https://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/new-parents/here-are-10-ways-to-pray-as-a-family.html>

Word Teasers, Faith Edition: Faith-based conversation starters for the whole family (www.wordteasers.com)

Prayer of Examen: <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/prayer-of-examen/>



† South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church



South Mecklenburg Presbyterian Church

8601 Bryant Farms Road • Charlotte, North Carolina 28277 • 704.544.0404

www.SMPChome.org

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