



Vision4Life  
Transforming the church

# praying our days

– welcome to the Prayer Year

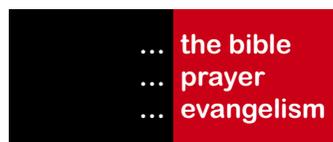
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## conversations about

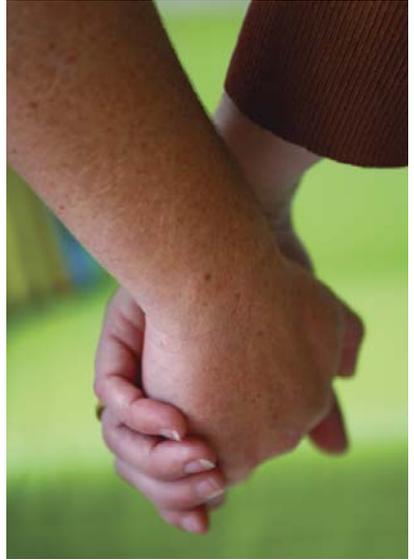


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**days**

**– welcome to the Prayer Year**



1000 Main St  
New York, NY 10001  
10001

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This booklet has ideas to help you expand your prayer life, as well as prayer stories from the lives of other ordinary people. If you use any of this with a group of people, feel free to pick and choose, rather than thinking you must do it all.

## Introduction

Welcome to the Prayer Year of Vision4Life, the second of three years that we hope will start to transform the United Reformed Church, and our partners, for mission. We began with the Bible Year, and hope you enjoyed making some discoveries to refresh how you see the Bible and your life together.

If you're new to *Vision4Life* you're joining more than a third of the churches in the URC which have signed up on [www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk) or via the link on the denominational church website [www.urch.org.uk](http://www.urch.org.uk)

You can use this material even if your church has not signed up, but to sign up shows the interest your fellowship has in *Vision4Life* and puts you in touch with other churches with whom you may be able to share activities and mutual support.

The Prayer Year runs from Advent 2009 to December 2010, when the Evangelism Year begins. This booklet is just a starter – more material is available on the website now and other things will appear right through the Prayer Year. Every signed up church will receive 50 copies of this booklet. You can download the booklet from the website and order extra copies from the United Reformed Church bookshop: 020 7916 8629 or email: [bookshop@urch.org.uk](mailto:bookshop@urch.org.uk)

## Ways into prayer

As we go through life we all learn different things in different ways. Sometimes we learn by watching someone else. Sometimes we listen to a talk on a subject and take notes. Sometimes we look for new information on our own – in books or on the internet.

How do we learn about prayer? Reading books about it is not everything and even if we find good teachers we can't just copy what other people do and expect prayer to come alive for us. That's because prayer is not a skill we learn, or an idea we understand, but a relationship we grow into.

In prayer we try to draw closer to God, and learn how to let God come closer to us. Praying in this way is about recognising how God is with us all the way on our life's journey. It's also about tuning in to the ways in which God communicates with us and listening for God's guidance.

Many of us worry that we don't do this well and never 'get it right'. That's quite natural, because we human beings do things imperfectly, no matter how hard we try. Thankfully, God is expert at dealing with our mistakes and encouraging us to try again. Let's use this time to try new ways of growing in relationship with God through prayer.



Your church may want to print some of the booklet in your magazine or newsletter.



Notes to assist you  
are in the margins.

### Doing this together

Rather than using this booklet on your own you could share it with others. It contains four sessions that could take between one and two hours if done by a group of people. Alternatively, some of these ideas might be used in worship.

The topics are Praying together, Praying alone, Challenging prayer and Exploring prayer. Each session includes Bible study, stories of other people's experiences, and activities to try.

Here are some guidelines for using these ideas in a group:

- advertise well to attract as many people as possible
- find a popular time
- pick a comfortable venue and offer refreshments
- prepare worship that fits the session
- find a leader or, even better, two leaders
- provide handouts or Bibles or decide against using any written material
- set rules on confidentiality – what we say won't be reported elsewhere
- establish respect – we don't correct each other, give advice or tell people they're wrong
- ask for real listening to one another – not listening merely so we can have another turn
- invite people to decide what they'd like to do next.

A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together in a prayerful grip. The hands are positioned diagonally across the frame, with the fingers of one hand interlaced with the fingers of the other. The skin is a natural, light brown tone. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is peaceful and supportive.

session one:

# praying together



If you are doing this on your own you may like to make a few notes about what you think.

## Introduction

From the earliest days Christians have prayed together. In what follows we will:

- see how Christians pray together in the Bible
- share stories of Christians praying together
- pray together
- plan how we would like to pray together in the future.

## First responses to prayer

Ask people to consider two questions:

- What makes us glad to talk about prayer?
- What makes us wary of talking about prayer?

Invite people to discuss in twos and threes, followed by sharing with the whole group if they wish. Otherwise the whole group may talk together.

