

# Tips for Intercessors: Preparing the Prayers

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* states, “The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion” (p. 105). Yet many congregations pray using words that are not locally prepared; that is, they use published prayers from a variety of sources. It’s also common that if a congregation’s prayers *are* prepared locally, they are prepared and led each Sunday by the pastor or presiding minister.

But having lay members of the congregation write and lead the prayers for each Sunday enriches the prayer lives of both the congregation and the individuals who participate in the prayer-writing ministry. Typically, congregations that entrust this ministry to laypeople have a group of six to twelve members who follow a rotating schedule for preparing the prayers. Your church may have many more than that or only a handful. The important thing is that laypeople are the right people to offer the prayers of intercession, also called the prayers of the people.

Here are twelve tips for individuals or committees presently engaged in writing the prayers of intercession or considering embarking on such a prayer ministry for Sunday worship.

1. Remember that the intercessions are the assembly’s prayers; they are not your personal prayers. As the writer and leader of the prayers on a given Sunday, you are giving voice to the assembly’s collective concerns, shared by the assembly because of events that are happening in the community, nation, and world. These are concerns that arise in our collective hearts and minds through God’s word, read and proclaimed on a particular Sunday.
2. At the beginning of Luke 11, one of the disciples asks Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Each week God also teaches us to pray through the words given in the lectionary. Those readings from the Old and New Testaments give us insights into things for which we are to ask God and the ways we can ask them. Prepare to write the prayers for Sunday by first reading the appointed scripture readings for that day. It can even be effective to draw words or language from the readings and use them in the prayers you write. Worshipers will have heard those words read earlier in the service and perhaps will have heard the pastor preach about them. The words may then resonate with the assembly, helping worshipers feel that the prayers are their own.
3. The theologian Karl Barth advised preachers to prepare with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. That’s good advice for writing prayers as well: the Bible gives us words for our prayers, and the newspaper and its broadcast and digital descendants help inform our collective concerns at local, national, and global levels. Prayer writers will want to pay close attention to the news so that the needs of people and the earth are included in the prayers.
4. The pattern for prayer suggested in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 105–106) is that the prayer concerns be organized into petitions followed by a call and response, for example: Hear us, O God. / **Your mercy is great.** An orderly expansion of concerns helps members of the assembly wrap their minds around one theme at a

time, and the call and response invites them to make the petitions their own. This shared liturgical action helps members of the assembly own the entire set of petitions, even if the intercessor is the one giving voice to the petitions. A single, long, uninterrupted prayer is not comparably inviting to the rest of the assembly.

5. In addition to using techniques to make the prayers “our” collective prayers rather than “my” personal prayers, always be aware of the *direction* of your speech. You are addressing God, not the assembly. We can remind ourselves and the assembly of this direction of our speech by introducing some petitions with phrases like “Merciful God,” “Eternal God,” and “God of all creation.” If you notice that *you* are addressing the assembly in something you are writing, you are in danger of becoming preachy. Petitions are to ask God for help, not tell the assembly what to do.
6. When preparing the prayers, don’t avoid sticky or controversial issues. Sunday worship should be a place where we can all bring all our concerns before God, even if we may not be in agreement about them. When giving voice to a controversial matter, don’t take sides, and don’t presume to instruct God how to resolve it. But when we bring an issue to God in prayer, there are any number of things we can all agree to ask of God regarding that concern. We can ask that God care for those suffering in the midst of some situation, for example, or that God give wisdom and courage to those who are addressing the concern.
7. A petition in which we pray for persons who are sick, dying, grieving, or imprisoned can provide an opening that invites members of the assembly to name specific individuals for whom they want to pray.
8. In addition to providing an opening in which members of the assembly can offer up individual names, you may include a separate opening, between prepared petitions, in which you invite members of the assembly to lift up other prayer concerns. This can encourage a livelier and more spontaneous prayer life in the congregation. By keeping the two openings separate and distinct, you avoid confusion. The congregation will learn the pattern: that in one space they are invited to name individuals’ and families’ names, while in the other they can raise other prayer concerns, whether of thanksgiving or intercession. Whenever you open a space in your prayers for others to voice names or concerns, allow plenty of time, be comfortable with silence, and help the assembly to be comfortable with the silence.
9. For someone who is preparing prayers for the first time, it’s okay not to start off writing all the petitions from scratch. A comfortable first step may be to study the lectionary readings for Sunday, then choose from among the prepared prayers in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 72–87). Choosing petitions is a step toward writing petitions oneself. Next time you prepare the prayers, replace some of the phrases in a petition of your choosing to make the petition more fully address concerns in the context of *now* and current events. Soon you’ll be writing whole petitions from scratch. You might try this with the weekly intercessions provided in *Sundays and Seasons*. Those petitions include references to recurring observances and events on church and secular calendars—the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or presidential elections—but of course cannot foresee wars or earthquakes.
10. Read your prayers aloud before worship. Proofreading your prayers silently is important but won’t help you identify the word or phrase that ties your tongue. Reading your prayers out loud ahead of time will also allow you to focus during worship on giving your words a prayerful intonation.
11. Giving thanks for the saints in your last petition signals to the presiding minister that it is, indeed, your last petition. The presiding minister can then conclude the prayers. Giving thanks for the saints, however, is far more than a signal to the presiding minister. It is an important way of weekly remembering with gratitude

that it is through the lives and witness of those saints that God has brought us to faith these two thousand years after Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. Consider naming the saints whom the church commemorates during the coming week (Sunday through Saturday). *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides a convenient list of saints and their commemoration dates (pp. 15–17).

12. Finally, in addition to drawing inspiration for prayers from the Sunday's scripture readings and from the newspaper, you can also draw inspiration for tone and language from the seasons of the church year. Epiphany invites language about light; Lent invites attention to those preparing for baptism; Christmas celebrates becoming human in the incarnation of Jesus. Think about the church calendar when considering imagery for your petitions.

You will never know the riches to be gained in writing prayers of intercession if you don't try it. Be at peace, for Christ is with you!

—Fred Quivik