

Strategies for Praying and Spiritual Formation with Children and Adolescents

Lee Yates

(LifelongFaith Associates, 2018)

Acts 3 includes a powerful story of healing but it begins with the spiritual discipline of prayer. Peter and John are headed to the Temple to pray at the appointed hour. This bit of information has little to do with the story but gives us some insight into the commonality of “praying the hours” among God’s people. The roots of the practice are in Deuteronomy, with the Jewish community being called to remember God in waking and going to sleep. It expands to match the times of sacrifice in the temple, and found structured lives of monastic communities. Every three hours, the community would stop to pray, starting at 6 am, and continuing around the clock.

This might seem extreme in our world today, but some of the first faith practices taught to children are prayers for waking up and going to bed. We teach children “God is great, God is good” as a prayer of thanks for food. Many young children “say their prayers” at times that are not too far off from the 6 am to 9 pm portion of the monastic cycle. Most of these prayers are recited rhymes shared with folded hands and bowed heads. Over the years, liturgical prayers will become familiar to some, and children will often grow accustomed to an older family members tone and attitude of prayer at family feasts.

Somewhere along the journey, children find their own words and their own style. Some will follow the familiar practice of their childhood while others will express themselves in new ways. Some stop folding their hands and begin spreading their arms. Some stop looking down and lift their heads up. Some are content with a humble bow while others will pour their prayers out through music or dance. We have to be careful not to speak of prayer in terms that are too limiting.

Beyond the diverse prayer practices of Christians around the world, we must also recognize the development of a prayerful attitude. Christians are invited to a way of life, grounded in prayer, that allows the world to be seen through the lenses of our personal spirituality. Personal decision making processes, the way we view others, and how we respond to sudden life change or disruptions are often indicative of how prayer fits into our daily life. More than keeping a prayer schedule, we hope that prayer becomes a reflexive response to blessings and challenges that arise in daily life. What one person experiences as a gut reaction might be understood by another as guidance of the Spirit. Where one person might offer a hug of support, another might also offer to pray for or with another in need.

Developing a prayerful approach to life begins with prayer habits and experiences. While children and youth will approach these differently, the participation in prayer is fundamentally the same. We cannot apply what we have not experienced or practices. Creating opportunities for children and youth to experience prayer practices is fundamental to their spiritual growth. These experiences should range from structured rituals, to personal expressions. Similarly, prayer experiences should range from communal to personal and private petitions. Teaching a topic as broad as prayer requires diversity and creativity in tension with repetition and tradition.

Howard Thurman, mentor to many in the Civil Rights movement, said this about prayer: *If God's home is in you and your home is in God, then prayer is God calling to God; a hunger deep within your heart, calling out to God; and our job is to clear away anything that keeps God from talking to God.*

While we are shaping the spiritual foundation of children and youth we should always remember that they already have a relationship with God. Even the unchurched have an innate spirituality and an experience of something beyond themselves for which they simply lack language. Children have a relationship with God that is different from adults but none the less authentic. We are helping grow and shape the experiences of young people rather than giving them something they lack. We are passing on language and practices to help grow what is innate within all God's created peoples.

Prayer: Five Settings

Growing in faith as an individual

Most of our prayers are personal. If we add up all our worship experiences we will still not come close to the private prayer time we have experienced, even if we didn't know we were praying. "God help me." "O' Lord, how can this happen?" "Please, someone be there for that family." We often express prayer in reflexive ways. Others have intentional prayer practices with devotions, blessing of meals, and other traditions. These prayer experiences are core to who we are, and while shaped by the worshiping community around us, they are very clearly ours. Teaching young people to pray goes beyond taking them to worship and hoping something rubs off on them. Teaching prayer is more than helping them memorize a couple of liturgical prayers. Personal prayer is something we all do as our hearts reach out and long for God at different stages of our life. Our job is to help children be intentional about this experience and deepen their connection with God.

Growing in Faith with Peers

One of the most awkward prayer experiences for youth can be with peers. Children tend to assume everyone else sees the world the way they do, and differences are met with more curiosity than judgment. As they grow older, the deeply personal nature of spirituality and the inherent insecurity of adolescents, makes faith conversations more complicated. Still, prayer experiences with peers can be powerful. In organized groups at Church, camps, or faith-based clubs, children and youth are offered safe opportunities to express their spirituality. Praying together outside these groups proves more difficult, but such relationships and experiences can be very powerful.

While there are libraries filled with books about how to do peer-based ministry with children and youth, we should look beyond the controlled program environment to imagine how prayer and spirituality can be part of their lives together, without adult leadership. This leaves us with the great challenge to equip children and youth (as well as their families) with tools for creating prayerful relationships or prayer experiences with peers. It is in casual time with peers that young people, especially youth, talk more openly about their own differences with parents' beliefs, and have the potential to shape each other's faith experience in profound ways. It is also in the midst of peer groups that youth will be pressured to make choices that will test their character and impact their future. It is important to help them make God part of their relationships and these critical moments.