## Stories of praying together from Acts

We share stories from the book of Acts that show the role prayer played in the life of the Early Church. You can either:

- give the material in a handout
- ask a few people to prepare and tell these as stories
- invite everyone to piece together these stories from memory
- ask people to read these stories aloud
- combine several of these approaches.

The book of Acts has some vivid accounts of what happens when communities of Jesus' followers pray together. Choose from the following stories about the way the Early Church prayed in Acts.

- **Acts 1.14 and 2.42 Constant prayer**

Before and after Pentecost the believers in Jerusalem devoted themselves constantly to times of prayer. They needed strength to survive in a bewildering new situation. Do we connect with this?

- **Acts 1.24, 13.2-3 and 14.23 Finding leaders**

They had to choose someone to replace Judas, to set Saul and Barnabas aside as missionaries of the fellowship in Antioch and to appoint elders to lead a number of infant churches. Each time, they did so when the fellowship gathered for prayer, or for prayer and fasting. What was this praying for?

- **Acts 2.1 and 4.31 Waiting for the Spirit**

At Pentecost 'all' the believers in Jerusalem were gathered together – possibly for prayer. Another time we read of them gathered and praying. Both times the Holy Spirit comes upon them powerfully to enable and encourage. Does this relate to our experience of praying together?

### **Contacts and chasms**

Discovering points of contact between our own experiences and stories of God's people in the Bible can be helpful. We can also explore the 'chasms' between our lives and these stories.

Invite people to give their first responses to these stories. Think about:

- contacts – what do we relate to here?
- chasms – what can't we relate to here?



Depending on the time available you might choose two or three stories. If you have several small groups each one could discuss a different story and then report to the whole group. Otherwise have a whole group conversation.



If you are doing this on your own you might like to write your 'contacts' and 'chasms', as well as any other responses, in a note book. If you are doing this in a group it would be good to write them on a flip chart or wall poster.



### Why the Early Church prayed

Either as a whole group or in twos and threes, invite everyone to focus on what we've discovered about the role of shared prayer in the life of the first Christian communities. Using our awareness of life and its pressures, along with what we know about the Early Church, discuss:

- why did the first churches pray together?
- what drove the churches to prayer?
- what did they hope to achieve by prayer?
- what did they think prayer would do for them and their mission?
- what difference did their praying make?



Now share some or all of these stories about people praying together.

### Let me tell you...

**When opening a new Christian café and bookshop in our village, we needed a cash till.** It would cost around £200 so we were really grateful when someone promised us a free one from a recently closed toyshop. They doubted whether it would be of use as it had no key. Since the café was due to be open in two days this was urgent. Not holding out much hope we prayed, and then phoned the manufacturers to find out where their supplies warehouse was. 'I don't know if you have heard of it' said the man on the phone, and he went on to name the village where our church is.

## Let me tell you...

**Ten years ago** the church took hold of a vision of creating an open, welcoming space to share with the community around us in our large 1832 premises. Since then we have been through and paid for three phases of work on the building. Key to this has been the growing of relationships and intensive networking with those around us.

Prayer has underpinned everything, plus a fair sprinkling of patience and perseverance. Often the treasurer reports at meetings that the current account is as low as £12. We continue to trust in God and step out in faith on the next venture, always finding that the money comes just at the right time.

We also pray for new people to be added to our number, so the work may be shared with a larger group. This prayer is also answered, but we keep on praying as we need more people still to help with this exciting mission. The church is passionate about working together with other Christians and sharing the message of Jesus Christ in the community.

For a small congregation a lot is happening. All our members are encouraged to dream dreams and share visions. As ideas come forward we discuss them, pray about them, try them out to see if they seem to be right and if they are, we go for them.



A story of a church whose members are praying for growth so as to serve their neighbours.

## Let me tell you...

**We needed a leader** in order to open our youth club after the summer break. After much prayer, and advertising in other churches and the local theological college, there was still no response. A few days before the club should start, someone who had visited the club once rang to see if we needed a leader. They were exactly what we were looking for and also had many years experience of leading a youth club. God took us to the brink but gave us a miracle.



Allow people space to reflect on where they are now. Some will have gained fresh insight and others not. Unbridged or partially bridged chasms can be noted and returned to later, along with other questions they have.

### Ask the group:

- How do people respond to these stories?
- How do they differ from the ways in which they experience praying together?

## Community prayer

Many congregations pray with and for the community around them regularly. To find out people's prayer requests some churches leaflet or visit their neighbours and ask, 'Is there anything you'd like us to pray for?' This helps to build links between the church and the local community, as people recognise the faces of local Christians and connect them with the church in a positive way.

Prayer walking is another way to relate to those around you. Get a group together and walk around your community, stopping for prayer at different points. This needs courage but often wins support, frequently from people of other faiths who express thanks for a prayerful presence on the street.

Discuss the ways in which you currently pray together for the community around you.

### Ask everyone:

- What have we shared that speaks to us today?
- What will we do differently now?

