

Pathways to Praying with Teens

Pathways to Praying with Teens

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*To my mother, Cecylia,
to Beth, Jude, Barbara, Andre, Pat,
and all the many women
who taught me how to pray
and who nurtured my spirituality.*

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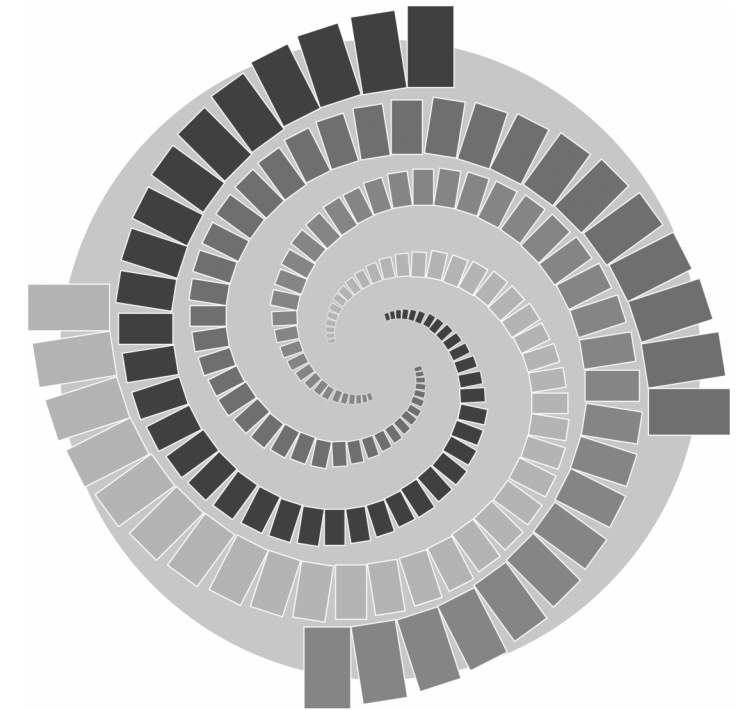
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Introduction



*God . . .
are you there?
I've been taught
and told I ought
to pray.
But the doubt
won't go away;
yet neither
will my longing to be heard.
My soul sighs
too deep for words.
Do you hear me?
God . . .
are you there?*

This excerpt from a poem by Ted Loder sums up how many teens feel about prayer, and for that matter how many adults feel about it also. Prayer is something we are taught to do, something we are told to do, something we need to do, yet something that can be so very hard to do.

When I ask teens, "What is prayer?" the most common response is, "Talking to God." Yet it isn't all that simple. We need to know how to

approach God, how to figure out what to say, and then how to listen for the response.

Put Away the Paste

Prayer cannot be pasted onto anyone's life. It needs to take root and grow.

Prayer is a process. It cannot be a once-and-done event. I have seen high school religion teachers squeeze in a three-hour retreat to fulfill a course requirement and youth group leaders throw together a quickie youth Mass to claim a spiritual component to their program. These events hardly ever make the grade as real prayer experiences. Prayer experiences for young people need to be well thought out and planned. They need to have their own integrity and yet be incorporated into a variety of activities.

The starting point for prayer with teens is right where they are at in their spirituality. You may have to begin slowly; then again, you may discover that the teens are already close to God in their own way. Never assume that young people aren't in touch with God. They may know God in ways that you do not.

Prayer Is a Verb

Alla Renée Bozarth is well known for her poem "God Is a Verb." I want to borrow from her analogy but change it to say, "Prayer Is a Verb."

Verbs are active. They do not sit around all day waiting for nouns to do something. Get the young people involved in planning prayer, leading prayer, and participating in the prayer experience. They may need some guidance at first, but they really get into it when they have permission to be creative. The times I have seen teens most excited by prayer is when they have been involved in the entire experience—start to finish.

Have some fun; use your imagination. Avoid the temptation to always copy a ready-made prayer service, just switching the readings around now and then. Try new resources, root around in your supply closet, listen to the Top 10 on the radio, and before you know it, you will be finding prayer ideas in all sorts of places.

Prayer is a way for young people—and everyone—to reach out and touch God in their life. It is a bridge between God and God's people on earth. Be a bridge builder.

Be Open to Change

Prayer does not change God; rather, it changes us, who offer the prayer.

So often we aim our "gimmie" prayers at God, expecting God to do something or change something for us, and then we get angry when God doesn't come through. Teens do this too. Quite a few times I have heard the refrain, "Well, I prayed to God, but nothing happened."