Growing in Faith with My Family

While personal prayer practices often start with family examples, there is another level of family prayer. Prayer can be part of family traditions and can help bind the family in times of change or challenge. Prayer can be a common experience, even when everyone's days are very different. Prayer can be a trust builder and community connector in a fast-passed world that never stops changing.

Like individual prayer, family practices may seem obvious, and intentionality is key. Being intentional with planned prayer practices increases the likelihood of prayer being part of more reflexive decision making. A family that has no experience praying together may find it difficult to pray together when they really need it. If we have not prayed at dinner, doing so at the death of a pet may seem awkward or even impossible. A family that has taken intentional time in prayer to bless the first day of school will have an easier time gathering for prayer in a crisis.

Equipping family prayer practices can be tricky. You don't want to be perceived as dictating or judging. The reality is that the home-life of many families lacks marks of their Christianity. Consider holding a series of "family meals" or workshops to explain, practice, and coach the prayer practices described. Communicate with families afterwards with reminders, resources, and encouragement. Focus on the practices they keep rather than the ones they skip or miss. In the end, you will not be present when these practices take shape in a family's life. You are their coach and their accountability partner. Don't try to control, but make sure you show interest in their progress.

Growing in Faith with Intergenerational Faith Community

We are becoming more and more aware of how important multigenerational experiences are in the life of any Church. More specifically, it is clear that children and youth grow in faith most effectively when engaged in intergenerational relationships beyond the family. While a Church meal or game night can be a good way to build these relationships, prayer is a sacred experience that deepens or solidifies the connection between Christians of different ages. For children, we are looking at how to connect them with older adults of various generations. For youth, we need to look at both those who came before them and those younger members of the community already looking up to them.

This part of a child or youth's prayer life can be more structured by the local congregation and there are more opportunities for programming. Still, we must remember that the majority of life is lived beyond the confines and structure of the Church. To be most effective, ministry must reach people where they live, work, learn, and play. Intergenerational relationships can begin at Church but, at their best, evolve to be part of a person's life. This is as true with prayer as it is with other aspects of intergenerational life.

Growing in Faith in the World

The world beyond our congregations and families will slowly take up more and more time and attention in the lives of our children and youth. Their experience of the larger world will slowly expand into neighborhoods and communities and eventually include the global community. Prayer is a great way to help children explore that world. Prayer invites us to have empathy and compassion for those who are different and offers a first step to solidarity with people whose needs surpass our own and call us to be

voices for justice. Prayer is the root of our Church's engagement in the world so it is important to help the next generation find the path from prayer to service while they are children and youth.

Prayer Practices

The following practices are expressions of prayer. Some are very basic and may seem obvious. Some may be things you are already doing. Our personal experiences and preferences will dictate which seem familiar and which seem foreign. Some are forms of self-expression while others are more reflective. Some are more artistic while others are more meditative. All of these practices offer an opportunity for children and youth to connect with God and hear God speaking within them.

1. Prime Examples	Younger and Older Children
2. Prayer Shelf (or Box)	Younger and Older Children
3. Prayer Journal	Younger and Older Youth
4. Mind Clearing	Younger and Older Youth
5. Prayer-toons	Younger and Older Children
6. Prayer Pauses	Young Children and Older Children
7. Prayer Cards	Children
8. Neighborhood of Prayer	Children
9. Grand-prayers	Older Children
10. Prayer Partners	Older Children and Youth
11. Making Prayer Personal	Growing from Children to Youth
12. Home and Away	Growing from Children to Youth
13. Highs and Lows	Growing from Children to Youth
14. Milestone Moments	Growing from Children to Youth
15. School Blessing	Growing from Children to Youth
16. Praying Around the World	Children and Youth
17. Faith Mentors	Children and Youth
18. Prayer Posts	Younger and Older Youth
19. Looking for God	Youth
20. Prayer Exchange	Youth
21. Headline Prayers	Youth

Younger and Older Children

1. Prime Examples

Personal prayer practices are often mimicked or copied from watching others. Helping young children develop personal prayer habits is best done by allowing them to watch us. The primary way to teach children to pray is to allow them to see the adults closest to them praying. That means the best way we can help children pray is to get their parents to pray. For some adults, this may be the motivation they need to rekindle their own spiritual disciplines. Whether we count hours in a prayer-a-thon, or give prizes for the number of consecutive days adults pray, we need to encourage them to pray remind them to allow their children to see them praying. You can give parents gold stars or merit badges. Whatever it takes, to get them praying, it is worth the effort.

Often, the reason adults give for not praying is similar to their reason for not talking to children about God or faith: they don't feel like they know enough. Through encouragement, reminders, and assurance that there is no wrong way to pray, we need to get our parents and grandparents to be prayer-models for our children. Adults need to invite children to sit, kneel, walk, or stand with them. However they pray, adults need to do so and allow children to bear witness. To equip parents, consider having workshops on prayer during children's programs, or having a parent-child prayer time before or after other events.

While seeing adults pray will be received differently at different ages, is as important at two years old as it is for the sixteen-year-old. Young children will mimic and youth will look at such practices as affirmation that adults are sincere. Youth are developmentally predisposed to test the authenticity of things around them. If adults are sincere in their faith practice, youth will take their example much more seriously and be less skeptical of their motives.