Close your time together with prayer for your local community. You may want to use the *Vision4Life* prayer at the back of this booklet.

## Evaluation

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

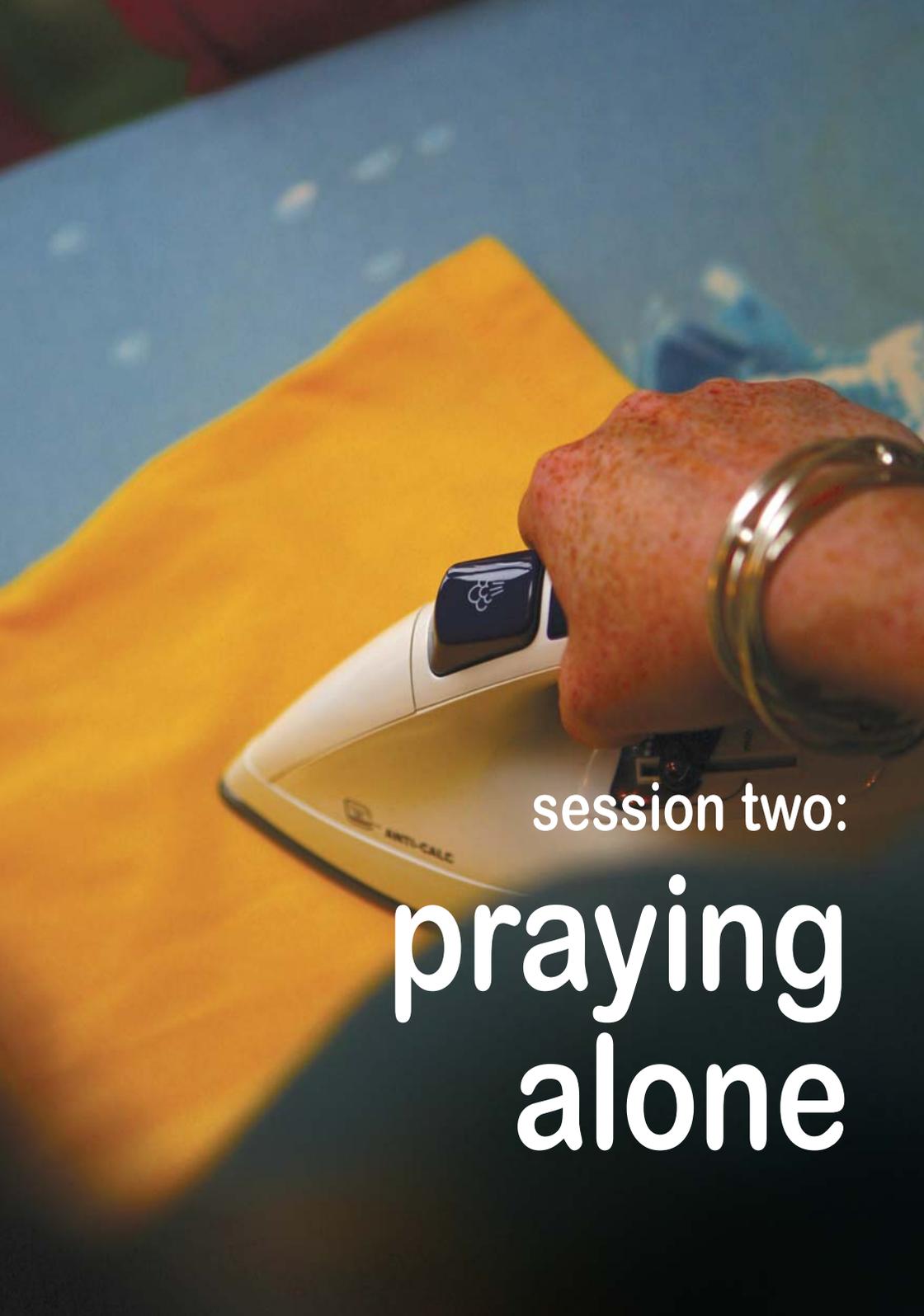
- What was the most helpful thing?
- What was the least helpful thing?
- What would you like to try now?



If you enjoyed this study you may wish to try some of the other Prayer Year resources on the website. Keep checking for new materials as the year goes on.

praying our days session one: praying together





session two:

# praying alone



Many of us will hear Luke's gospel regularly this year, if our Sunday worship follows the weekly lectionary readings.

## Introduction

The gospels show that Jesus valued times to pray alone. During this session we will:

- see how Jesus prays alone in the Bible
- share some stories about prayer
- try some ways of praying
- plan how we may pray in the future.

Luke's gospel draws our attention to Jesus at prayer more often than the other gospels. Here are some of Luke's examples of Jesus praying at the beginning, middle and end of his adult life. Share some of these stories with the group either by reading them aloud or a combination of remembering, reading and retelling them, as your group finds most helpful. Choose the ones that best fit your discussion, or work in small groups so each one can discuss a different story.