But while prayer does not always change the situation one is praying about, prayer can indeed change the person. While you are helping teens discover this, you will, no doubt, also see change in yourself. A good prayer life is ongoing, and change brought about by prayer, likewise, is ongoing. We need to help teens hope for, look for, and see this effect of prayer in themselves and in the world around them, especially in their relationships with others.

What Is Inside This Book?

Each of chapters 1 through 11 in this book focuses on a particular form of prayer and is divided into four parts: an overview, guidelines, prayer starters, and a complete prayer service.

The *overview* presents my experience with the form of prayer, followed by *guidelines* for using the form.

The *prayer starters* are ideas to get you started in planning your own prayer experiences. You can use one of the prayer starters and expand upon it or combine two or more as building blocks for a whole prayer service.

The *complete prayer service* serves both to illustrate the form of prayer described in the chapter and to provide you with a ready-made prayer service if you wish to use it.

Chapter 12, on miscellaneous prayer, is an exception to the format of the other chapters, offering an array of creative prayer suggestions that don't seem to fit in any of the other categories in this book.

Since all of the prayer forms in the book have some aspects in common, you will likely see prayer starters for some forms that can easily be used for other forms. You will notice, too, that the prayer service illustrating the use of one prayer form always includes other forms of prayer.

The perspective of prayer that I have in offering the variety of prayer forms in this book is broad. It encompasses the actual act of praying as well as experiences that have the potential to move one to prayer.

Prayer Is an Adventure

Throughout the writing of this book, I have kept with me a "prayer idea" journal made by some teens attending a retreat. It became special as I weaved notes from the journal into the pages and chapters of this book, but it was special also because of the way the teens had decorated it. They had cut out words and pictures that describe prayer as talk, sacred places, surprising, reaching out and blessing someone, rejoicing, looking toward the horizon, family, news, the Bible, ahead of its time, nurturing, and adventure. All of these words and symbols helped enrich the meaning of prayer as I wrote. But the one that I hope comes through the strongest in the prayer forms that I describe for you is the word *adventure!*

Adventure can be defined as an exciting and remarkable experience. That is what I hope these prayer forms provide for you and your young people.

Are you unsure of whether you have the faith it takes to embark on this adventure of youth and prayer? Let's borrow the three tests of faith from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* to find out:

Indiana Jones has climbed mountains, outsmarted treasure hunters, and even endured snakes to find the precious treasures he seeks. You might say that you aren't impressed because he hasn't spent an entire weekend with a youth group or taken a fourteen-hour bus trip to a teen youth convention.

Yet in his quest for the Holy Grail, the chalice of Christ, Indy must meet three tests of faith. These tests of faith hold a lot of truth for anyone who works with youth and certainly anyone who prays with them and for them.

The First Test of Faith

The first test of faith is *The Penitent Person Will Pass*. Indy learns that kneeling before God is the only way to keep his head while sharp blades swirl around him.

When approaching prayer with youth, we must first remember that God is the focus of prayer and ask God's guidance. We need to be humble and allow God to work through us in reaching out to the teens. Work on your own prayer life before helping the teens work on theirs. You and God together can do a much better job than if you try to go it alone.

The Second Test of Faith

The second test of faith is *Walking in the Footsteps of the Word*. Indiana Jones has great motivation to follow in the footsteps of God's word: he is fearful of falling into a ravine. But walking in the footsteps of the word of God is advice that can be well taken by you as you approach youth and prayer. If you yourself fall in love with the Scriptures, that love is sure to be contagious in working and praying with the teens.