The prayer life of a child's family makes God real and develops trust as a family. One day, the example children and youth see might become their daily habit. One day, this example might be the comforting image of faith that they emulate when seeking God's presence. One day, they will have their own words, petitions, and style of prayer but the root of their practice can be traced back to those they watch pray. If they only people children see pray are leaders at Church in formal settings, then that is where prayer will stay. For children to make prayer part of their daily lives, it must be seen in their daily lives.

2. Prayer Shelf (or Box)

Children often need something more tactile to help them connect to bigger concepts and their relationship with God is no exception. Setting up a focal shelf or a collection box can be a great prayer aid. You can help younger children collect items that make them think of God to keep on their shelf, place pictures of people who are important to them, or place items to help them remember a special event. As they get older, they can add to their shelf, choosing new items or changing other items on their shelf. This is a practice with a wide range of application and adaptation based on their space or family traditions. This can be started as a craft at Church, allowing time and space for children to decorate a cloth to cover their shelf, or a box to collect their prayer reminders.

Parents are an important partner in this project because they will be the ones assisting the child with it at home. While children will need help setting up their prayer shelf or box, they get to choose what goes in and how it is used. Parents can be great partners, reminding children to collect items or asking questions about the items children have placed in their prayer space.

Some children will have very clear ideas on what they collect and keep while others may surprise you with what treasures they choose to include. Coach parents to be mindful of the child's ownership of the project. While children may invite adults to be part of their prayerful collecting, everyone should remember this is intended to be their project. On nights when children have a hard time sleeping or days they are upset about something, parents can encourage them to visit their box or shelf to remember how God has always been with them and always will be. They might even suggest they put something in their prayer space to help them think of God the next time they are having a hard time.

Special events at Church can include a time-home item to go in prayer spaces to help children remember what was taught or what they did together. This is a great way to connect the events of Church with the prayer practices of the home.

Eventually, children will outgrow this practice and may need some help preserving the pieces or transitioning them into a format that they can keep with them as they get older. Encourage parents to talk with their children about their prayer life and how they connect with God. Make sure they give the closing of this practice as much time and attention as the launching. Prayer spaces can be packaged up and kept as a special gift at confirmation, graduation, or even as a baby-shower gift when they have their first child. Imagine adults looking back through pressed leaves, painted rocks, happy-meal toys, and other treasures that helped them express their faith as a child. Imagine their grandchild showing them their own prayer station years later.

3. Prayer Journal

While a box or shelf may seem childish to older children and youth, they can still have a special place for their prayers. A journal filled with blank pages offers a space to write, draw or paint. While this may feel like a diary, and can play a similar role, the focus should be spiritual expression. You can teach youth to dump question, anxieties, hopes, and doubts on these pages and encourage them to go back and pray over them or review them in the future. To this end, encourage youth to write or draw about important events. Ask them to record questions they ask you that are difficult or inspiring. Suggest using this space to save important letters, or keepsakes that can be flattened. Be sure to affirm this as a private space that should be treated as confidential and affirm this with parents. If this is truly a prayer journal, it should be between them and God.

To encourage this practice, the Church might consider giving each youth a journal. This could be a great way to mark their 13th birthday as a “coming of age” gift, or something they receive through youth groups or another program ministry. Notes from spiritual leaders of the congregation could even be added before the journals are given. Such notes could also come from older youth with words of encouragement about prayer disciplines and what their journal has meant to them.

Some youth will be more artistic and may want to try a different approach to a prayer journal. They may be dancers or thespians and need to go digital with their journal to save video clips, music, or other media. Other youth simply live in a digital reality that makes pen and paper seem like a foreign format. A digital journal can take the shape of a folder on their computer that has typed reflections, pictures, videos, etc. While this is difficult to set up for them, you can easily do a workshop at Church about how to do it, or even use a web conference platform like Google Hangout to walk through the steps together.

Remember, the goal of this practice is to create a sacred collection that can allow for personal expression and future reflection. There is no wrong way to do this, but however you help them set it up, it should be done with intentionality. You might consider even having a prayer of blessing together to bless the journals, be it bound pages or a drop-box folder. Spiritual practices are more about our intent and awareness than following a formula or having measurable output. An empty computer folder that a teen never adds anything to is still a reminder of the time you spoke to them about the importance of

prayer. Even a journal with lots of blank pages and a few old prayers can be a reminder of God's closeness through prayer.

4. Mind Clearing

Youth are constantly bombarded by communication and ideas. Some of this comes from the outside world – TV, computers, phones, family, and the noise of life around them. There is also an internal loudspeaker that seems to constantly inundate teens with messages. Some are repeats of things they have heard others say and some are their own thoughts – insecurities, hopes, dreams, and fears. Finding a quiet moment is often a foreign concept to youth. Helping youth find God in the midst of the clutter is difficult. Prayer that helps clear the mind and make room for God can be a helpful tool for the spiritual and practical life of young people.

