
THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

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1. The reason for this statement

This statement aims to clarify the nature and purpose, aims and contents of the prayer of the church. Three things seem to have contributed to confusion about this:

- a. People in our church have rightly sought more involvement for the congregation in what is after all its prayer, but have been uncertain how best to accomplish this.
- b. In reaction to the general character of our traditional prayers of intercession, pastors and congregations have been reluctant to intercede for the church and the world and have instead focused on themselves and their needs.
- c. The teaching on prayer in Protestant circles over the last decade has prompted the practice of group prayer at the expense of public congregational prayer. We therefore wish to open up discussion on this topic, because we are convinced that the intercession of the congregation for the church and the world is an essential part of public worship, and the evangelisation of lapsed members and unbelievers.

2 The scriptural foundation for the prayer of the church

- a. In Old Testament times, sacrifices and prayers were offered at the temple for the monarchy and the nation (1 Chr 16:7–36; 2 Chr 7:12–16).
- b. In the post-exilic period God's people also offered public sacrifices and prayers for the Persian king and his family (Ezra 6:9,10).
- c. At the time of Jesus the Jews were exempted from involvement in the imperial cult, because they offered daily sacrifices and prayers for the emperor as well as for themselves as the people of God.
- d. This practice of public prayer was continued in the early church.
 - Corporate prayer was affirmed by Jesus (Matt 18:18–20) and is based on his intercession (Heb 4:14–16; 7:25).
 - The early church regarded it as one of the four basic components of its worship (Acts 2:42; cf 6:4).

- According to St Paul, the first duty of congregations in response to the Lord's service of them is to intercede for all people and especially those in authority (1 Tim 2:1–6; cf 1 Pet 2:17).
- Congregations were also required to pray for all the saints (Eph 6:18,19) and all the ministers of the gospel (Rom 15:30–32; Eph 6:19,20; Col 4:2–4; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1,2; Heb 13:18).
- Through the prayers of the church, God accomplishes the final judgment and salvation of the world (Rev 8:1ff).

3 The nature and purpose of the prayer of the church

- a. This prayer is an act of intercession by the congregation for itself and the whole church.
 - In it the congregation prays for:
 - all the people of God (Eph 6:18,19)
 - the work of pastors and missionaries as well as the reception of the gospel preached by them (Rom 15:30–32; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 6:19; Col 4:3,4; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1,2; Heb 13:18)
 - the sending out of pastors and missionaries to do God's work (Matt 9:35–38)
 - its own needs (Phil 4:6; Col 4:2).
 - Intercession for the whole church acknowledges and affirms the ecumenical nature of the local church, as the intercession is made with and for all God's people.
- b. This prayer is also an act of intercession on behalf of the world.
 - In it the congregation brings the people of the world to God, makes petition for their needs, and pleads with God for their pardon (1 Tim 2:1,2).
 - Ideally, the congregation will pray both for general needs and specific circumstances, for public institutions and particular leaders, for groups of people and individuals.
 - By praying for the world the congregation stands in solidarity with all the people of the world and identifies itself with them and their needs.
- c. By this prayer the congregation offers its public service on behalf of the world.
 - The congregation performs its priestly role by representing the people of the world before God in prayer. It is therefore not the prayer of individuals for themselves nor the congregation for itself, but is indeed the prayer of the church.
 - The congregation participates in the mission of the whole church by interceding for the world and praying for the spread of the gospel.
 - This prayer voices the needs and concerns of the church and the world.
- d. The nature of this prayer is indicated by its traditional place after the sermon in the Lutheran liturgy.
 - It grows out of God's word and expresses the faith that is generated by the preaching of God's word, but it need not refer to the actual readings for the day. It reflects God's word in:

- its contents which are determined by God's promises and commands as they apply to the needs of the church and the world
- its language as it echoes and employs the words and imagery of the Scriptures, which have been given not only to generate faith but also to guide the saints in prayer.
- Since this prayer is associated with the collection of monetary gifts and prepares for the eucharistic thanksgiving, it is part of our corporate offering to God the Father through his Son. In it we:
 - respond to God's work for us by interceding for others
 - ask for the gifts which God gives us in and through the sacrament.

