



# THE SPIRIT PRAYS WITHIN US

A Prayer Workbook for Ruling Elders



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

*Romans 8.26–27*

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# Introduction

*“Life in Christ involves prayer, the seeking of God’s will and blessing on all of life. Prayer is an openness to the presence of God. In words, or in the absence of words, prayer is the focusing of our lives towards God.” Living Faith 8.1.4*

What range of responses does the word “prayer” call up for you? Is there a good memory of praying that surfaces? Or perhaps an uncomfortable one? Do you think of someone specific—someone who taught you to pray? Someone who’s praying has moved you? Someone you prayed for or who has prayed for you? Is there a moment during prayer when you truly felt that “openness to the presence of God” described in *Living Faith*? Prayer is a multi-layered practice in Christian life, a powerful dynamic in Christian worship and, for many, the heartbeat of our personal relationship with God.

Our expectations of prayer are many and varied; however, they are rooted in our experience of praying. How we were taught to pray shapes some of those expectations. Studies have shown that the patterns of prayer we observed at home when we were young set a long-lasting example for us. Yet those examples can be either fruitful or limiting, depending on our journey of faith as we’ve grown. Some people explore many different approaches to praying and settle into a practice that feels both comfortable and nourishing. Others may hold a clear idea of the “right kind” of prayer and expect others will share that view. Yet our personal practices of prayer will vary greatly. Some Presbyterians use a devotional resource in a daily discipline of praying. Others will be more spontaneous. For some, prayer becomes a “holy habit”; yet, for others praying is like using a crisis line, reaching out to God when trouble is at hand. We often wrestle with how God “answers” prayer, puzzling out what to believe when our request is not met the way we wanted. For some people, prayer leads to powerful encounters with God’s presence. Yet others wonder if God is there, finding prayer a chore to be avoided.

As an elder, your own experience of prayer will have shaped your perspective on praying with others. It is worth remembering that everyone you meet in your role as a congregational leader will have a different experience of prayer. Therefore, their expectations of praying will likely differ from yours, at least in part. Truly, there is no single experience of prayer, no set of correct expectations about prayer. Over anyone's lifetime, someone may go through various "seasons" of prayer, times when God seems close and praying very fruitful; other times when God seems far away and praying rather empty. So, your practice of prayer as part of your role as an elder follows a path alongside many other paths, those of other elders on Session, other members of the congregation, people assigned to you for your pastoral attention...plus friends, neighbours, and, truly, the "communion of saints"!

This workbook is designed to invite ruling elders in the Presbyterian tradition to explore your own practice of prayer and the opportunities to pray with others which present themselves as you undertake your pastoral responsibilities as an elder. It is not proposing a single theory or model of prayer. Instead, there are sections which invite you to reflect on questions, either by yourself, or perhaps, with other members of Session. It may be helpful to jot down words or phrases which capture a memory, an idea or a question that arises while you're reflecting. You might write down first names or initials of people whose situation comes to mind as a subject for your own prayers. If you are comfortable and experienced praying with others, this workbook may offer a few suggestions to expand the ways you lead prayer in pastoral encounters. On the other hand, if you feel a bit uncomfortable praying with others, or nervous about suggesting prayer with someone, the exercises in this book are intended to help you practice finding words, imagining yourself in conversations in which prayer can bring that openness to the presence and promises of God of which *Living Faith* speaks. There is no set of right answers, however. Trust that God will honour any effort you make to reflect on the questions provided, and guide you in every opportunity to pray with others, whenever those opportunities arise.

Canadian theologian Gregory Baum once remarked that prayer is "the quiet readiness to be addressed." In your prayerful reflections, be ready. God will open up for you many truths about prayer and surprise you with insight and opportunity.

## How to Use This Resource

- **Personal Study:** Share this workbook with elders in your congregation and encourage them to use it for individual study.
- **Group Study:** Consider forming a study group of elders who will work through this workbook together.
- **Session Starters:** Use the sections of this workbook for group reflection at the beginning of your session meetings. Gradually, over five meetings, everyone on your session will have discussed the whole book.
- **Elder Training or Mentorship:** Use the information in this workbook as part of your training or mentorship with new elders.

# My Current Views on Prayer

- 1 | For you, what are the most important reasons we pray?  
Think about reasons individuals pray on their own and also why congregations pray together.
- 2 | How do you feel about praying on your own? When leading others?  
When someone else is leading?
- 3 | List any concerns you have about leading someone else in prayer.

*(Remember, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions.)*

## BEST IN PRAYER?

*There is some ecumenical laughter provoked whenever Presbyterians point out that you can rearrange the letters in "Presbyterian" to read "Best in prayer." (Go on, try it.) But not every Presbyterian feels that confident. When I was a young minister, I sent a questionnaire to members of my pastoral charge, seeking to identify priorities for ministry and the kind of programming people would enjoy. I was astounded at the result. Almost every questionnaire returned identified the need to develop a more fulfilling prayer life. So, the Session agreed we'd start a prayer group. A date was chosen to begin. To my even greater astonishment, only one woman came to the first meeting of that prayer group, even though more than twenty-five questionnaires named the need to learn to pray. I had to find other approaches!*

## Prayer within an Elder's Pastoral Role

Within Presbyterian polity, ruling elders have a crucial role in congregational life and in the church courts. Elders are called by God through a voting process within each congregation to serve in this leadership role. Your leadership is part of the "pastoral" life of the congregation.