This is not a guided meditation or a nap time, but rather a conscious decision to clear the mind. You can teach the practice in just a few minutes, but it is most effective when practiced. This also increases the chances of youth using it on their own. It begins with asking participants to sit comfortably with their eyes open and fixed on something boring that won't change. An area of the floor, wall or a door work great. Ask participants to identify the sounds around them and be aware of distractions in the room, then ignore them, focusing only on breathing out. As they focus on breathing out, tell them to save any thoughts that pop into their mind for later and trust that important ideas will come back at the right time. Tell them to turn down the volume on all sound till it is just them breathing out. Provide 1-2 minutes the first time you try this exercise. You can raise it by 30 seconds each time to help youth expand their ability to sit in the silence.

Five minutes is a good goal for a group experience but this can be expanded in personal prayer time and when youth need to decompress. The goal is to allow tension, fear, worry, anxiety and all the other normal pressures that youth live with to ease away. This leaves room for healthy decisions and for that still small voice of God to find an audience. This prayer practice also helps youth explore a spirituality that is beyond words and beyond rituals – it is something in their core that can't be explained but when we let everything else go, we know God dwells there.

5. Prayer-toons

Drawing can be a great way for children, especially pre-readers, to express themselves and this holds true for prayer. A child can draw a picture of family, or a friend who is sad, or what they are afraid of. These pictures can be their prayer. Young children lack the attention span to listen to a large group share joys and concerns, but a large sheet of paper or a poster board can allow multiple children to share their feelings and concerns about a topic as a group. As they draw, they will talk, affirming and supporting each other.

Giving children a key word to focus on may be all some children need, while others will need some wondering questions to help them reflect and connect with the activity. A group prayer drawing for a particular person they know is probably the easiest expression of this practice. If a friend or adult they have in common is sick or has an injury, explain the situation in terms the children can understand, then allow them to draw pictures to express their feelings. Be sure to affirm what is shared and assure the

children that God sees and understands what they are thinking and feeling. This type of practice allows children to experience prayer in a creative setting and make spirituality something they share with others.

Technology can offer another expression of this prayer. Posting pictures of their work on social media, or using pieces of their drawing as illustrations or slide backgrounds in worship can add another layer to the experience. This is also another way to celebrate the authentic voice of children in our Church family.

6. Prayer Pauses

This is a practice where you will be a coach more than a leader. Pray as a family or one on one with children and youth at special times. Special meals and celebrations are easy times to remember. Milestone events such as first days of school or beginning a new team or activity are also appropriate times to pray. As children grow older, they can be invited to share in leading prayer, offer a prayer of their own, or do all of the talking. Prayer together can also mark times of sadness, concern, or loss. When something frightening has happened to a child or one of their friends, prayer can be a comforting experience. Sharing a prayer at times like this reminds children and youth that God is with us, both joy and struggle, while modeling the prayerful attitude we hope they live into as they grow.

I remember watching a small child tell a man at Church about going to the dentist. The child was obviously nervous about the upcoming appointment. Rather than say, "I'll be praying for you," which is easy, the man knelt down and held the boy's hands and prayed with him for courage, and asked God to give the doctor wisdom and good hands. Their prayer ended with a huge hug. While this is a beautiful expression of Church, such practices should be part of our family life. We cannot have a line between Sunday spirituality and our lives and expect young people to find any authenticity in the faith we share.

To help families begin this practice, you can facilitate conversation about prayer at times they can control. Invite families to a meal and invite someone at each table to offer a prayer. Ask each family about where they can include prayer in holiday traditions and special days. Invite them to brainstorm how prayer could be part of birthdays and milestones (school, teams, clubs, etc.) in the family's life. Have them discuss how spiritual practices will be part of vacation time. Remind families to think through their plan, and take notes, especially deciding who will be in charge of initiating this practices so the moment is not lost with everyone expecting someone else to take the lead. Remind parents to let children grow into roles of leadership, lending their voice to the family prayer. As they are younger they will need coaxing and coaching. As they get older they may still require coaxing, but are very capable of leading family prayers. This will empower them to take the lead in their own family prayer practices one day.

There are other ways to facilitate this prayer experience such as asking parents to lead prayer at Church gatherings. You can make sure someone prays before boarding a bus or departing on a Church trip. Be careful that you are not the only one praying in these public settings. The more you get people of different ages involved in public prayers, marking time and transitions, the more normal a life of prayer will seem at every stage of their life.

7. Prayer Cards

Children often struggle to understand the perspective of adults because they lack the experience. Developmentally, this is something they grow into. Prayer can be a good way to help children think about the issues adults face. By inviting children to make cards for adults, we can help them connect with the problems of adults and respond with prayer. Keep cards focused on simple to understand concerns like illness, or hospitalization. Cards can be made for adults who are homeless or live alone. These are tangible issues children can understand.

Cards can be personal or generic. This depends greatly on how they are to be shared. Children can create a bunch of cards that can be taken to shut-ins or on hospital visits, or they can create personal cards for people on a prayer list. Cards can be made for those who may come to a shelter, or addressed to individual residence in a group home. Invite children who are old enough to write to include a prayer in the card, and take time to bless the cards before sending them. Children can personal deliver cards where it is appropriate or adults can deliver them later.

