

9 Ten ideas for creative prayer



All too often adults pray on behalf of children and it becomes a question of 'Hands together and eyes closed, and don't forget to join in when I say "Amen" at the end!' Many children must grow up assuming that prayer is something done by someone else, and unaware of the fact that God loves his children to speak to him individually as well as in groups. How can we expect children to learn to pray if we don't let them join in from the start? It's all too easy to switch off when someone else is praying (even adults do it). Children are quite capable of praying for themselves, and their prayers often show an understanding that would surprise many adults. However, if leaders always pray at great length and pepper their prayers with long and learned words, those listening may well be left feeling 'I could never do that!'

It is important, therefore, that we find ways of encouraging children to pray both on their own and in small groups. We don't need to limit ourselves to spoken prayers: we can also write and draw our special prayers for God. Sometimes drawing something for which we want to thank God can make us stop, think and take a little more time over our prayer. Moreover, younger children often find it easier to express themselves in a picture than in written words. So let's be creative in our prayer and worship.

1 A Bouquet of Flowers

...offer him glorious praise. (*Psalm 66:2*)

Have you ever given someone a bunch of flowers on a special occasion? Well, why not make some special prayer-flowers for God? Use the template on p 60 to cut flower shapes from coloured paper. Then invite the children to write or draw something on their shapes for which they would like to thank God. Stick the finished prayer-flowers to a sheet of backing paper. Add a few drinking straws or lengths of green paper to represent stalks, and cut a few leaves out of green paper. Finally, say a short prayer offering the whole bouquet to God.

2 Trefoil (Thank you, Sorry, Please)

'Lord, teach us to pray...' (*Luke 11:1*)

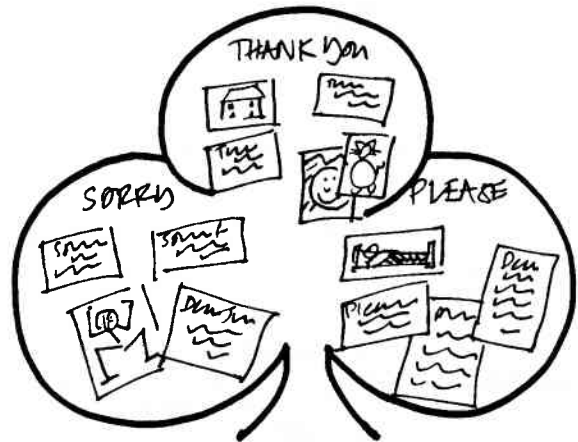
Children often comment that they just don't know what to pray about. Sometimes it's helpful to explain that many prayers can be based on the words 'Thank you', 'Sorry' and 'Please' which have all been incorporated into the following prayer-trefoil.

Draw a large outline of a simple trefoil, or shamrock, so that the three leaves are quite distinct. Label one of the

leaves 'THANK YOU', one of them 'SORRY' and the other 'PLEASE'. Have available plenty of sticky labels so that the children can write short one-line prayers, eg 'Thank you for keeping us safe as we travelled on holiday', 'Please, God, help my gran to get well soon', or 'Sorry, Lord, that I was bad-tempered with everyone yesterday'. Younger children who cannot write confidently should be encouraged to draw their prayers. Invite the group to stick their prayers to the appropriate leaf on the trefoil. Conclude with a short prayer offering the whole prayer-picture to God.

TIP

Address labels are just the right size for a one-line prayer, but if you want to re-use the trefoil over and over again, let the children write their prayers on post-it notes.



3 In the Bin

'I will forgive their sins
and will no longer remember their wrongs.'
(*Hebrews 8:12*)

Discuss with your group some of the things that we often do that must make God feel very sad. Write your ideas on a large sheet of paper. Expect suggestions like fighting with brothers/sisters, telling lies, being grumpy, not helping at home, stealing, swearing, being naughty. Use a marker pen to write the suggestions on a large sheet of paper. Once the sheet is full, pray a short prayer in which you group the children's suggestions together into a simple response-prayer. Explain that you would like them to say, 'Sorry, Lord' every time they hear the cue 'We really want to say...'. For example:

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For fighting and telling lies,
We really want to say...
Sorry, Lord.

For swearing and stealing,
We really want to say...
Sorry, Lord.

For being grumpy and bad-tempered,
We really want to say...
Sorry, Lord.

For the times when we're naughty and refuse to help,
We really want to say...
Sorry, Lord.

For all the things we do that make you feel sad,
We really want to say...
Sorry, Lord.

Amen.

When the prayer is finished, slowly and deliberately tear the sheet of paper into small pieces and drop them into a waste bin. As you do this, explain that when we say sorry to God, he is always ready not only to forgive us but also to forget about all the things we have done wrong. It's as if God tears up all our wrongdoing and throws it in the bin, then gives us the opportunity to make a fresh start.

4 Forgiven and Washed Clean

Be merciful to me, O God,
because of your constant love.
Because of your great mercy
wipe away my sins!
Wash away all my evil
and make me clean from my sin!
(Psalm 51:1-2)

As in 'In the Bin', ask your group to help you write a list of some of the things that we do that must make God feel sad. Use a water-soluble pen to write your suggestions on an OHP acetate. Once the list is complete, weave all the suggestions into a simple response-prayer similar to the example given below. Invite the children to join in with the response 'Please forgive us and wash us clean' every time they hear the cue 'Father God...'

We are sorry, Lord, for all the things we do that
make you feel sad.

Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

We are sorry for the times when we lie and cheat.

Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

We are sorry for the times when we are grumpy,
selfish or unkind.

Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

We are sorry for the times when we are naughty
and disobedient.

Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

We are sorry for the times when we fight or argue
with our brothers, sisters and friends.

Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

We do so many things that we know are wrong.
Father God...

Please forgive us and wash us clean.

Amen.

When the response-prayer is finished, gently sprinkle two or three drops of water onto the words on the acetate, and watch the ink dissolve in the water. Then wipe the whole acetate clean with a damp cloth. (Take great care not to flood the OHP; it is, after all, an electrical appliance!) Finally, make the point that when God forgives our sins, he also forgets them and washes them away, making us clean on the inside and giving us the opportunity to make a fresh start.

5 Shopping Trolley (Harvest)

He gives food to every living creature;
his love is eternal. *(Psalm 136:25)*

The following prayer-collage is particularly suitable for use at harvest time when it can be displayed in church as a focus for prayer.

Collect a number of food magazines, supermarket leaflets and food advertisements. Invite the children to cut out pictures of their favourite foods and paste them to a sheet of paper within the outline of a shopping trolley. Point out that though we buy our food in shops and supermarkets everything we eat has first been provided by God. Look at the list of ingredients on one or two packets and tins, and work out how various products first started life. When the food-collage is finished, add the caption 'Thank you, Lord, for all the good things you give us to eat'. Finally, take a moment to pray and offer the finished collage to God.



6 Prayer People

...pray always for all God's people.
(Ephesians 6:18)

Cut out a number of gingerbread-men shapes (a template is provided on p 61), enough for all the children in your group. Explain that God likes us to pray for the particular needs of our friends, neighbours and families. Invite the children to use the shapes to write short prayers for particular people they know for whom they would like to pray. Stick all the finished prayers to the wall with *Blu-tack*. You could arrange the shapes to form a long line or a pyramid. In subsequent weeks, take another look at the prayers. Thank God for

answered prayers and continue to pray for those situations that still cause concern. Have ready some blank shapes so that children can add new prayers to the collection.

7 Bunting

This is the day of the Lord's victory;
let us be happy, let us celebrate!
(*Psalm 118:24*)

Give each member of your group a coloured paper triangle and invite them to write a one-line 'thank you' prayer. Fasten all the triangles to a length of ribbon to make a festive string of bunting that you can hang across your meeting room. If your group is small you may want to give them two or three triangles each, or you could add to the bunting week by week. Prayer bunting is particularly effective on special occasions like Christmas, Easter, church anniversaries or holiday club services, when an extra long string can be made during an all-age service.

8 Heartfelt Praise

I thank you, Lord, with all my heart...
(*Psalm 138:1*)

Cut out a heart-shaped piece of paper for each member of your group (a template is provided on p 60). Punch a hole in the centre at the top of the heart and attach a piece of cotton or embroidery thread. Explain that God loves us with all of his heart and he is overjoyed when his people return this love. God has given so many good things to us and done so many wonderful things for us that he deserves our love and praise. Invite each child to write a short one-line prayer on his or her heart-shape. Then string up all the hearts from a curtain pole or a length of string tied across a corner of your meeting room. As the children bring up their hearts to add to the display, sing a song joyfully but prayerfully, eg 'We are here to praise You' by Graham Kendrick (Kingsway's Thankyou Music, 1985), *Songs of Fellowship* no 567.

9 Thank You, Lord

He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
(*Psalm 23:2*)

All too often adults say prayers on behalf of children without really considering the kinds of things they might like to pray for. The following prayer is about holidays, but the idea can be used for many other topics, eg family and friends, favourite food, things that make us feel happy.

Invite the group to tell you some of the things they have enjoyed during the holidays. Make a list of their suggestions on a sheet of paper or OHP acetate. Then weave their ideas into a prayer where they join in with the response 'Thank you, Lord' every time they hear the cue 'We really want to say...' In this way the children are participating twice, by suggesting prayer topics and by joining in with a response.

For lazy days and holidays

We really want to say...

Thank you Lord.

For swimming and cycling and day trips out

We really want to say...

Thank you Lord.

For camping and caravanning

We really want to say...

Thank you, Lord.

For the fun of visiting new places

We really want to say...

Thank you, Lord.

For the time to play with friends

We really want to say...

Thank you, Lord.

Amen.

10 Prayer Wall

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people. (*1 Timothy 2:1*)

On a sheet of A4 or A3 size paper, draw a section of a wall, about 14 bricks. If there is a suitably rough wall nearby, place the sheet against it and lightly rub with a pencil: this will help to create the right 'brick' texture. But leave a blank area in the middle of each brick for the children to write in their prayers.

Photocopy enough copies to give one to each group of six to eight children. Give each group a selection of felt-tipped pens and invite them to write their prayer requests to God on the bricks. They could write about personal needs, eg 'Dear Lord, please keep us safe as we travel on holiday', or about the needs of their friends and relatives, eg 'Father God, please help my grandad to feel better soon'. As far as possible have a leader work with each group so that prayer requests can be discussed before they are written on the wall. Once the wall is complete, allow a little time for children to pray about the items written on it.

If you have a large number of groups, all the sections of wall can be joined together to make one long wall. Alternatively, with a small group you might like to add further sections to the wall in subsequent weeks.

From time to time, take a few moments to review the prayer wall. Thank God for answered prayers and pray again for items that are still topical. You may find it helpful to explain to the children that God answers some prayers with an immediate 'Yes', other prayers he answers 'No', and some prayers he answers, 'Wait', because this isn't the right time. It's rather like a set of traffic lights where green represents 'Go' or 'Yes', red represents 'Stop' or 'No' and amber 'Wait'. Point out that just as all the bricks work together to make the whole wall strong, so individual prayers make a church strong.

✕ CROSS REFERENCE

It's worth checking out 'Windmills', section 4:1.