*To consider the scriptural roots of the word "pastoral," read Psalm 23 and the Parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15.3–7.*

The word "pastoral" connects with the images in Psalm 23 that picture the Lord as our shepherd, giving his sheep all the kinds of care we need on life's journey. Our tradition associates the term "pastor" with Ministers of Word and Sacraments, also called "teaching pastors" by Reformation writers. But the adjective "pastoral" belongs to the whole church, which, as Christ's body in the world, expresses his care in many different ways. No one person alone can offer all the care a congregation needs or is called to offer to the surrounding community.

Every leader within a congregation has some "pastoral" responsibilities. For example, Sunday School teachers keep an eye on every child. If a child stops attending, a teacher will likely contact the family and find out what's up. So, too, a choir director or activity group leader may notice if someone is upset or not looking well and check things out. In any of these situations, the minister might get called in. Sometimes a little friendly concern is all that's required. Someone will feel the love of God in a kind question or conversation. Elders are part of this attentive pastoral approach at the heart of every congregation, whatever its size.

In most congregations, elders have a pastoral advantage when they are assigned a "district" or contact list of members and adherents in the congregation with whom they have the responsibility to keep in contact and develop a relationship. Regular communication within your district is one role of an elder, but so is embodying the care and attention Christ has for each of us, as the Parable of the Lost Sheep presents. At first, this responsibility may seem a bit daunting, but truly, the relationships cultivated between elders and their districts are key to the health of Presbyterian congregations. Your contact with your district reminds people that they are important to the life and ministry of your church. It is also of great assistance to the Minister of Word and Sacraments in offering effective pastoral care. You may hear first about a situation that calls for the minister's attention. The ways in which you report within your district also

helps the whole Session reflect on the needs within the congregation, and may influence decisions about program planning or identify people with gifts and interests to call upon. Good congregational leadership is rooted in attentive pastoral relationships throughout the congregation.

Prayer will strengthen your pastoral relations with those in your district. God has called you to serve as an elder because of your faith in Christ. You are trusted by your congregation to represent God's love and the congregation's love and concern for people in your district. You were not called to become an elder because you're expected to fix every problem you may hear about. You're not required to have expertise in health, family or economic challenges. No, you are a friend in Christ and a good neighbour who cares about the lives of others. You can strengthen your relationships within your district by praying for each family and individual on your list. Invite God's blessing and guidance for them—and on each encounter you will have with them, whether at church, in their homes or somewhere in the community. Set aside a few minutes each week to focus prayerfully on names in your district. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and give you opportunities to connect with and support each person you pray for. The Spirit may just give you a nudge about someone who needs a call!

The support and friendship you can offer as someone's elder begin when you know who you are talking to. It's important to find out a few details about each new name assigned to your district, perhaps by conversation in Session or with your minister—and certainly by talking directly to each person. Don't be embarrassed by what you don't know. Take the time and show the interest to find out about someone directly—for example, where they work, how long they've been part of the congregation and community, do they have children or grandchildren, and if so, the stage those children are at. Elders aren't nosy, but they are genuinely interested in the lives of those who make up the congregation. Your pastoral relationship with each person in your district grows when you demonstrate good listening skills, showing that you've heard the most important things they've mentioned and understand their joy and/or concern. At some point in your relationship with each person or family in your district, you may find the opportunity to pray with them—on a home visit, at a hospital bedside, even on a virtual visit or phone call. (God can use technology, too!) Praying together strengthens your pastoral relationship and expresses your trust that God also shares their joy and concern.

# Who Is in Your Care?

- 1 | Make a list of those currently in your elder's district. Add brief notes on what you already know about them, for example, their occupation(s), roles in the congregation, background, family connections, important life events (recent or past), etc.
- 2 | Now identify a few key things you don't know. There's a topic for a new conversation, when the time seems appropriate.
- 3 | Pray over the list on your own, name by name. Seek God's guidance for them and for yourself as their elder. If you are aware of something significant in their lives (e.g., a birth, death or wedding, new job or retirement, a health issue, a big trip) pray about that too. If you can't think of anything significant, maybe it's time to make a call to check in.

## Learning to Pray Together

*(Jesus) was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11.1).*

How did you learn to pray? How old were you? Who taught you? Some of us learn to pray as children. Perhaps we memorized a prayer to say at bedtime or in the morning. Some families say grace before meals and children are given a turn, saying familiar words or following a family custom. Studies have shown that the examples set by parents have a huge impact on a child's faith development (sometimes with great benefit, and sadly, sometimes not.)

## NANCY LEARNS TO PRAY

*My parents taught me to pray each night, beginning with a memorized rhyme, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." I didn't really know what all the words implied back then! After repeating that prayer, I'd say "God bless..." followed by a string of names that included family, friends, neighbours and pets. For a few years, one of my parents listened at the door. Eventually they stopped eavesdropping, but I kept praying. It became for me what it still is, a holy habit at the end of the day, to lift before God names and situations that matter to me, before "I lay me down to sleep."*

If prayer was not a central part of your early family experience, who set a lasting example for you? Perhaps a Sunday School teacher or youth leader? A friend? Minister? Camp counsellor? Or perhaps there was an event like a conference or a retreat, or one memorable worship service, which introduced you to a way of praying that moved you deeply. We are truly blessed if we have many prayerful examples in our lives that have illustrated different ways to pray.