If you have lots of younger children, consider having them help brainstorm words for a prayer, then type it up and print multiple copies. Children can then decorate cards and help glue a copy of their prayer inside. If you are doing this activity within the structure of a faith community, this is a great time to teach older children about how the Church cares for people. Let them meet people who visit shut-ins or organize meals for homeless. Connect the children to the people who connect the Church to those in need. This will help the children pray with a more personal connection and better understand their faith community.

8. Neighborhood of Prayer

Children will grow in their understanding of the world, but they are most aware of those they see regularly. Helping children connect with a world larger than their immediate family and weekly routine is a big step. For young children, it is best to start with those they see all the time. An old Sesame Street song asked, “Who are the people in your neighborhood- the people that you meet each day?” By helping children make a list of people we see regularly, we invite them to look a little broader into the world. Inviting them to pray for these people helps them understand how much we rely on others to doing things for us. From trash collection to mail carriers, to police and road crews, there are lots of people children can identify and pray for.

With older children, ask them to think about what those people do and what their jobs might be like. Use wondering questions like, “I wonder what they see at work?” or “I wonder what is most fun about that job?” or “I wonder when that job is hard to do?” This process will help children better understand the world around them, but also become more comfortable with people they see all the time. You can also help children understand that these people have lives beyond their jobs. These are people with families of their own. Invite children to pray for the families of those they see as well.

As children get older you can look further into the community and the world for examples of people they see. On television, they will see regular faces on the news or talk shows. They will see political

leaders and news about what people are doing in other communities. Allow the flow of information that expands their awareness of the world to also expand their circle of prayer.

Within your various ministries this practice could be part of a Children's worship or ritual at Sunday School. This could be a prayer practice of an after-school program or parent-child play group. How this practice fits into your Church's ministry is up to you. The goal is to help children think about their world around them and see prayer as one tool they can use to engage and support their ever-expanding community.

9. Grand-prayers

Family is larger than we often think. Children may hear stories from earlier generations, learn about ethnic or cultural ancestors, or learn some basic family history. Families also have a spiritual heritage. Help children connect with generations of prayer practices in their family by having them interview grandparents, aunts, uncles or others. This practice requires the participation of parents, and can be as meaningful for them as for the children involved. This activity invites a conversation many adults may not have had with their own family, and may not ever have if not for the special permission children have to ask questions.

You can help children and families develop questions together, but remember that children will often go off-script so it's good to coach parents to be patient and flexible. Remind parents to talk with family members in advance about this project, and make sure they are willing to be interviewed. Some might even appreciate a list of questions in advance. There is no way to predict the Spirit or a curious child. Encourage children to ask family members why they pray, how they pray, and what they pray about. Older children might want to ask what names others use for God, and where they are most comfortable praying.

Smaller children will need help doing this, providing a great opportunity for a family conversation on prayer. This could be a great time for parents and grandparents to share about their prayer practices (or lack of) as a family and talk about how each experienced it differently.

Older children might prefer one on one time with older family members. If family members are part of a different faith tradition, this might be a good excuse to visit their worship service as a family. Both options offer great potential for conversation and a deeper understanding of prayer. Also, consider inviting grandparents or other family members to interview children in return. Children have a great deal to say about God and prayer. They are deep thinkers when given the opportunity to share.

This activity can also be done as part of a family gathering or game night. Simply write questions out on separate note cards, and number them 1-6 or 1-12. Family members can take turns rolling dice and answering the corresponding question. This way everyone gets to share their answers, but it does lose the intimate feel of a conversation.

Children to Youth

10. Making Prayer Personal

The next logical prayer practice is helping young people develop their own prayer routine. As they get grow, their prayer practice will change, but the intentionality is the same at any age. If you are already equipping adults to pray on their own, take advantage of your communication with them to affirm the need for their child to have a designated prayer time as well. You will need to approach this differently with different age groups, but if you start with children when they are young, the conversations with youth become about fitting their prayer practice into their teenage schedule rather than convincing them to start something new. For children, this is something that must be done in partnership with parents and may be presented more as coaching than as a program or curriculum piece. With youth, it can be a something you work with them directly to create.

With children, parents can pick any time to start a “personal prayer moment.” Bedtime is often an obvious place to start but if something else fits their schedule better, that is fine. Coach parents to talk with their children to see where they might fit a prayer into their regular routine. Does it go best after tooth-brushing or before? Their attitude as parents will go a long way in making prayer a priority. A couple extra minutes at bed time won’t hurt but can make a big difference. Prayer can’t be something skippable on busy nights. It needs to be a priority habit just as much as hygiene. Encourage parents to take their child’s prayer routine as seriously as they want their child to treat prayer.

As parents develop a routine for their child, they need to make sure it is truly the child’s prayer. Parents can give them a prayer to repeat, but as children are old enough to express it, prayer should be the child’s voice. This can also be a silent prayer of something children are thankful for from their day or something they are looking forward to the next day. Prayer can evolve as they grow older, moving from an answer to your question about thankfulness to their own bigger questions and concerns. This can evolve from rhyming prayers to devotions books they choose as they make the practice their own.