## At the beginning of his ministry

### • **Luke 3:22 Jesus' baptism and blessing**

Luke tells us that Jesus was praying at his baptism when the affirming voice spoke from the heavens and the Spirit came down like a dove. Why does Luke add that detail?

## During his ministry

### • **Luke 5:16 Jesus and the habit of private prayer**

In a summary of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Luke comments that Jesus would withdraw from the group to pray alone. Prayer was part of Jesus' pattern of life in ministry. How did that work?

### • **Luke 6:12 Preparing to choose disciples**

Before Luke's account of Jesus choosing twelve particular followers to be with him and be sent out on mission, he tells us that Jesus spent the whole night in prayer. Why might Jesus do that?

### At the end of his life

- **Luke 22:40-46 Jesus in Gethsemane**

This is the classic Gospel account of Jesus praying in the most desperate of situations and somehow finding through prayer the strength to continue on the way of the cross. What do we learn about prayer from watching here?

### Remembering the 'contacts' and 'chasms' of session one, as found on page 11, ask the group:

- Why did Jesus pray?
- What difference did his praying make?
- What does this say to us about our prayer?

### A place for prayer

One question to ask about prayer is where to do it. Think about the places Jesus chose to pray. How can we create space for prayer in our everyday lives? Ever since God told Moses before the burning bush, 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' (Exodus 3:5), people have searched for somewhere to experience God's presence.

### Ask the group:

- Have you been somewhere – a building or geographical location – where you feel God is close?

In the 18th century Susanna Wesley was a mother of 19 children, including her famous sons John and Charles. She created holy space in her kitchen when she put her apron on her head. This was the sign that she was having her quiet time with God.



If you are doing this on your own you might like to write your 'contacts' and 'chasms', as well as any other responses, in a note book. If you are doing this in a group it would be good to write them on a flip chart or wall poster.

Some people have a prayer chair at home that sends the same message. Others create a prayer corner in a room with picture and symbols to help them focus on God.

We can also make prayer spaces in our churches and communities. You may set aside a room in your church for prayer, so people can use it when the church is open. You may have stories to share of places where you have felt welcome to pray.

Discuss the places where you pray now and how your church provides space for prayer.



Here are three very different stories of people being prayerfully alone with God.

## Let me tell you...

**I was having coffee** at the café in the shopping centre one December day. Several people were chatting nearby and many passing by on their way to other shops. Somewhere close by someone was singing. The person sharing my table was talking on her mobile phone. How can anyone be still in this environment? Is this what the run up to Christmas is for so many?

Then I happened to look up. The Christmas decorations were beautiful. I sat for a few moments looking at the lights twinkling and the traditional Christmas colours. It was possible to be still and shut out the clamour. The noise was still in the background, but deep within I found peace.

## Let me tell you...

**I knit blankets** to send to the South African orphanage our church supports. As I crochet I pray. I have seen photos and know some of the names of the children. As I begin each row I remember the name or face of one of the children and lift them to God in prayer. When I run out of names I pray for the children in our church. I pray that my blankets will provide warmth and also be a prayer covering for these children.

## Let me tell you...

**Once, when prayer seemed empty** and God felt distant, I decided to walk the two miles to the end of a promontory near where I was staying. On the outward journey I resolved to use the Lord's Prayer as a pattern.

The distance gave space for each phrase to be listened to properly – 'forgive us our trespasses' ... good thing it's a long walk since that one will take some time; 'as we forgive those who trespass against us' ... so what about those dark thoughts I hold persistently against a few people?

When I stood high above the sea at the end the Atlantic breeze matched the Holy Spirit blowing freshness and vitality through me.





### **Keeping a prayer journal**

Some people find keeping a prayer journal – something between a diary and a scrapbook – helps their praying. Here is one person's way of doing so:

'I've kept a journal since I was quite young. Over the years this has become my prayer journal. At the start of the year I choose a nice book that looks and feels good. I keep my prayer journal in my bag if I go somewhere and by my bed or desk at home. It has notes about people, places or situations for which I'm concerned. These come from the newspaper, emails, letters, telephone calls or conversations. There are photos and postcards too – anything small that fits in the book. I usually put a date to show when I started praying about something.

I use the journal for prayers I write and ones I collect. Sometimes friends give me these or I find them in other places. I sit down with my journal most days. I choose a quiet place, indoors or outdoors, and start by looking at what I have recently been praying. Then I look to see what I was praying about earlier in the year, so I balance long term and new concerns.

What I pray about varies from day to day. It may be good news received, or something overlooked for a while, a phrase that comes to mind or a picture of a person or place which I hold as I pray. I try to record experiences linked to my prayers like the sounds around me or how I'm feeling. Showing other people my prayer journal can encourage them to have a go for themselves.'

Discuss together the various ways in which you currently pray on your own.

**Ask everyone:**

- What have we shared that speaks to us today?
- What will we do differently now?