Sometimes the first or most significant experience of praying becomes the model of prayer we always turn to. We may have established that model as a kind of standard for every time we pray. Yet there are many ways to pray, not just one "correct" way. Many of us "talk" to God in words, whether we speak them out loud or silently within ourselves. Others find silent prayer nourishing, quieting all thoughts, perhaps letting one phrase of scripture resonate, giving space for God to move within us. Still others choose a favorite prayer book or devotional resource, using the words of others to inspire contemplation and connection to God. If you ever find that your current practice of prayer isn't helping you engage God at the moment, exploring a different approach to prayer may open you to God's presence in a fresh way. If as an elder you have sampled some different ways of praying yourself, you may find opportunities to discuss these approaches with someone in your district, helping them expand their practice of prayer.

# The Ways I Pray at Present

- 1 | What, if anything, is most fulfilling about your current practice of prayer?
- 2 | What, if anything, is challenging about your current practice of prayer?
- 3 | Consult the bibliography in this workbook if you are interested in developing or expanding your practice of prayer.

## Lessons from Praying in Worship

For Presbyterians, prayer is both a personal and a public matter. The order we use for Sunday worship is filled with prayers of different kinds, offered in different ways. We might call these types of prayers different “voices of prayer.” Reflecting on these voices of prayer can help us learn to pray together when we are not in public, but in smaller, personal or interpersonal situations.

Often the voices of prayer are identified in the bulletin or order of service used in public worship. Following is a list of prayers commonly found in Presbyterian Sunday liturgy:

**Adoration** — usually the opening prayer in worship, when we express to God our wonder and praise for the mystery of who God is, and all the things God does and has done for us. It often explores God as Trinity, addressing God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer

and Sustainer of all creation. We offer to God honour and glory, our love and loyalty, as we gather together in God's holy presence.

**Confession** — often follows immediately after the prayer of adoration, recognizing before God and each other ways in which we fall short of God's purposes for our lives. We seek God's forgiveness for "sin" (the failings of humankind and the world) and for "sins" (the ways in which we as individuals harm each other, our own lives and the world we live in, betraying the love and loyalty we owe God.) Sometimes this prayer is led by one voice; another custom is to say it in unison.

**Illumination** (or Prayer for Understanding) — precedes the reading of Scripture and the sermon, seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit to understand God's Word as well as the Spirit's power to live out God's teaching

**Doxology** — usually a sung prayer of praise when the offering is presented to God, joining our voices to the voices of all creation and the communion of saints

**Dedication** — a prayer seeking God's blessing on the offering and dedicating the offering to God's purposes at work in the ministry and mission of the church.

**Thanksgiving and Intercession** (or Prayers of the People) — prayers which give God thanks for ways in which we encounter God's goodness in our lives, and which also seek God's attention and intervention in the life of the world and the lives of particular people in some kind of need. These prayers often include times for those in the congregation to speak their prayers for others, either aloud or in a time of silence. They may include responses said or sung by the whole congregation.

**Supplication** — this kind of prayer asks for God's assistance in some specific way and may be included as a line or two in the prayer of confession, or as part of the intercessions.

**The Lord's Prayer** — is regularly used in Presbyterian worship, repeated together as a way of affirming our unity with all Jesus' disciples, in our own congregation, in churches around the worship and throughout all generations. It may be spoken or sung, according to local custom. There are different versions of the Lord's Prayer in scripture and in the texts used in worship. Usually, each congregation has chosen one version that is used most frequently.

## **“DEBTS AND DEBTORS”?**

*Presbyterians often use a translation of the Lord’s Prayer which says, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Other churches use the version, “Forgive us our trespasses...” I have sometimes found myself insisting on “debts” when those trespassers go on without me! These two translations borrow on the different ways Matthew and Luke record the prayer in their Gospels, also drawing on the English usage of King James’ day in the 1600s. The “ecumenical version,” developed in the 1970s, prays “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” In my father’s church, they repeat that ecumenical version, though it was (and still is) a bit controversial. When he was in hospital, dying, I invited him to pray the Lord’s Prayer with me. Thinking an 80-year-old Presbyterian would say “debts and debtors,” I found myself out of sync once again. He prayed “sin and sinned against”! Just a wee reminder to check with each other about which version you’ll repeat together!*

Reflecting on all these different “voices” in our public prayers reminds us that our more personal prayers can draw on all these themes when we pray together. When you lead prayer with someone as an elder, you will recognize from conversation and the situations discussed which of these themes is appropriate on that occasion. Don’t feel you have to touch every one of these themes in every prayer but do include a range of expressions which address the breadth and depth of God’s relationship with each one of us.

The different ways of praying which we experience in public worship teach us other things as well.

- Sometimes prayer is led by one person with others joining in silently as they listen. Other times we repeat a familiar prayer together, like the Lord’s Prayer. In your role as an elder, you may use both these approaches, offering prayer on behalf of others and/or joining in the Lord’s Prayer (or another familiar prayer) together.
- In leading public prayer, it is important for the leader not to speak too fast, to give those joining silently the opportunity to take in and connect with the words just spoken. That’s why leaders often give a

few moments of silence during a prayer of intercession or confession, in order that those being led can focus their own thoughts and prayers. So, too, when we say familiar words together, it is important to set a pace that allows everyone to keep together, a reverent pace that respects the words we are offering to God. This is a good reminder for you as an elder, too. If you're nervous when you lead a prayer, you may rush. So take a deep breath to slow yourself down as you begin, and pause briefly when you complete a sentence or a thought. Allow the Spirit time to pray in you and those you lead.