Youth will need to approach this concept differently, and you can directly coach them through the process. While some teens will have a regular bed time, many live in a world of packed schedules and unpredictable homework loads. Youth have a strange relationship with both time and structure which makes it harder to set a consistent prayer time while making such a practice even more impactful in their life. Technology can be a problem solver as youth try to find a moment to spend with God. Setting a repeating alarm on their phone for a time or a few times a day can be a simple solution, and very reminiscent of the ancient “keeping of hours.” Meal times, shower time, before or after practice, or the old stand-by of bedtime can provide a break for prayer. This prayer time does not have to be long for any age. A simple pause to acknowledge God’s presence can have a powerful impact on the rest of one’s day. As you coach parents and youth through this process, know that it will also have a powerful impact on their life.

11. Home and Away

It is important to have a Church home for children but visiting other congregation’s worship service can be a helpful experience, specifically in understanding how other traditions speak to God and about God.

You can do this with just your congregation, or partner with other faith communities to take turns visiting each other's worship service. This experience will allow children and youth to better understand their friends, especially those who come from a very different faith tradition, and build bridges between communities of faith. Afterwards, you will want to spend time talking about the experience, comparing it to your own tradition and ask young people if there are prayer practices they enjoyed that seemed new.

To be clear, this is different from going to Vacation Bible School or having a joint summer event. That is usually a very different experience from a congregation's typical gatherings and can feel the same in just about any setting. Visit when a community is doing their thing. If you are taking turns visiting with other Christian traditions, be intentional to a good host when others are visiting you.

Different ages will need to approach this differently. For young children, involving parents is necessary. It may be that the entire family comes along. Encourage children to ask questions about what they see and hear. Spend some intentional time afterwards talking about how that community talks about God and how they talk to God. Youth can go on an outing like this with a few adult leaders to supervise but also need time to debrief their experience. You might consider letting older youth sit with young people from that congregation and allow them to ask questions and share thoughts together after worship.

As children grow older, friends will invite each other to attend lock-ins and special events. Youth will go to worship with a friend after sleep-overs or visit local congregations around the college they attend. Relationships can draw youth to one community or another regardless of theology or style of worship. Helping young people see the validity in other faith expressions will help them better understand their own, and live out the prayer of Jesus, "that all may be one." Paying attention to the way others pray, and talk about God also helps young people find their own voice and better articulate their beliefs. As you debrief the experience with youth, be sure to ask the same questions about how that community speaks about God and to God.

Encourage children and youth to affirm practices that were moving to them, and to keep other church communities in their prayers. As we help children and youth understand how big the Christian family really is, and as children learn to respect other faith traditions, friends can become great teachers for one another. Over the years, your young people may connect friends to the traditions they visited. This can help put a face on prayer practices and beliefs that are different from ours, keeping us from judgmental generalizations. If nothing else, you have helped placed faith and spirituality on the table between friends, making it a more available topic of conversation when they are together with other peers.

12. Highs and Lows

Knowing what to pray for is a challenge for many. Spending some time sharing with each other can enhance our prayer time. Sharing "highs and lows" is a very simple practice to connect with others before praying together. This can be done with groups of children and youth, or used by families. Using this practice in your Church programming offers children and youth a model to use at home. They can even be the leaders of the practice without parents having to initiate. You can model this with families at Church meals or have a special orientation time to go over the concept. While there is no set time that this must be done in the life of a family, meal time is often most consistent opportunity. Family

members simply go around the table, asking each person to share their best (high) moment or two of the past day and their worst (low) moment from the last day.

When you lead this activity, and when you coach families, be intentional about sharing time. Let each person speak without judgment, snarky comments, teasing, or giving advice. Simply let each person have their time to share about their day while others practice active listening. The group or family should be attentive to those who have had a very hard day. Be affirming and supportive. Parents can make mental notes of follow-up conversations you want to have later. These conversations do not have to take place in front of siblings, other family, or guests.

After everyone has shared, close in prayer, lifting up the joys and challenges in the group or family's shared life. Remind families not to neglect issues they perceive as smaller. What seems little to an adult can be a very big deal to a child. What parents see as drama can be filled with trauma for a middle-schooler. Likewise, children may not understand the complexity of issues adults face. You don't want to be seen as lifting one person's concerns or joys up above another, so keep the prayer general or make sure to cover everyone's sharing.

Families that struggle to find a common time together can use technology to bridge the gap. A group text is a great way to connect. Highs and lows can be sent to each other after a certain time of day, and prayers can be lifted up individually. When the family does see each other, they have an understanding of what the day has been like and can be attentive to each other's experience. Setting up a group message, private family page on social media, or other communication system for this practice can even be the work of older children and youth in the family. If they need help, this is another place the Church can help quip and support the prayer practices of the family through coaching and resourcing.

