

## Tool 5



### Writing Prayers for Public Worship

Writing relevant, engaging prayers for public worship can seem a daunting task. Here are some suggestions to help you turn your heartfelt prayers into Prayers for the People.

1. Be yourself. Imagine you are speaking to someone very important who, you are sure, loves you dearly but who would certainly know if you tried to pretend to be someone or something you are not. That is exactly what you are doing when you pray.
2. To begin, you want to say “Thank you” to that person and so do the rest of the people in the church. What do you think people in your church can thank God for? What can you thank God for? Write out a list.
3. Then ask yourself: “What do people around the world need? What about people in my church? What about myself?” Make another list.
4. Now cut out the things that are about yourself alone or that would violate a confidence if mentioned aloud in the worship service.
5. Next, take your revised list and turn it into a series of sentences.
6. Put the prayer away in a drawer and let it sit for a day or two.
7. Take it out and look it over. Is the language clear? Is it too “churchy”? Would a person from a different generation or a different church background (or no church background) understand what you are talking about? You will probably have to make some changes, but they will almost certainly be changes for the better.
8. Now read it aloud several times—in the presence of someone whose judgment you trust, if you wish. Are any of the words or phrases real tongue twisters? Change them or cut them out. Does it flow smoothly from sentence to sentence? If the answer is “Yes” or even “Well, sort of!” put the prayer away and stop worrying. God loves you and wants you to pray, and God will help you to do so.

### Prayer Language Tips

9. Use contemporary English. Even though much of our tradition of prayer uses the marvellous language of the *Book of Common Prayer* by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1549 and 1552) and the *King James Version* of the Bible (1611), it is difficult to imitate. More important, language that is separate and apart from the language of “real life” suggests subconsciously that prayer itself is something separate and apart from real life.
10. Say “You” to God. Four hundred years ago, “Thou” was the normal second person singular in English. The New Testament likewise uses the normal Greek second person singular to speak to God. In modern English, the normal second person singular is “You.” “You” in prayer creates an intimacy that the God who invites us to say “Abba [‘Daddy’ in Jesus’ language], Father” both permits and desires.

11. Cut down the number of subjunctives. Many of the first English prayers were translated from Latin or based on Latin models. Latin is rich in subjunctives but English makes less use of them: “We ask that you would be with us so that we might know your love.” In modern English, we use the infinitive for the same purpose: “We ask you to be with us so we might know your love.”
12. Use shorter sentences with few subordinate clauses. Public prayer often piles subordinate clause upon subordinate clause. “Almighty God, whose love is without end and whose mercy never faileth, we would ask Thee to bestow upon us the blessing of Thy Spirit that we might live in the light of Thy presence.” Does that style sound familiar? Pray instead: “Almighty God, your love never ends and your mercy never fails. Give us, we pray, the blessing of your Spirit. Help us to live in the light of your presence.”
13. Say “We” rather than “I.” The church is more than merely a collection of individuals; it is also a “collective personality” or, to use the image of the Apostle Paul, “one body” with many parts. It is therefore always right to use the word “we” when leading prayer.
14. Use inclusive language. For centuries we have spoken as if only men were in church. The Nicene Creed, for example, speaks of Jesus who came down “for us men and our salvation.” It was a convention then that the word “men” included women as well.

Conventions only work when everyone agrees to them, and not everyone agrees to this one anymore. Women and many men have come to realize that the effect of such language has been to shut women out from the centre of life and to suggest they are second-class citizens in the Church. All prayer language should be fully inclusive. “Men” must become “men and women” or “women and men” or “persons” or simply “us”! It is, in fact, quite easy to be inclusive with respect to human beings.

Any questions or comments? Please contact the Elders’ Institute for information.

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