- Some congregations invite worshippers to speak out a name or a concern in a moment of silence. This is something you can work into a time of prayer shared on an elder's visit, too. Be sure to leave enough silent time for someone to find the words they want to express their concern. A time of silence should last at least fifteen seconds, and thirty seconds is better. After thirty seconds of silence, it is likely that the person you're praying with has offered their thoughts to God without speaking aloud. Fifteen or thirty seconds doesn't sound very long. However, time out a silence that long in advance. It feels longer than you imagine. If leaders become uncomfortable in silence, they will rush ahead. Please give the Spirit time to pray within all those you are engaging in prayer. Learn to dwell in silence comfortably.
- Prayers in public worship vary in length. The prayers of thanksgiving and intercession can often take several minutes. In more private situations, a prayer does not have to be that long. You can focus on just the main topic or two of your conversation. A short prayer is no less sincere than a long one!
- Throughout a whole service of worship, the voices of prayer often address each person of the Trinity at some point, occasionally within the same prayer. In an inter-personal setting, you may find it more natural to address God simply, depending on the topics in your prayer. Don't worry about naming Father, Son and Holy Spirit in every prayer. The matters you are praying about, given the discussion you're having with someone, will often suggest how you address God. (More about addressing God in prayer later!)

# Public Prayer in our Congregation

- 1 | Think through the order for worship on a typical Sunday in your local congregation. How many of the “voices” of prayer are used regularly? Do you find one “voice” speaks for you more than others?
- 2 | Think about the different ways prayer is led in your congregation. Which way(s) of prayer leadership draw(s) you into prayer most effectively? What is it about that way of praying that really helps you connect to God?

## Prayer Lessons from Life Experience

When we first learned to pray, we likely began each prayer with the same name for God or the same phrase to get us started. This way of praying may still seem most familiar and, perhaps, best to us. Yet God is more mysterious than any single approach to prayer can embody, as we see in the variety of language offered to God in the Psalms. Our own personal prayer style can expand to help those we lead meet God in ways appropriate to their situation. Here are some ideas to consider:

- **Thou or you?** Are you most likely to address God as “thou” or “you” when you pray? In years past, “thou” and “thee” were commonly used both in public worship and private prayer. These words seemed very respectful, honouring God’s holiness. However, in the development of the English language, “thou” and “thee”

were originally terms of intimacy and familiarity (like “tu” would be in French or “du” in German.) These words were first intended to draw us closer to God! But now “thou” and “thee” often seem very formal and even a little distancing from God for some, especially younger people. Much language for prayer and praise now uses “you” for God. “You” is just as respectful as “Thou” once was. (Worth noting: Most people today don’t easily remember the correct form of thou, thee, thy and thine to use, except perhaps in the version of the Lord’s Prayer they memorized.) Whichever pronoun is most familiar in your own practice of prayer is likely best when leading others in prayer. Your comfort in praying will help someone else be comfortable.

■ **Names for God.** We are often taught a name for God to open our prayers when we are beginning our prayer life. “Lord” and “Heavenly Father” are two very common names used to address God in prayer, along with “God” as a name on its own. Yet ways of addressing God in Scripture are many and varied. Sometimes the situation raised in conversation with someone can suggest a different way to begin a prayer, lifting up an aspect of God’s nature that speaks to the concern you have been discussing. It is tempting to use the name you are most comfortable with personally. However, your pastoral responsibility as an elder can you broaden the prayer language you draw upon.

- ◆ You don’t have to begin every prayer addressing God with a name. You can open with a phrase that suggests a gift of God you are seeking for the pastoral situation you’ve entered into. For example, if someone is feeling anxious about something, you might begin “You embrace us with peace when we are worried, O God. Your presence calms us when we’re not sure which way to turn...” Or begin with an adjective that claims the gift needed from God. For example, “Wise God, guide N as she faces this choice...”
- ◆ If you sense an emotion resonating through a conversation, you might begin a prayer with a phrase that offers God the feeling. “Receive our joy at the birth of this new grandchild, Lord...” or “Stay with us in our sadness today, Lord...”

- ◆ Sometimes a story from scripture offers a good way to begin a prayer. For example, if you learn about a death someone is grappling with, you might pray “Jesus, you wept at the grave of your good friend. You share our tears as we remember N...” Or “God, you gave David the courage he needed to face a fierce enemy. Give N courage to ...” Lines from the psalms or from a familiar hymn may also offer fitting ways to express a feeling or seek a needed gift from God. “Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our paths. Guide N in this time of decision making...” (Psalm 119:105) “What a friend we find in you, Lord Jesus. Stay by N in this lonely time...”
- ◆ Check out the scripture references at the end of this book to see how they could be useful in your pastoral role as an elder. See if some of them suggest a few different ways to pray with people in your district.

■ **Use plain language.** When you pray out loud, use everyday speech. Form direct sentences in plain English, French or whatever language for pastoral care is used by your congregation. Complicated sentence structure will tangle your tongue and confuse someone who participates by listening. Avoid using formal theological terms, unless you are certain such language is fully understood by those with whom you’re praying. There is no need to impress anyone with elaborate speech. Because prayer is referred to as conversation with God, use conversational language!

■ **Leave room for God to respond as God wills.** Sometimes it’s tempting to add into a prayer your own opinion about how a situation should be resolved. For example, you may want to pray, “Please help N do this or that,” giving the advice *you* think is best for them. However, prayer invites God to work in our lives and so our prayers should allow God to work with us as God sees fit. God sees and knows more about every situation than any of us do, so honour the freedom of God’s Spirit to work in ways we cannot begin to imagine, to bring goodness out of even the toughest challenges.

