

Take The Fear Out Of Group Prayer*

By Mark Whelchel

Remember the first time you prayed out loud in a group of people? If you're like most of us, you were probably pretty nervous. Most likely your hands were sweaty, your throat got dry, and your mind raced ahead, trying to think of the right words to pray.

It's important to remember how you felt, because there might be someone in your small group who feels the same way you once did. For them, prayer time is not a wonderful, intimate time of fellowship with the Father; it's a stress-filled time that ties their stomachs into knots.

Fear of praying out loud could keep someone from returning to your small group. To make sure this doesn't happen, what can you do, as a leader, to ease prayer anxiety and help your group experience the joy of praying in a group setting? Here are some suggestions.

1. Never force someone to pray. Prayer should be a voluntary response from the heart. When praying together as a group, it's important to let people know it's okay if they do not pray out loud. Encourage them to join with the group in silent prayer. Avoid going around the circle in order, each person taking a turn. Even if someone has the option to pass, he or she may feel awkward doing so.

2. Don't unexpectedly single out someone to pray. If you want to ask a particular person to pray, ask permission prior to the meeting. Let the other group members know that the person praying has volunteered so they won't be worried that one evening you will call on them to pray.

3. Teach about prayer. Discuss on a regular basis what prayer is and how important it is. Communicate to your group that prayer does not consist of eloquent and inspiring phrases, but rather heartfelt communication. Encourage openness and honesty in prayer, and downplay the urge to sound "spiritual" in front of others.

4. Focus on prayer requests. Allow sufficient time for prayer requests. Many people who would not feel comfortable verbalizing their prayers are willing to talk about what's going on in their lives. Sharing prayer requests gives them an opportunity to participate in the group prayer time without feeling threatened.

5. Include silent prayer times. Some of the most encouraging prayer times I have experienced in a group setting have been times of silence. No one is worrying about what to say. Everyone is focused on the prayer requests at hand. Silent prayer can enrich and support group members when everyone is focused on specific needs and requests.

6. Use word and sentence prayers. Every so often, structure your prayer time around single word or sentence prayers. This helps people get comfortable with praying in a group. You can open up a prayer time by asking for single words of thanks or single sentences praising God's attributes.

7. Pray as a group. Repeating a prayer line for line after the leader can be a unifying experience. You can also read a psalm together as prayer.

8. Guide the prayers. Leaders can guide a prayer time by focusing the group on one topic at a time and moving them to the next topic after a sufficient time. This method is less threatening to newer group members because it is structured, and they don't have to think about including all the requests they've heard into their prayers. A second benefit for prayer-shy group members: Prayers focused on a single topic tend to be shorter.

9. Strengthen private prayer lives. The more a person grows in his private prayer life, the more likely he will grow in his desire and ability to pray in a public setting. Ask group members to commit to praying for specific prayer requests throughout the week. This will help them mature in their private prayer lives.

10. Be a model. The most important thing a small-group leader can do is model an authentic prayer life for his small group. People are quick to recognize honesty and humility. If they see a leader open his heart to the Lord without regard to how he sounds in front of others, they will be more likely to follow that example.

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