

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The title of this resource presents a goal: Becoming a praying congregation. Its purpose is to help you model, encourage, teach, and inspire prayer for individuals, families, and the entire congregation by providing resources and ideas that can be customized for your unique congregation. This set of tools and the process you will begin is designed to be easily modified as you continually find new ways and resources to help people grow in their spiritual practices.

Whether your community has been intentional in building and encouraging the practice of prayer for years or this is a new goal, you will find in this book a variety of ideas and tools to encourage prayer as a way of life. The materials in this resource are designed to:

- reach the entire congregation.
- encourage continual practice.
- help the entire congregation understand the value of a prayer practice in individual life, group life, and congregational life.
- bring prayer into all areas of church life so that prayer becomes a way of life.
- help make prayer a more integral part of worship, ministry areas, church decision-making, the church's mission and witness in the world, and personal and family devotions.
- help you provide ongoing opportunities for all ages to learn more about prayer and the many ways to pray.
- offer simple ways to model prayer in worship and group settings.
- involve the intellect, heart, spirit, and body.
- help you establish a continuing churchwide practice of prayer.

There are many ways to use the ideas and resources provided here to model and encourage a practice of prayer in every area of congregational life. In addition to encouraging a personal daily prayer practice among leadership, small groups, and every member of the congregation, you can explore new ways to incorporate meaningful prayer in worship and work to develop a unifying, common language that stimulates conversation about prayer. Through small-group study, worship, preaching, and Christian education, you can help individuals to grow in their understanding of the purpose and life of prayer. You also can gain clarity about how prayer fits into the mission and decision-making of the church. You will think of many other ways to use the materials provided as you seek to become a praying congregation in the coming months.

This twelve-month prayer initiative is designed to reach the entire congregation. The role of the pastor or pastors is to model, lead, and teach prayer in all aspects of church life. The role of the core leadership team, which consists of staff and/or volunteers, is to plan and oversee worship, new classes and groups, and specific ministries. The role of the congregation is to participate through worship, at-home devotional readings, and special prayer activities.

As you begin this journey, keep in mind two important and often overlooked truths about spiritual leadership:

We cannot lead others where we are unwilling to go.

We cannot be spiritual leaders without the Spirit's help.

Preparation

In the opening section, *Leading a Praying Congregation*, the first steps begin with the pastor and leadership team. You cannot lead a congregation to become a prayerful community unless you are willing to enter that way of life yourself. Before beginning any churchwide focus on prayer, the pastor and leaders of the congregation must begin a personal practice of daily prayer. Together you will devote renewed focus to a daily relationship with God, discuss together the purpose, questions, and mystery of prayer, and be equipped to lead from a personal experience of prayer. The companion resource, *When You Pray*, was designed and prepared for this purpose. Based on the Revised Common Lectionary, the weekly content can become the shared source for sermon texts, group study, and personal devotions. Use it personally and in the leadership team as you prepare to lead the entire congregation in becoming a praying congregation.

To be a spiritual leader in this process of transformation, you must have the Spirit's help. True spiritual leaders must first become and then remain friends of God. As the apostle Paul wrote, "While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:11). In other words, spiritual leaders become the visible presence of Jesus in the world. John Wesley called this transforming power and presence "the image of God fresh stamped on the heart."³ Wesley knew, as we know, that spiritual leadership is not something we do on our own; rather, it is a gift of grace that comes as we spend time with Jesus and begin to think as he thought and go where he would go. It is in this companionship with God that we are adequately formed and fed for the ministry of spiritual leadership. The ways in which God chooses to form us and feed us are as infinite as God's being and as varied and diverse as the human race.

As you begin this time of preparation through a renewed attentiveness to prayer, allow yourself time to be fed. It is easy for spiritual leaders to become so busy that there seems to be no time for personal sustenance. If we are to be spiritual leaders, we need to be fed and to rediscover those spiritually forming and transforming disciplines so that more and more the life of Jesus may be made visible in us. Wesley said, “Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.”⁴

Remind yourself and your team members often that each of you is God’s beloved child. Not beloved the way you once were or the way you will become. You are God’s beloved now, just as you are. As you claim and live this truth for yourselves, you will be able to lead others to the wonder of this central truth.

Planning

One of the key ideas to consider as you begin to plan is the importance of building in enough time, continuity, and repetition so that prayer actually becomes a lifestyle. The primary goal or purpose of this book is to help you establish prayer as a way of living for your congregation. After all, we are not to pray for prayer’s sake, but to lead us to a regular, natural, ongoing relationship with God.

Habits take time to build. In a six-week program, you have some chance of establishing new habits, but it’s a tough proposition. In three months or even six months, the possibilities are greater. To truly support and develop a new way of living together, you need at least one year. The sample plans provided here outline how you might use the ideas in this book, and in the companion resource *When You Pray*, to develop new habits over the next twelve months. At the end of this year of learning and living as a praying community you will be prepared for a lifetime continuing growth in your relationship with God.

First, consider your plan for getting started. Feel free to adapt the following plan to meet your unique situation and needs.