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## A LIFE LESSON IN PRAYING

*When I was small, my vision started to fail. Based on a comment from my optometrist, I feared I'd be blind by the time I was 20. Having heard at Sunday School the stories about Jesus healing blind people, I began to pray each night that God would heal my eyes. In the morning, I was always disappointed when my vision was still blurry. One day when I was about ten, I woke up to the same disappointment—and I was mad. Mad at God! But as I started to complain to God, a new prayer opened up within me. "God, help me face whatever this day brings." That "new" prayer has travelled with me since that day, through many ups and downs, for over sixty years. God is good, even if we don't receive quite what we asked for!*

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The next reflection section invites you to practice forming different ways to open prayers as you imagine situations people in your district might be facing. Some people feel that spontaneous prayer is always the most authentic but having considered a few ways to approach prayer in advance will give you confidence. In a time of inter-personal prayer, or a situation that's new to you, you can prepare words that honour God and respond to a concern shared faithfully. The Holy Spirit works when we are in an immediate situation but also in the reflection we do in advance and the experience we develop praying on our own.

# Prayerful Preparation for my Elder's District

- 1 | Go over the names in your elder's district again and any notes you made about what you recall about the situations a family or individual has been facing. Jot down a phrase or an approach in prayer that you could use to open a short prayer with them in the situation(s) you remember discussing with them.
- 2 | Take a moment to consider different ways to open a prayer in the following situations:
  - a. A child or grandchild has just graduated
  - b. Someone has moved into a new neighbourhood or residence
  - c. Someone is waiting to hear about a diagnosis
  - d. Someone is home from surgery and is on the mend
  - e. News about the death of a friend or family member who lives far away has just been received
  - f. Someone is puzzled about a situation in the recent news
  - g. Seeking forgiveness for an action someone now regrets
  - h. Your local church is facing an important decision and together you are unsure which choice is best
- 3 | Imagine you have been invited to offer grace before sharing refreshments together while visiting someone's home. Do you have a memorized prayer before meals you always say? If so, how could you link this grace to another a prayerful sentence about something that's happening? If you usually pray spontaneously over a meal, consider how to include a prayer line or two about things you've been chatting about.

# Before, During and After Praying Together

## Preparing for an elder's visit

When you are preparing for a visit in your district, spend a few moments in prayer, thinking through what you know about the person or family you're calling on – and what you don't know. Consider any topics you want to raise on behalf of Session, any questions you've been mulling over. Seek God's guidance to give you an opening, the words you want to speak, and openness on the part of everyone present, so that the time together, whether long or short, is a meaningful connection between friends in Christ. If you are anxious in any way about this connection, hand your anxiety to God and give God thanks for the opportunity to develop this relationship in Jesus' name.

## NANCY'S FIRST PASTORAL CRISIS

*I was quite young when I was ordained, without much life experience. I well remember the day I learned a lovely woman in our congregation was dying. Her cancer had returned. As I headed to the hospital, I prayed the whole drive (eyes open, of course!) "God, what am I going to say? Give me the right words." At her bedside, I learned that she'd been given a prognosis of six months. She was stalwart—and I was shaking inside. When I asked if we could pray, she put her hand through the bed rails. I held her hand and words tumbled out. I sought God's comfort and strength but kept tripping over my tongue. When I said "Amen," she squeezed my hand, smiled and said, "It helps, you know." The testimony of a dying friend. Her witness gave me much more courage to pray with others, not to worry about my words so much, but to trust in God's presence and grace.*

## **When and where will you pray with someone?**

When you visit someone in their home, you can make an opportunity to pray together. Your visit may not be a long one and it is appropriate to ask a simple question towards the end of your time together, for example, "Shall we pray together?" or "Could I say a short prayer to thank God for this chance we've had to talk?" The first time of asking is often the hardest, but it is part of your responsibility as an elder to pray with and for people in the congregation. The second time you ask will seem much more natural.

The question will be most easily asked if you are seated together somewhere quiet (no TV or radio playing the background, cell phone turned off) and reasonably close together so you do not have to speak too loudly. As noted above, if your host offers refreshments, this can be an opportune moment to ask if you can bless the food as well as the conversation you've shared.

If you are visiting someone in hospital, your visit should be quite short. Sit close to the patient so you can speak gently and directly to them, even if that means asking someone else visiting at the same time to give you space. Again, prayer for healing or comfort can be formed in just two or three sentences and may be a kind and faithful way to end your visit. If someone is very ill or in a lot of pain, choose gentle language and use a soothing tone to express God's presence and comfort.

If someone you are visiting cannot communicate well, they may still appreciate your prayer. Simply call them by name and tell them you are going to pray. Offer a short prayer of blessing, seeking God's comfort and assuring them they are not forgotten by God or by friends in Christ in your congregation. You could even speak such a prayer quietly if the person is asleep or under medication, trusting that the Spirit will pray in them and with you.