Close your time together by praying for your own prayer life. You may resolve to try a way of prayer you have never used before.

**Evaluation**

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

- What was the most helpful thing?
- What was the least helpful thing?
- What would you like to try now?



If you enjoyed this study you may wish to try some of the other Prayer Year resources on the website. Keep checking for new materials as the year goes on.





session three:

# challenging prayer



We are not the only ones to face challenges in our lives. Jesus did too, yet he consistently met them with prayer, something we don't always do.

## Introduction

The gospels give us examples of Jesus praying in the face of challenges. During this session we will:

- see how Jesus prays in challenging times and situations
- share some stories of people responding to challenges by praying
- try some ways of praying
- plan how to pray in the future.

Here are some more stories of Jesus praying from Luke's gospel. They show how Jesus prayed in some very challenging moments of his life. Share some of these stories with the group, either by reading them aloud, or a combination of remembering, reading and retelling, depending on what the group finds most helpful. Choose those which seem most appropriate for your discussions, or give one each to several small groups.

## No such thing as getting away

### Luke 4:1-13 Jesus and the wilderness fasting

As with the other gospels, Luke tells us of Jesus being driven by the Spirit to be tested in the wilderness and of his fasting there for forty days. Though the word 'prayer' is not mentioned, might this represent a time of fasting and prayer – even an extended period of 'extreme praying'? Why would Jesus do that, and why at this particular time?

### Luke 9:18-27 Jesus and the big question

Luke tells us that when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter said he was God's Messiah (anointed one), it was in the midst of a time when Jesus was praying alone. Why would Luke want us to know that?

### **Luke 9:28-36 Jesus praying on the mountain**

Luke tells us that when Jesus went up the mountain of transfiguration with Peter, James and John, they went there to pray. Does that add anything to the story?

### **Luke 22: 24-34 Jesus and prayer for Peter**

When warning Peter of his impending denial, Luke says that Jesus tells Peter he has prayed for him and that Peter will be able to turn again and be strong for others after he has failed. What does this add to our picture of Jesus, his praying and his care for his followers?

### **Remembering the 'contacts' and 'chasms' of session one, as found on page 11, ask the group:**

- What do we relate to here?
- What can't we relate to here?
- What difference did it make that Jesus prayed at challenging times?
- What does this say to us about our prayer in response to challenges?

In his book *Prayers for People Under Pressure* former Conservative MP Jonathan Aitken tells how he began praying while in prison for perjury. When he wrote letters for other inmates they wanted to thank him and one gift was some porn magazines. He declined these politely, only to be offered gay porn instead. Aitken tried to explain his refusal and said, 'I'm trying a different path in life.' The man asked, 'So what kind of path would that be?' Taking a deep breath Aitken said, 'It's the path of praying to Jesus and obeying his teachings. It's a path that has changed my life.' After a long silence the other prisoner said: 'You know I'd really like to try that path myself.'



If you are doing this on your own you might like to write your 'contacts' and 'chasms', as well as any other responses, in a note book. If you are doing this in a group it would be good to write them on a flip chart or wall poster.



Praying with others, in difficult circumstances, is not something that comes naturally to all of us. If someone is willing to plunge in, and break the silence, others may be helped to find their prayer voice too.

Aitken and his cellmate prayed together at first and then gathered a small group. There was great embarrassment when about 12 men first came together. Someone asked, 'How do we pray?' Aitken gave a hesitant explanation but was relieved when a Nigerian prisoner began a passionate prayer and the group took off. He writes of the amount he learned from this experience – it was his fellow prisoners who taught him how to pray from the heart.

**Ask everyone**

- How do you respond to this story?
- In what challenging situations have you tried to pray?
- What happened when you did?

## Let me tell you...

We worked in South Africa at the time of the first democratic elections. In the run up to the elections the South African Council of Churches asked the whole country to pray that they might be peaceful. We were invited to pause at 12.00 midday and pray wherever we were. Each day, at that time, our alarm would bleep and we would stop and pray simply, 'God Bless Africa, guide her rulers, guard her people, give her peace'.

As the elections approached, churches were asked to hold a prayer vigil for 24 hours over the weekend before the elections. There were three churches in the group with which we worked. Two were in the rural areas where a high number of people had been killed or injured. One of them was very small, with only a handful of members, so they decided to do their vigil by passing on the time of prayer to each other in their own homes over the phone. The second, a medium sized congregation in a village, decided on one vigil in church for people who were mobile and one on the phone for those who could not leave their homes.

It was the third and biggest church, in a small market town, that was the most reluctant to join in at all. People were afraid. We told them how, through contacts with other churches, we had heard of other prayer vigils of different sorts up and down the country and around the world. They decided to go ahead. We took our sleeping bags down to the church and stayed there overnight so that no one would find the place empty when they came, our daughter was just five months old and slept through most of it.



Here is a story of people praying in the face of a great political and social challenge.