13. Milestone Moments

Milestones are moments when something changes. This can be a literal change or a cultural construct. Turning 13 happens the same way as turning 11 or 12, but the word, "teen" has cultural significance. Milestones include transitions such as school changes, jobs, or moving. These can be celebrated throughout life and celebrating them within an intergenerational community adds to the significance. We often think about intergenerational as young people with much older people but that misses the true arc of age diversity in a community. Youngest children can watch as older children celebrate special moments and anticipate when their turn will come. Older members can look back on the same celebration with nostalgia or in prayerful reflection. Celebrating such moments with prayer in an intentional act. A 16-year-old can be given a keychain from the congregation for their birthday, or they can be presented a keychain along with a prayer of blessing for that youth and a prayer of protection as they expect new freedom and responsibility. Intentionality changes an event into a milestone celebration.

Different communities have different traditions and approaches to milestone moments. Some use actual stones with symbols for different events. Some have different tokens or prayers for different life experiences. Some provide a box for participants to collect milestone items. There is no wrong way to do this, as long as it is an intentional moment marked by prayer. Remember to be age appropriate and

don't forget to celebrate the family that celebrates these special moments. Include them and affirm them while keeping the focus on their child or youth.

14. School Blessing

Once children start school, they will spend as much time in that community as any other. Once children start school, they will spend as much time in that space as any other. Their relationship with school will change over the years but school will remain a significant part of their daily life experience. Making school a safe place and a place they can express their spirituality is important. It is hard only be part of a person in any setting, so starting the school year with a prayer of blessing can help children claim school as a safe place and affirm that they go there as a whole person growing in body mind and spirit.

A school blessing can be done as a family, with peers, or with a faith community. It can be a larger public event or something more intimate. While many schools will not officially participate in such an activity, prayer does not have to be officially sanctioned. This type of blessing can be done on the corner by a school just as easily as on the school grounds. Asking God's blessing does not require access to any building. All that is required is our intentionality and time.

A prayer of blessing can be led by older children and youth or by adults. You can do this as a congregation, invite teachers and other students, or just provide resources for families to have their own prayer on (or just before) the first day of school. Either way, ask God's blessing on the space and for the children and staff who will enter. Lift up fears and challenges children will face. Remind children that God will be with them, even if school is hard and even if something bad happens. Remind children that prayer is something we do in our hearts and minds, and that God is accessible to them at school by simply pausing to listen, talk, think, or feel.

Blessing of a school can be done on-site or on-line. If you can't gather at a school, consider working together with families or with a group of children to write a prayer for the school year and post it on social media. This allows others to share in the prayer and offer their own prayers in response. Do your best to avoid the political hot buttons of prayer in school and focus on the intentional act of asking God's blessing, marking a special time and place in the lives of children and youth.

Children and Adolescents

15. Prayer Partners

Asking someone to pray for you can be awkward. Prayer partners is a simple way of creating prayerful bonds between peers, and can be done at any age. While there are many ways to structure such an experience, as we have said before, it is the intentionality that truly matters. Prayer partners (and parents) should have clear expectations for how often they will pray, and some way of connecting with each other. This will, of course, be done differently at different ages but the relational aspect is an important part of the prayer experience. We can pray for anyone at any time, but praying for someone who is also praying for us creates a relationship. Knowing that partners will be in each other's life in some way also provides some sense of accountability to the partners.

The first task is connecting children as prayer partners. The next step is involving families. Make sure everyone knows the expectations and is equipped to explain the idea of prayer partners to their child. Simple guidelines should include how often the children will remember each other in prayer (weekly, daily, etc.) and how they will connect socially. Will the children share prayer concerns with each other, or just have play time? This is, of course, impacted by their age and level of involvement. The youngest children able to participate will be dependent upon parents to lift up the names of prayer partners, and help them keep the practice.

For older children and youth, the idea of having a prayer partner is similar and also requires some organization from adults, but the practice can be more independent. The sharing between the partners can also be more personal. Youth may be more comfortable sharing via text or social media, but face to face time can be important. Either way, there should be an opportunity for them to share some stories and life experience with each other. Prayer partners can also become accountability partners for individual prayer practices. Partners can remind each other to pray and encourage each other to keep or reestablish habits. Hopefully, this experience will make spirituality a common part of their life, and help them establish relationships with a spiritual side.

16. Praying Around the World

Using a large map or globe, invite children and youth to pray for those beyond their immediate circle of family and friends. Begin by praying for those close by, and expand a little each week or month to pray your way around the world. If you plan to do this over a long period of time, move one direction away from home (east or west) so that you can make your way around the world, and all the way back home. The simplest way to do this is praying for people who live 12 miles away, then doubling the miles each time you pray. If you do this once a month, starting with your own community, then moving 12 miles out and doubling it each month, you will get the full 24,000 miles around the earth in one year. If you do it more often, you can circle the earth multiple times, focusing on different places each lap.

As you reflect on what to pray about, think about who lives that far away and what their lives are like. Use a simple internet search for basic information on population, common jobs or industry, and special concerns that are unique to that region. You can pray for a specific community or group who lives in that area or for a country or region as a whole. With younger children, consider sharing common names of children and pictures of where they live. Making this connection more concrete will help them better connect in prayer.