Sometimes words from a familiar hymn can offer good words for prayer. If you are able to carry a tune, you could sing the verse that forms a prayer softly. For very aged people, or those with some forms of dementia, a familiar hymn may reach them with God's blessing in a way spoken words cannot. Someone may even sing along with you. *(This is a suggestion, of course, not intended to send you for singing lessons!)*

## What will you pray about?

### SOME ADVICE TO NANCY ABOUT PRAYER

*When I was developing this workbook, I had a service in a local seniors' residence. I decided to ask these wise, faithful souls the advice they'd give to elders praying with others. First thing: Listen! Pray about what you have just talked about together. Remember the conversation. Second thing: Use names. Pray for people who have been mentioned. Third thing: Don't go on and on. Three good tips from people who have had ministers and elders visit them for a combined total of more than 600 years!*

Someone who listens well can pray well with others. Don't go into a visit with a rehearsed prayer already in your mind. Listen to what concerns or gladness is mentioned as you talk. If you're not quite sure what someone means, ask a gentle leading question, "Could you say a little more?" If you hear something that surprises you, just say "Well, that surprises me." Such words encourage a bit more conversation. Listen for emotions, too—in the tone of voice as well as the choice of words. Still, it's good to check that you've picked up on the feeling accurately. "It sounds like you're feeling ... about that." Checking on your understanding can also lead to some further clarification. In pastoral conversations, we who visit must guard against assuming people are feeling the way we *would feel* if we were in their shoes. Even if we have experienced something similar, we are *not* in their shoes—so in prayer we want to honour what they are expressing, what they seek to offer God or ask from God. Listen carefully and caringly—and check out what you think you heard.

A good listener is also a good observer. In a conversation, watch how someone moves. Do they seem tense (often visible in facial expressions, stiffened shoulders or clenched hands). Watch for tears forming in the corners of someone's eyes or the need to swallow a lump in the throat. Give someone a bit of breathing space in such a tender moment. Anger will often show in the level of the voice but also in flushed cheeks or clenched hands or jaw. Check your observations as you would the conclusions you draw from what is spoken. "You seem a bit upset/angry/worried about..." followed by a pause for them to

confirm or clarify. The meaning of a smile can sometimes need elaboration, too. “You smiled when you said that. Say a little more.” These gestures of checking cues help establish trust, showing you’re really interested in understanding.

If a conflict becomes a topic of conversation, pay very close attention. Try not to take a side but show understanding. Ask gentle leading questions to bring out enough of the story so that you appreciate why someone is upset. It is not your role to resolve the conflict, not even if it’s something the Session should address eventually. Encourage the person you’re speaking with to address the conflict directly themselves, for example, by speaking to the person concerned if it’s safe and wise to do so, by writing a letter to Session about a church matter, by approaching the minister directly if the conflict involves him/her, or by continuing to pray for guidance. Avoid adding to conflict by offering your opinion, whether you agree or disagree with what has been stated. Instead, use the time of prayer to lay that concern before God and seek God’s guidance.

If you have had quite a deep conversation or touched on some very personal concerns, before the subject changes, it is appropriate to say, “Let’s ask God to guide you through...” Such prayers should lift up that particular concern in just a few short sentences and end by seeking God’s blessing on all of you. Again, such prayers do not have to be long, nor do you have to seek a specific response from God. But sharing a prayer together may encourage someone to keep seeking God’s support in whatever situation they’re facing.

Lots of people find remembering names a challenge, even in a fairly short conversation. If you’ve talked about someone and want to include them in a prayer, but can’t remember the name, check before you begin to pray. “I want to include your son in this prayer. Just remind me of his name, please.” (It is common for people to lose track of names in conversation, so don’t be embarrassed about asking. Better to ask than to use the wrong name.)

## **To touch or not for prayer**

The laying of hands is an ancient custom for prayer, especially in prayers for healing. Indeed, some people learn to pray together holding hands. However, how touch is received is a very sensitive matter, across different cultures and according to people’s life

experience. It is wiser for an elder *not* to initiate touch when you invite someone to pray with you, even if you are very comfortable offering someone a hand to hold. If someone puts out their hand for you to hold, you can decide if it is appropriate to take their hand, based on the setting and how well you know that person. As important as touch is to human well-being, it can be misinterpreted or confusing within a pastoral relationship.

## **Confidentiality and referral**

You should let those in your district know that you report in general terms on all your pastoral visits as part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada's *Leading with Care* best practice. However, the specifics of a pastoral conversation should remain confidential, not to be shared with anyone else unless you have checked directly with the person themselves. If your congregation prays for members by name in worship, or if there is a prayer circle that offers intercessions, ask directly during your visit if a name or a concern mentioned can be added to the prayer list. Prayer is never meant to be "gossip" within a community, alerting other people to something they may not have a right to know. When you report to Session on your visits, generalize what you say unless you have permission to offer detail.

You should also ask if someone would like you to bring their situation to the attention of the Minister of Word and Sacraments. This is especially important if you have been alerted to a serious situation where the minister's training in pastoral care can offer more sustained assistance. Sometimes people don't want to "bother" the minister with personal matters. But assure whomever you visit that their minister will want to know whatever they're facing and offer ongoing support. If they are reluctant for you to pass along their concerns, encourage them to speak directly to the minister.

## **Taking your leave**

Sometimes praying together seems like a good way to end a pastoral conversation, a way of handing to God the substance of any concerns raised and giving thanks for time shared together. But experienced pastoral visitors have found that sometimes sharing a prayer actually opens people up to add something very important for you to hear. So don't rush away. Once a prayer is concluded, return to your conversation to sum things up. Check to see if there's anything else they'd like to add. This is a good time to ask if something important

can be brought to the minister's attention. Make sure members of your district have your contact details and encourage them to keep in touch. Once it's clear there is nothing new or nothing more to discuss, assure them you will continue to hold them before God in prayer.