Here are two prayer stories of the church serving those facing personal challenges.

## Let me tell you...

**The chapel is quiet**, the faces solemn and sad. Nana is home, ready for the funeral, and lies here amongst us. Her eldest boy lights the first candle, bows his head, nods to the coffin and signals to his wife to light the next. She weeps as she does and passes the wax taper to her daughter. Taking her turn, stoic, she passes the light to her brother. Eventually, everyone's light is shining and the gathering darkness outside has been driven back a little. We pray.

The following week Jack, who missed the funeral, calls in. He feels her loss. 'She was my rock,' he says. In the chapel, quiet once more, he lights a candle. Perhaps a little of his inner darkness is driven back.

At times of loss, difficulty or sadness, many in this small community have lit a candle in our chapel. Many prayers, spoken or not, have been made like this. Especially when words are not enough, light is a symbol of hope to us all.

## Let me tell you...

**We run a weekly drop-in** with breakfast, take away food, clothing and washing facilities for the homeless. To share our faith, we now offer to pray for those who come and have a box for prayer requests. These are passed to the church and beyond. Here is one:

'Pray for my workers. How help me to bete Drugs and over come Drugs. When I was about 20 year old or 19 one or 2 I went to get help come off Drugs and 9 years 10 years down lane. Exams soon, Art coueses New Home. New life. Thanks to a man called Paul. Cheers.'



### Non-stop prayer

There's nothing new about today's 24-7 prayer phenomenon. Some people have always been willing to pray non-stop, day and night. The psalmist blesses the Lord at all times – 'his praise shall continually be in my mouth,' (Psalm 34:1). Jesus called for persistence in prayer day and night (Luke 18:7) and the early Christians prayed intensely at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 1:14).

Later, generations of monks at Bangor Abbey prayed continually for 200 years. A community near Dublin began praying in 547AD and carried on for about 1000 years, sending out missionaries all over the world. The Pope decreed continual prayer in some places during the 15th and 18th centuries.

In 1727 a small community of Moravians in Saxony began a non-stop prayer meeting that lasted over 100 years, resulting in 300 missionaries and an evangelical movement that led to the conversion of John Wesley. Revivals always start with prayer.

When a church youth group in Chichester launched what their leader Peter Greig called a 'Moravian experiment' in 1999, the modern 24-7 network was born. Inspired by Count Zinzendorf's prayer life in 18th century Moravia, they began praying in relays which lasted from September to Christmas.

From this small beginning the 24-7 prayer baton has been passed worldwide, with many meetings now linked by the website. There is a network of prayer rooms, a missions movement and houses of continual prayer or 'boiler rooms'. Non-stop prayer events particularly attract young people – they see turning up for prayer at 3am as more exciting than 7.30pm.

### **Non-stop URC prayer**

Over Easter 2010 we are holding a national URC 24-7 prayer event. You can register your church for a period of round the clock prayer. To get started, pray that you may inspire people within your church to join a rota of non-stop prayer. A youth group is often a good place to start as they usually like the early hours shifts.

Put up a rota and encourage people to sign up and ensure continual prayer cover. Try choosing a theme for the event and have a prayer room with a variety of resources to help people focus on prayer. During the sessions these will allow them to express prayer in different ways.

There are ideas on the website for setting up places to pray. Spend time on preparing your prayer room as this will be the hub of your activities, where people 'pick up the baton' from the person praying before them.

### Ask the participants

- Has anyone ever taken part in a non-stop prayer event?
- What was it like?
- Would we like to try this for Easter 2010?

### Ask everyone

- What have we shared that speaks to us today?
- What are we going to do differently now?
- You may want to review the notes that have been made during the discussions.

Close your session with a time of prayer focusing on what has come out of your session together.

### Evaluation

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

- What was the most helpful thing?
- What was the least helpful thing?
- What would you like to try now?



To find out more about contemporary 24-7 prayer, visit [www.24-7prayer.com](http://www.24-7prayer.com)



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a key to a wooden door handle. The door is made of light-colored wood with a dark metal handle. The hand is positioned in the lower center of the frame, with the thumb and index finger gripping the key. The background is slightly blurred, showing the texture of the wood and the handle.

session four:

# exploring prayer



## Introduction

Prayer is one of the basics of living a Christian life, yet we all do it differently. Some of us enjoy exploring new ways of praying while others prefer something familiar. The Bible shows us how, after the resurrection of Jesus, his followers found themselves exploring prayer in new ways. In this session we will:

- see how the first followers of Jesus explored prayer
- explore some new ways of thinking about prayer
- try some ways of praying
- plan how to pray in the future.

Here are some stories of the first followers of Jesus exploring prayer. Share some of these with the group, either by reading them aloud, or a combination of remembering, reading and retelling, depending on what the group finds most helpful. Choose those which seem most appropriate for your discussions, or give one each to several small groups.