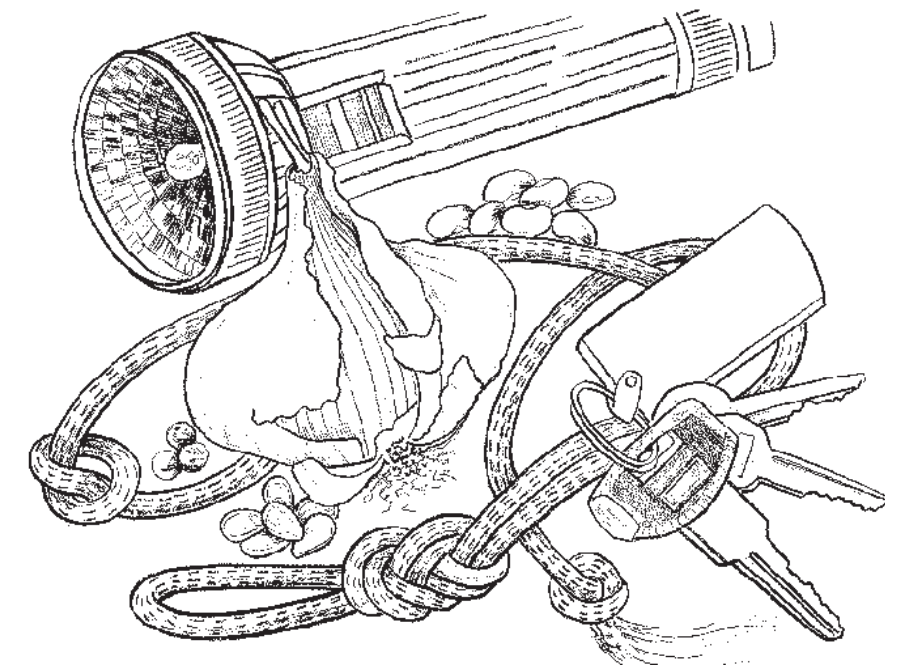
The Third Test of Faith

The third test of faith is the hardest challenge. Near the end of Indy's adventure, a giant chasm is the only thing left between him and the Holy Grail. His only choice is to pull strength from within himself and take a giant *Leap of Faith*. You can read hundreds of books and spend hours in preparation for a prayer experience with young people, but eventually you just have to trust yourself, and your God, and just do it.

But don't worry.
You have it in you.
Simply close your eyes and . . . jump!

1

Symbols: Allowing Images to Speak to Us and for Us



Overview

Symbols have a power just waiting to be tapped in youth ministry, especially in the creation of exciting, inviting prayer experiences. Praying only with words and thoughts can be abstract and uninvolved; using symbols and images can stir up the imagination, and interest and excite us. Young people are used to having symbols do this for them. They experience symbols and images in almost every place they look—church, school, home, and all the forms of media in popular culture.

One of my first experiences of the richness of symbols in prayer occurred during a master's seminar in college. The professor asked everyone in the widely diverse class to take out an index card and a pack of crayons. She said she would give us a word and we were to draw the first thing that came into our mind. The word was "God." The surprising thing was that I didn't draw a cross or a heart or anything quite ordinary, but a giant burst of fireworks.

Later, when I thought about it, I realized that I saw God as both powerful and beautiful. What was more amazing was the incredible

array of symbols that had come forth from the group. I now use a variation of this activity with some of my retreat groups. Their symbols tell me a lot about where they are at in their spirituality.

One of my favorite activities is to give teens some clay and see where their imagination leads them. When expressing their view of God in this medium, there is rarely duplication, even in a large group. The teens laugh at first, then become intrigued. They especially like the opportunity to look at all the other creations.

Using symbols in prayer can

- open a window to help teens experience traditional church symbols in a new way or expand on the symbols' meaning
- help teens discover the God-centered messages hidden in the symbols in popular culture
- give teens permission to use their imagination and allow them to approach God in different ways
- put surprise and a sense of fun into prayer experiences, when teens often expect the ordinary, formula prayer services
- enable teens to think and experience things in a manner that does not require words

Recently, I went on a retreat for myself. (Retreat directors should really do this more often.) While the entire retreat was well done, the most moving part was a foot-washing ceremony. I had read the scriptural account of foot-washing (John 13:1–14) before and had seen it done in liturgy, but I had never experienced it myself. Especially moving was the fact that one of my mentors in ministry was the one who washed my feet. No words can express the impact that the experience of this symbol has had on my understanding of my ministry.

Guidelines

1. Choose the symbols first and then build a prayer service around them, so that music, prayer, and scriptural readings support the symbols rather than take away from them.
2. Allow the teens to choose or identify their own symbols from popular culture. Stay in touch with youth culture and the symbols found there that can teach us.
3. Do not use too many symbols at one time. This can be confusing and blur the symbols' power. If you do use more than one symbol, make sure the symbols work together, or are tied together by the theme of the prayer service or a scriptural reading.
4. Never directly tell the teens what a symbol means. Symbols are meant to be experienced, not defined.
5. Challenge the teens to find more than one meaning or different levels of meaning for each symbol.
6. Offer opportunities in large or small groups for the young people to share the insights they get from experiencing the symbols. Be prepared for some surprises.
7. Make sure you tell the teens that it is okay if they do not find the same meaning in a symbol as others do. Everyone is different and sees symbols in different ways.