## **Continuing to pray about the conversation**

Sometimes we say "I'll pray for you" as a kind of acknowledgement of our life together in Christ. If you make this comment during your visit, be sure to keep up your commitment regularly. This will help you remember to follow up your pastoral connections with your district. Even if you don't say this out loud, do follow up your visit with your own prayers for the person or people you've connected with, raising what you learned to God, and seeking God's ongoing guidance for how you can support them.

## **WHEN NANCY LOST HER WORDS FOR PRAYER**

*I was deeply grief stricken when my father died. A few weeks after his funeral, a friend called to check in on me. After some conversation, she asked, "And are you still able to pray?" What a wise question. I realized I'd lost my words for prayer, so deep was my sorrow. I'd been listening to sad music to soothe my soul, but I wasn't practicing my familiar "holy habit." Her courage to ask that simple question made me realize I was missing God's comforting presence. I know my friend was praying for me, but I decided to use prayer books for a time and found the prayerful words of other wise and faithful people gradually helped me find my own words again.*

## **Suggestion: Keeping a prayer journal**

Spiritual directors sometimes suggest keeping a prayer journal. Making daily notes of your observations of God's goodness experienced that day, of names and situations prayed for, and of scripture reflected upon is a kind of faithful "discipline" which both reminds us of people we're concerned about (to keep lifting them up in prayer) and of signs of goodness around us and within us (God's goodness working in the world in ways hoped for and unexpected.) Keeping a prayer journal may help you remember things you want to follow up with members of your district the next time you call. It can

also be faithfully rewarding, as one means to focus on God's Spirit at work in our lives. If you keep a journal, make notations that are meaningful to you—an aid to your memory; but respect confidentiality and make notes in ways that don't reveal a specific person's concern if someone else happened to pick up your journal.

## Pray Without Ceasing

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).*

A *Catechism for Today* (developed by the PCC) says, "Prayer is a conversation with God, the offering up of our desires in the name of Christ, by the help of the Holy Spirit. It is confession of our sins and acknowledgement of God's mercy. Prayer seeks God's blessing and makes our requests known to God in the confidence that God hears and will answer. It is seeking, asking and accepting from God whatever we need. In words or the absence of words, prayer is openness to the presence of God."

As you develop your pastoral relationship with those in your elder's district, let prayer become that ongoing conversation with God. Brief sentences of prayer, prayed within yourself or aloud, keep you aware of God's partnership with you in your ministry—and your life. When praying is for you as simple as breathing out and breathing it, prayer will become a natural dimension of your interactions with those in your district. On your own you can give thanks for a conversation that went well. You can confess any "mistakes" you feel you made and ask God to repair any misunderstandings. If you remember something you wanted to say but forgot, let God know your intention—and ask for the opportunity to pick up that conversation again. Pray without ceasing, like breathing out and breathing in.

Another scripture to reflect on is found in Ephesians 3, Paul's benediction to the congregation he was addressing. His words are a hopeful benediction for your pastoral relationship and the prayers you offer with and for those who are in your care:

*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,*

*so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever (Ephesians 3.18–20).*

These words remind us that the power in prayer is God's. God is present in situations before we arrive. Your ministry as an elder is a part of the all-embracing love of God, which surpasses our knowledge and explanations, for sure. Trust that love in every encounter you have as an elder, and stay mindful of God's ability to accomplish more than any one of us can imagine, including working through our best practice and faithful diligence in serving Jesus Christ. Remember that you are not alone in your work as an elder. Yes, you may be the one "on the spot" in a visit. However, you are part of the Session of your congregation, and part of our Presbyterian connection in this denomination. More importantly, you belong to Christ and are part of his Body, the church, living and serving in the world God loves. How firm a foundation is that?!

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# Appendix of Scripture Texts for Various Pastoral Occasions

Reading scripture helps us to form a richer prayer life because it provides a language for expressing the depth of human experience and the breadth of God's extravagant love and provision for us. Whether you are praying alone or with others, using the divinely inspired words we've already been given is a simple and powerful way of communicating with God. There are scripture passages that can be used in prayer for most circumstances. In this section, you will find recommended scripture passages for common pastoral concerns you may encounter during elder's visits. Of course, you can also draw on passages that have been meaningful to you over the course of your life of faith.

There are many different translations of familiar scripture passages. Those presented below are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation, which is very commonly used in worship services and resources prepared by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Also feel free to use the version you are most familiar with, or the one cherished by those you are visiting.

**Psalm 23** — "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

## In Times of Need

**Psalms 73:26** — “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

**Romans 8:28** — “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

**Philippians 4:6** — “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

## In Times of Celebration

**Psalms 139:14** — “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.”

**Zephaniah 3:17** — “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”

**Psalms 41:1** — “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.”

## When One is Afraid

**Psalms 46:1** — “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

**Psalms 121:7–8** — “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

**Isaiah 43:1b** — “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

**Luke 2:10–11** — “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’”

## When One is Discouraged

**Psalms 61:1–2** — “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock which is higher than I.”

**Isaiah 26:3** — “Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you.”

**Isaiah 40:31** — “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.”

**John 8:12** — “I am the light of the world: whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

## When One is Facing Sickness

**Psalms 6:2** — “Be gracious to me, O Lord; for I am languishing: O Lord, heal me; for my bones are shaking with terror.”