- **Luke 24: 28-35 The risen Jesus blesses the bread**

In the climax of this resurrection day story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us that the two disciples suddenly realise who their companion is when Jesus prays at their shared evening meal. This is a first instance of shared praying with the risen Jesus. What does it say to us about prayer?

- **Acts 12:5-17 Believers interceding**

When Peter is imprisoned the believers meet to pray fervently for him, yet when he appears at the door they are struggling to believe he is truly there. Can we connect with this? What do we expect when we pray for those in need?

- **Acts 20:25-37 Believers praying before parting**

Before Paul leaves the church elders of Ephesus, with no assurance of a return, they all pray together. What is this prayer doing?

**Remembering the 'contacts' and 'chasms' of session one, as found on page 11, ask the group:**

- What do we relate to here?
- What can't we relate to here?
- What difference did it make that the first followers of Jesus explored praying in different circumstances?
- What does this say to us about our openness to explore prayer?



If you are doing this on your own you might like to write your 'contacts' and 'chasms', as well as any other responses, in a note book. If you are doing this in a group it would be good to write them on a flip chart or wall poster.



Here are two different poems exploring prayer. You might read them aloud or, if working in small groups, give each group a poem to discuss.

### **Disclosure**

Prayer is like watching for the kingfisher. All you can do is be where he is likely to appear, and wait.

Often, nothing much happens; there is space, silence and expectancy.

No visible sign, only the knowledge that he's been there and may come again.

Seeing or not seeing cease to matter, you have been prepared.

But when you've almost stopped expecting it, a flash of brightness gives encouragement.

**Ann Lewin**

### **Prayer**

Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer utters itself. So, a woman will lift

her head from the sieve of her hands and stare at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.

Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;

then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

Pray for us now. Grade 1 piano scales console the lodger looking out across

a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls a child's name as though they named their loss.

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer – Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

**Carol Ann Duffy**

## Let me tell you

**In hospital, recovering from an operation,** I was visited by three different ministers. The first, minister of the church I attended regularly, listened carefully to the story of my admission and what had happened since. At the end of the visit he took my hand and said gently, 'We will all be praying for you'. Knowing he and the folks at church would pray gave me a sense of encouragement.

Second was the new minister of a friend's church. She had told him I was in hospital and he was visiting members of that church. He introduced himself and asked if I would be comfortable with him praying for me. I said I would and he gently put his hand on my arm and shoulder as he prayed aloud. He moved on to his next visit. His gentle touch had warmed me.

The chaplain was the third visitor. She asked to sit by me, briefly introduced herself and enquired how I was getting on. After a few minutes' talk she asked if there was anything I'd like to pray about now. I said there was, so she prayed simply and briefly about the matters I'd mentioned, before taking her leave.

All of these ministers prayed differently – the first prayed with the fellowship to which I belonged, the second by what is called the 'laying on of hands' and the third as a fellow pilgrim. It was not a competition as to who was the best. They each had their own way of praying and contributed to my recovery.





If you are doing this alone you may want to record some of your thoughts in a note book. If you are doing this in a group it would be good to write them on a flip chart or wall poster.

## Let me tell you...

**In ministry**, a great number of people have appreciated my way of doing prayer. At a bedside I use a lot of silence and read psalms to create intimacy. After conversation with a dying person I use their words and thoughts as the basis of prayer, if I use words at all.

I do use formal prayers in worship but they often involve images and art works. I may use a hymn as a structure or as a response. Sometimes I hand a microphone around, for people to pray as they wish, or the Bible so whoever holds it may pray aloud. I still feel uncomfortable providing my words for others to pray, preferring to build on the feelings and experiences of others, while allowing the Spirit to pray within me. Long silences can be very welcome too.

## Let me tell you...

**I was meeting the Elders** of a small church. The final person came in, bringing with him a youngish man and his small son, whom he'd met on arrival. 'My mother has just died,' said the man. 'Can I light a candle for her?' 'We don't light candles', said the Elder, 'but we happen to have the Moderator with us tonight. Perhaps he would say a prayer.'

The man and his son told the story of his mother's life. We said a prayer and he went off into the night. 'Why don't you light candles?' I asked. 'Clearly it would have meant something to that man and his son.' 'We are not Catholics', they said.



### Ask everyone:

- How do these stories connect with our experiences of exploring prayer?
- How do we respond to ways of praying that we're not used to?
- Do we prefer formal or informal ways of praying?



### Prayer labyrinths

In life it often seems as if we're going round in circles. We may use this experience to get closer to God by following a prayer labyrinth. The labyrinth is an ancient symbol, made up of one circuitous path leading to a centre. Examples have been found in many different parts of the world and the oldest may be as much as 3,500 years old.

In the Middle Ages the Church adapted this ancient symbol for Christian use. It was often based on the shape of the cross, suggesting the journey of Christ to the crucifixion. The best known example is probably that in Chartres Cathedral, which dates from the 12th century. Devout Christians may have used labyrinths to make a virtual pilgrimage to Jerusalem without actually going there.