8. Encourage the teens to experience symbols with as many senses as will respond. Let the young people not only see a symbol but touch it, listen to it, smell it, and in some cases taste it as well.

Sometimes a symbol can touch someone in a way that little else can. I remember one young man who did his best during an entire overnight retreat to fight everything we did. He was uncooperative and often disruptive. Even his classmates grew tired of his antics. He would often wait to catch my eye before doing something inappropriate.

Just when I felt like I was at the end of my rope, he became fascinated by a simple prayer using a marble. Not only did he ask me all about it, but a few weeks later I received an envelope in the mail from him—with a marble inside.

Prayer Starters

1. Pass a simple wooden cross around a circle of youth gathered for prayer. Dim the lights. Ask the teens each to hold the cross for a minute, to touch it and look at it. Ask them to share one word that comes to mind when they think of Christ crucified.
2. Use an evergreen branch as a springboard for prayer on the theme "God's love is everlasting." A small piece of the branch may later be used to bless the young people with holy water.
3. If several different groups of young people are gathering together for prayer, ask each group to bring some holy water from their church. Gather the holy water in a large bowl as a sign of unity in Christ. The young people can bless themselves or each other with the water.
4. Use a spider plant as part of a prayer service based on the passage "I am the vine, and you are the branches" (John 15:5). When the spider plant grows, it forms complete miniature plants attached to the main one. We too are independent yet part of the main vine, Jesus Christ.
5. At the start of a penance service or a talk on sin, give each person a piece of rope tied in many knots. To talk about the effect of sin on the community, use a single long rope tied in many knots.
6. For the topic of the value of material possessions versus the value of personal talents, ask each person to bring a prized possession from home and contrast it with a personal talent or skill. Or take a VCR, a CD player, a Walkman, designer jeans, and the like, and pile them on one side of the room. Place a candle and a crucifix on the other side.
7. Start a prayer service completely in the dark. Read scriptural passages about light and faith, increasing the light in the room with each reading. This can be done with a number of candles or various types of lamps or flashlights.
8. Give each person a seed to hold while reading and reflecting on the parable of the sower and the seed (Mark 4:1–9).
9. Ask the teens to leave their shoes outside the door before entering a room for a prayer service on homelessness or any other theme for which you want them to "walk in the shoes of another."

10. Ask each person to wear a mask for a prayer service in October, near Halloween. Challenge the teens to “take off their mask” at a prayer service on “being yourself.”
11. Create a giant banner with a picture of an hourglass and the saying “Now is the time for God.” Ask each member of your group to sign his or her name on a small circular sticker. During prayer, each person can come forward and place the sticker on the hourglass part of the banner as a promise to make time for God in his or her life.
12. Plan a prayer service about dealing with tough times, centering around the saying “Life is like an onion: you peel off one layer at a time, and sometimes you cry.”
13. Choose one symbol and challenge different groups of teens to plan a prayer service based on it. Combine the best ideas from each group into one prayer service.
14. Ask each person to take an item from their pocket or desk. Spread out all the items on the floor or on a large table and see what prayers result from everyone’s meditating on common objects.
15. During Advent, ask the teens to cut out a paper ornament in the shape of an object that represents themselves and then to write a prayer on the ornament. Have them place their ornament on an evergreen tree during the prayer of the faithful at liturgy.
16. Collect several objects that represent different countries. During a prayer for world peace, remember each country and its people by name as an object is placed before the altar.
17. Borrow a giant ring of keys from the parish janitor for a prayer service on finding “the keys to the Kingdom of God.” When the teens leave, give each one a construction-paper key that says, “Jesus is the key.”
18. Give each person a large rock at the start of a reconciliation service based on the passage “I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26, NRSV).
19. Invite a priest who works with people who are hearing impaired to come and celebrate Mass in sign language. Teach the teens how to sign a prayer, perhaps the Lord’s Prayer.
20. Pray the Lord’s Prayer, stop after the phrase “Give us this day our daily bread,” and break homemade bread with each other.
21. Place a bowl of M&M’s in the center of the prayer space. Ask each person to take a handful and share a reflection on individuality and how it is possible to be different and yet the same.
22. Share with the teens the significance of prayer shawls in the Jewish faith. During a prayer service, ask the teens to come forward one at a time, place a shawl on their shoulders, and lead the group in prayer.
23. During an affirmation service, sprinkle a little bit of salt in each person’s hand and say, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13, NRSV).
24. Use the sign of the cross as the center of a prayer service. Divide the prayer service into four parts: “In the Name of the Father,” “And of the Son,” “And of the Holy Spirit,” and “Amen.”