**Psalms 23:4** — “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

**3 John 2** — “I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health—as it is well with your soul.”

**Romans 15:13** — “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

## When One Feels Rejected

**Psalms 27:10** — If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

**John 16:33** — I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!

**Colossians 1:11–12a** — May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ’s glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience

**Hebrews 12:3** — Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

## When Facing Grief

**John 11:25–26** — I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

**Romans 8:38–39** — For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**1 Thessalonians 4:13–14** — But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

## Thanksgiving and Support

**1 Peter 1:3–4** — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

**2 Corinthians 13:13** — The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

**Psalms 36:1** — O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

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# About the Author

**The Rev. Dr. Nancy Cocks** has been a minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for over 40 years, serving the denomination from coast to coast. Originally from Medicine Hat, Alberta, she went to high school and university in Saskatchewan. She did both her theological degrees at Knox College in Toronto. She has served pastoral charges in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. Her doctoral work explored the relationship between life experience and the expression of doctrine. She taught pastoral theology at Vancouver School of Theology and Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax).

Her research interests draw on her love of storytelling. Her first book, *Growing up with God* (Wild Goose Publications 2003), examined the role stories play in the spirituality of children and how children learn to pray. The interviews for that book involved congregations throughout Canada and led to her time spent with the Iona Community in Scotland. There, she deepened her love for Celtic prayer, reflected in her second book, *Invisible We See You* (Wild Goose Publications 2006). She spent almost four years in Scotland before returning to ministry in Canada. She has also published 16 books for children (now, sadly, out of print).

This workbook draws on her extensive experience offering lectures and workshops throughout Canada. Before retirement, she returned to her hometown and home church, St. John's Presbyterian Church in Medicine Hat, Alberta, where she concluded full-time ministry in 2017. She continues to develop worship material for The Presbyterian Church in Canada and for the Iona Community in Scotland.

## Images

The images in this resource are taken from the windows of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

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# Sources and Resources for Prayer

*There are many fine resources for prayer available, but a bibliography can grow outdated very quickly. Here are some authors and publishers to check out in a library, bookstore or online book seller. Also included are a few common devotional magazines that are still available, either online or by subscription.*

## Authors with Different Approaches to Prayer

David Adam was an English priest and long-time rector of Holy Island, Lindisfarne, who published many small prayer books following Celtic Christian patterns. Although he died in 2020, many of his books are still in print and offer a poetic approach to prayer, steeped in the mystery of the Trinity.

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest with roots in both the USA and Canada, who has explored centering prayer and the Benedictine tradition deeply. She has many published works which help the reader try the practice of centering prayer, a meditative approach to praying through silence and focused listening.

Walter Brueggemann, renowned scholar of the Hebrew Bible, has also published helpful books on the psalms and how to pray with them, a book of prayers collected from his classroom teaching, and very thoughtful meditations on grief.

Susan Palo Cherwien is an American author who writes prayerful, poetic reflections and hymns which fit themes in the Christian year and also a wide range of theme from faith and life.

*Lectio divina* is a long-established prayer tradition which draws on the scriptures in prayerful meditation and holy listening. Though established within the Jesuit order, this form of prayer is now practiced widely through many Christian traditions. If you type *lectio divina* into any search engine, you will find many resources. Libraries may also have print resources available through a subject search.

Ted Loder, who died in 2021, was an American Methodist who published many collections of prayers, both poetic and profound, filled with whimsy and wonder. His work is still in print as of 2021.

John Philip Newell is a Canadian author, now based in Scotland, who studies the Celtic Christian tradition and has published both prayer books and theological studies of Celtic theology.

Eugene Petersen, an American Presbyterian minister and theologian who died in 2018, remains a widely published author whose spiritual insights and approaches to prayer are deeply nourishing. He has been widely celebrated as author of *The Message* translation of the Bible, and his collected works offer titles which connect prayer with Scripture.

Joyce Rupp is an American Catholic sister whose writing on prayer and spirituality spans decades. Her bestselling book, *Praying our Goodbyes*, has been reprinted, offering a fine resource for conversations that touch on experiences of loss and grief.

Esther de Waal is an English author who explores both the Celtic and Benedictine practices of daily prayer. She is an active spiritual director and has many titles in print.

## Daily Devotional Material

There are many sources which support a regular time of Scripture reading, reflection and prayer. Some common titles include *These Days*, *Daily Bread*, *Today*, *The Upper Room*, and *Pray Now*. They come in different formats, some as published booklets, others as on-line resources. Denominations, including The Presbyterian Church in Canada, often provide daily themes for prayer or access to a short reflection or blog post to focus prayer. Ask friends what resources they find helpful and check them out!

## Publishers

Augsburg Fortress Press, an Evangelical Lutheran publishing house, has excellent devotional materials available, for order and online. It also has good resources for children's spiritual development.

[augzburgfortress.org](http://augzburgfortress.org)

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, offers a wide range of devotional resources, including both classic texts and new releases. It offers good resources for children's spiritual development.

[eerdmans.com](http://eerdmans.com)

The Presbyterian Church in Canada offers the daily Prayer Partnership, inviting us to pray for many different people, situations and themes.

There are also worship resources available for download, following the lectionary and also exploring different important themes.

[presbyterian.ca](http://presbyterian.ca)

Wild Goose Publications is the publishing wing of the Iona Community, based in Glasgow. It offers a wide selection of prayer books and worship resources, some available for download as e-books, others for mail order purchase, produced by an international network of authors. Both Nancy's books are carried by Wild Goose Publications.

[ionabooks.com](http://ionabooks.com)

*There are so many books available it is impossible to list all the worthy resources. Check with your minister and your church library for suggestions of books, blogs or e-resources to help you develop your own prayer life as well as your ministry praying with others.*



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