Today we can use the labyrinth as a way of praying and listening to God. We might do it before an important event such as baptism, marriage, starting a new role in Christian service, retirement, changing jobs or seeking God's guidance about a decision.

In the life of the church it could be used at the conclusion of a course or a period of prayer, or when considering some significant initiative.

The best way to experience a labyrinth is to walk it through. You might find one at a church or retreat house. One could be set out in a large church hall, in church grounds, or even a car park. A portable one may be available to borrow. If not, you can draw a labyrinth on a sheet of paper, or with a fabric pen on a piece of cloth, and follow it with a finger.

However it is done, it needs to be slow and meditative, be aware of what is going on inside you and open to what God is doing and saying.

Here is one suggestion for using a labyrinth: before entering become quiet and relaxed. Try to leave behind things that might distract you. Name before God whatever burdens, worries or anxieties you are carrying, and ask God to release you from them.

Enter and begin following the path. Walk slowly and purposefully, winding your way towards the centre. Gradually shed disturbances and busy-ness. Be aware of the way the path sometimes brings you close to the centre (God), and at others back to the edge. Be aware of others who may be walking the labyrinth at the same time. You may see this as an allegory of your life, and offer prayers of thanks, confession and concern for others.

At the centre pause and rest, opening yourself to God's presence with you.

- What do you want to say to God?
- What does God want to say to you?

When you are ready, retrace your steps, without hurrying. You may reflect on where you think God is leading you, the people you are likely to encounter, the decisions you may be called to make, the places you need to go to and things you need to do:

- What has changed you?
- What needs to change?
- What have you learned about God, about prayer, about other people and about yourself?



The best way to experience a labyrinth is to walk it through.



As you leave give thanks, taking the light that you have been given.

**Ask everyone:**

- What have we shared that speaks to us today?
- What are we going to do differently now?

You may want to review the notes from the session. Close your session with a time of prayer focusing on what has come out of your sharing together.

**Evaluation**

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

- What was the most helpful thing?
- What was the least helpful thing?
- What would you like to try now?

Drawing together the evaluation from any of the sessions you have used could be helpful in planning new ventures in prayer with your church, your group or for yourself.

## Epilogue

The phone rang. I answered it. 'Hello,' he said, 'it's me. Have you got time to talk – is it convenient?' His familiar voice sounded tired. To speak at all was clearly needing much effort yet he persevered and talked about the progress of the illness and how there were good days and bad days. It was obvious which this had been and the night stretching ahead was not an easy prospect. He spoke of how he had fallen into the pattern of using the hour between 8.30 and 9.30 each evening as a special time for reading, thinking, dozing, and praying in a way which his energetic, driven life had never permitted – until now.

We spoke about the book he was reading and the issues it raised and how it resonated with this unchosen final lap of his life. He talked of God no longer as the motivator for an activist ministry, but as the father in the story who is already striding down the road to greet his returning prodigal son.

Our conversation drew towards its conclusion and then he said, 'Will you pray with me – now?' 'Of course,' I replied, sounding more confident than I felt, and immediately stepped off the solid ground of 'normal' prayer and into a swirl of deepening friendship, mobile phone technology, God's love, and our progress into eternity. Far from merely rubber-stamping the earlier conversation our prayer served to enrich and set in a good and safe place all that had been spoken of previously.

We said our 'amens,' and 'goodnights' and went back to our separate lives. But even as we did so we realised that our friendship remained, along with the love which holds all things safely in the palm of God's hand.



Do you have a story about prayer to share with others?

### **A Vision4Life prayer**

Life-giving God, creator of all,  
you spoke the world into being  
and saw that it was good.  
Help us to see the world through your eyes –  
messy yet full of potential,  
incomplete yet perfect in parts.  
When our view is distorted  
may we refocus it through your lens of love.  
Generous God,  
give us vision for life.

Jesus Christ, saviour of all,  
you live alongside us and show us  
life in all its fullness.  
Help us to look with you for hidden possibilities –  
tiny mustard seeds of new growth,  
grains of yeast that activate change.  
As we identify signs of hope give us your energy  
to keep searching for more.  
Generous God,  
give us vision for life.

God, the Holy Spirit, new life of all,  
you blow away our excuses  
and overcome our defensiveness.  
Help us to keep in tune with your promptings –  
glimpses of what could be,  
hints of new outcomes we didn't expect.  
Generous God,  
give us vision for life.

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Permission has been given by the author to reproduce Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Prayer', published by Anvil Press Poetry and featured on [www.sheerpoetry.co.uk](http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk)

Visit [www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk) for advice on resources to use when praying with young people.

## Hearing back from you...

Comments, stories and suggestions on our website:  
**[www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk)**

or send an email to:  
**[admin@vision4life.org.uk](mailto:admin@vision4life.org.uk)**

or write to us at:  
Vision4Life  
c/o The Windermere Centre  
Lake Road, Windermere,  
Cumbria LA23 2BY



[www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk)