4 The contents of the prayer of the church

- a. Corporate intercessory prayer has normally been addressed to God the Father, ie the first person of the holy Trinity.
 - He is the source of every good gift (Jas 1:17).
 - Jesus addressed him as Father in his intercession for us (Luke 11:1–4; John 17) and commanded us to pray to the Father in his name (John 16:23,24; cf 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:26).
 - Through Jesus we may approach the Father in prayer (1 Tim 2:5,6; Heb 4:16; 10:19–22).
- b. The prayer may also begin with a petition for the Holy Spirit to unite and guide the congregation in its intercession (cf Luke 11:13; Rom 8:26; Eph 6:18; Jude 20), or with a short act of thanksgiving, as appropriate to the season and occasion (cf Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:18).
- c. In this prayer intercession has traditionally been made for the church and its servants, the nations of the world and their rulers, and problems and needs of particular people.
 - Provision was also made for special requests in each of these areas, or after they have been covered generally.
 - Opportunity for confession of sins to God, thanksgiving for his gifts, praise for his accomplishments, and adoration of him is provided elsewhere in the liturgy and in the hymns.
- d. The contents of the intercession need to be expressed in a general form so that they can be owned and prayed by all

5 The form of the prayer of the church

The prayer of the church may take various forms. The following are some possibilities.

- a. **Continuous prayer**
 - The liturgist prays without interruption until the final Amen
 - Even though this has been the normal form of intercession in our circles, it tends to overwhelm the congregation with many petitions and can exclude it from participation.

- b. **Bidding prayer**, ie a series of collects or brief petitions on particular topics.
 - An assistant (traditionally a deacon) or the liturgist invites the congregation to pray on a particular topic by saying: ‘Let us pray for...’
 - This is followed by a short period of silence, during which the members may offer up their personal prayers silently.
 - The liturgist then prays a collect on the topic, with the traditional ending: ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’.
 - At the end of each collect the congregation responds with Amen.
- c. **Exhortative prayer** on particular topics
 - The liturgist announces the subject and contents of the prayer by addressing the congregation with the words: ‘Let us pray for... that....’ or ‘For... let us pray to the Lord’ or ‘We pray that...’
 - The congregation then makes the prayer by saying: ‘Lord, have mercy’ or ‘Hear us, good Lord’, or another similar petition.
- d. **Petitionary prayer** on particular topics
 - The liturgist makes a series of petitions grouped according to topic.
 - At the end of each section the congregation may respond by:
 - saying ‘Hear our prayer’ after the words of the liturgist, ‘Lord, in your mercy’.
 - saying ‘Lord, hear our prayer’ after the words of the liturgist, ‘Lord, hear us’.
 - singing LHS hymn 899.
 - During Lent each section may be introduced by the singing of LHS hymn 902.
- e. **The litany**
 - A form of the litany is found on pages 80,81 of *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement* (but not in the earlier paperback *Supplement*)..
 - If other forms of the litany are used, they will need to be printed out for congregational use.
- f. **The Lord’s Prayer with additional prayers based on each petition**
 - Luther recommended this method of intercession, which reflects the contents of his Small Catechism.
 - Each petition or group of petitions may either introduce or summarise the prayers.

6 Leadership and involvement in the prayer of the church

- a. Normally, the presiding minister leads the congregation.
 - Since the prayer of the church belongs to the congregation and is offered by it to God the Father, the presiding minister acts as its agent and mouthpiece.
 - Since the congregation may appear to be excluded if the prayer is spoken entirely by the presiding minister, the role of the congregation may be highlighted by the practice of exhortative prayer as outlined in 5c above, where the leader announces the topic and the congregation offers the prayer.

- b. A layperson (traditionally a deacon) may announce the topic of each intercession from the lectern or from beside the altar.
- c. Laypeople may present particular intercessions on certain designated topics from the lectern or, in the case of small churches with no acoustic problems, from their position in the nave.
 - The topic or the text may be assigned to them by the presiding minister.
 - If they prepare their own petitions, the presiding minister will normally have oversight of these, to ensure that the prayers can be owned and prayed by the whole congregation.
- d. The congregation can be involved by saying responses.
 - They can participate by saying 'Amen' after each petition or by making short responses at the end of each section.
 - It is preferable for the whole congregation not to say long parts of the prayer together. Most people find it hard to read unfamiliar material aloud together with others, and can be distracted from the contents of the prayer by having to concentrate on what they have to read.