25. Try to borrow an old stop sign from the department of transportation in your area, or use a life-size one you’ve created yourself. Place the stop sign in the center of your circle for a prayer service on things that stop us from getting closer to God.

Prayer Service “Prayer in a Backpack”

Featuring the Use of Symbols

In addition to symbols, other prayer forms found in this prayer service are music, quiet prayer, scriptural prayer, and shared prayer.

Themes found in this prayer service are journey, discipleship, and discernment.

Supplies

Ten index cards; a pen; a hole punch; a ball of string; a Walkman; a watch; a piece of jewelry; a mirror; a teddy bear; a dollar; scissors; a calculator; a backpack; a small table; road maps; white paper; glue; light green paper; the song “Come and Journey with Me,” by David Haas; a Bible; pencils; a recording of “Do You Know Where You’re Going To?” by Diana Ross; a tape player or CD player; a basket

Preparation

Write each of the following “backpack prayers” on an index card and attach it with string to the symbol designated in brackets following the prayer.

1. “Lord, help us to tune out the many distractions in our lives and find quiet to listen to you.” [Walkman]
2. “Lord, help us to slow down the hectic pace we set. Teach us how to make time for you.” [Watch]
3. “Lord, keep us from wanting more and more possessions and putting things before people.” [Piece of jewelry]
4. “Lord, help us to accept your life plan for us instead of always telling you where we want to go and be.” [Map]
5. “Lord, help us to look inside each person for you instead of always being concerned about outward appearances.” [Mirror]
6. “Lord, give us the courage to set aside our insecurities and be willing to take risks in order to follow you.” [Teddy bear]
7. “Lord, help us to realize that the things of real value in life are not measured by how much they cost.” [Dollar]
8. “Lord, help us to set aside any grudges or petty jealousies that tangle up our hearts. Show us that you are the tie that binds.” [Ball of string]
9. “Lord, help us to cut out our bad habits and dependencies and learn how to depend only on you.” [Scissors]
10. “Lord, help us not to put facts and figures before faith. Teach us to believe even when we cannot see.” [Calculator]

Place the symbols and cards in a backpack and put the pack on a small table in the center of the prayer circle, where all can see it.

Cut road maps into 4-by-4-inch pieces and glue a 3-by-3-inch piece of white paper into the center of each map piece, to provide space for the teens to write a petition.

Make a copy of the closing prayer for each person. As a background for the words, photocopy a road map on light green paper using a light exposure setting.

If your available songbooks do not include the closing song, find the song elsewhere, write for copyright permission, and include the words on the sheet with the closing prayer.

Ask for volunteers to read the backpack prayers, but do not let them remove the symbols from the backpack or read the prayers ahead of time.

Ask a teen to prepare to do the scriptural reading.

Give each person a pencil, a map piece, and a green prayer sheet as she or he arrives for prayer.

Procedure

Call to prayer

Opening song: “Do You Know Where You’re Going To? (Theme from *Mahogany*)” by Diana Ross

Reading: Mark 10:17–27 (the rich man)

Pause for quiet reflection

Backpack prayer: Invite each volunteer to pull a symbol and its attached card from the backpack, hold the symbol so all can see what it is, and then read the prayer found on the card.

If time permits, ask the teens to think of other symbols that could have been included in the backpack and to write their own accompanying prayers.

Road map petitions: Request that each person write a brief prayer of petition on their map piece, asking God to guide them on the journey of life ahead. When everyone has finished, direct them to place the petitions in a basket.

If your group has access to a chapel, place the basket of map petitions in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament and ask the teens to stop in each day for a week and pray one of the petitions.

Closing prayer: To close the prayer service, ask everyone to read the following prayer:

Lord, help us to accept your invitation to “come and follow me.”
Shield us from doubt, so we never put anything or anyone before
you.

Help us to unpack all the things
that put distance between you and ourselves.

Guide us on our journey
so we may follow in your footsteps
on the way to your Father.

Amen!

Closing song: “Come and Journey with Me,” by David Haas