Youth may want to take this a step further and learn a little about the place they are praying for. They can quickly use phones to look up the location and lift up concerns specific to that region. Phones and tablets can be used to bring up maps and images to serve as focal points for prayer. Prayers can be shared silently, out loud, or even shared on-line which invites others to share in the prayer experience.

If your Church has ministries in different countries or relationships with global mission partners, be sure and lift those in as you pray for their region of the world. Technology can further bridge the gap between us and those we pray for around the world. Video conference platforms like Skype or Google Hangout allow youth and children to visit with ministry partners anywhere in the world and even pray together.

17. Faith Mentors

We know how important intergenerational relationships are, especially for children and youth. As we continue to find those adult mentors beyond the immediate family, prayer can be a great way to start a relationship. By inviting older adults to pray for children and youth, you can lay the foundation for a more personal relationship. In this practice, prayer is a first step to other relational experiences. The more the child and adult get to know each other, the more meaningful the prayer experiences will be.

Creating adult mentors in faith should be done much like the prayer partner process described earlier. Clear expectations should be set from the beginning as to how often an adult will pray for their partnered child or youth, and there should be a clear understanding as to how long this official program will last. Be sure to include any other expectations, including face to face visits or special gatherings. These expectations should also include any administrative requirements such as training meetings or background checks. Clear expectations are important because children and families will compare experiences.

A simple version of this practice involves the adult partner praying for their partner once a week by name, and making personal contact once a month. This can be a letter if schedules are difficult to manage but an occasional face to face moment, just to say “hello,” is important for building the relationship. An adult who prays for a child every week for a year will have a hard time losing relationship with that child. Regardless when the program ends, the relationship will continue. As you choose mentors for children and youth, think about what age adults are best suited to connect with and what age of adult each young person might need in their life. Be sure to follow your community’s risk management policies and do orientation and background checks as needed.

Once you have the basics of a mentoring process in place, you can look to expand the relationships and their shared involvement in the Congregation. Asking mentors to attend one social event and one hands on mission event each year with their partner is not a huge request but can be a powerful addition to the program. The more time they spend together the more comfortable they will be sharing prayer concerns.

Like all practices, intentionality matters and even the most responsible adults can become forgetful. Having a system of accountability for the adult mentors is helpful in establishing this practice as a longer-term program. One way to handle this is giving the adults 12 Church addressed post-cards. They can drop them in the offering or mail them to the Church each month to share contact moments with their child and affirm that they are still actively praying for their partner.

Adolescents

18. Prayer Posts

Youth spend a great deal of their time on-line and connecting through social media or messaging software. This allows them to be in closer communication than any generation before. Social groups and networks form between friends and friends of friends that can span a few blocks or hundreds of miles. A child that moved in elementary school may still spend time playing games with friends they have not

personally seen in years. These relationships and networks can have a spiritual nature and are a great place to express joys and concerns. Prayer is just a click away.

Some youth might be immediately comfortable connecting their on-line communities in prayer while others may need some coaching and encouragement. A simple version of this practice includes a basic social media post of, "I'm about to take some prayer time. What can I pray for you? Reply or private message me." This practice makes a young person's spirituality a public matter, and helps them become more comfortable speaking and acting out of their faith in front of others. It also creates the opportunity for peers to support each other and express their own faith in response.

You can help equip this by inviting youth to send out their first post at the same time. This can be the first activity for a group meeting or event. Take time at the end for them to check their responses and pray about any that are posted during your time together. This is a great way for youth to use the technology so many carry with them to Church events. It has the added bonus of being an implicit promotional for your ministry.

This is a practice youth can eventually do on their own, without the structure of a Church program. Youth who are a little more confident might try a more personal post of, "I'm thinking about (or struggling with) _____. What advice do you have? Prayers appreciated." This is more vulnerable but also requires some strong self-esteem because peers, especially on-line, can be harsh. Like the invitation to receive prayer requests, this practice helps youth experience a public spirituality that shapes the expectations of others when speaking to them and shapes the young person's identity as a person of faith.

19. Looking for God

Part of human development is the evolution of our ethics. Children are more trusting but eventually we start asking questions. We start imagining how a situation could be better. What used to be simply dismissed as "unfair" evolves into an understanding of "hypocrisy." Youth notice the injustice in the world. They are already struggling with God's presence, or perceived lack-there-of, in disasters and social injustice. It is important to help youth respond to these questions with prayer. We can respond to these questions with a prayerful asking of, "Where is God?" In response to news or experiences that are filled with hurt and lack love, we can teach youth to ask those around them, "Where is God?" This is a wonderful practice to teach families. This can be anything from global news to school drama. This is a great chance to name God's presence for each other and then pray about the issue.

Encourage parents to model this by asking the question themselves, not on behalf of youth but in response to their own frustrations, doubts, questions, and insecurities. Youth will often offer a voice of hope or an image of God that an adult would have missed. Adults should trust youth to be partners in this experience rather than trying to "lead" these moments. Since you cannot be there with parents to referee, or remind them of best practices, look for ways to publicly practice this prayerful approach to events in the news in the life of your congregation. Explaining the practice is great, and should be done, but modeling it will help youth and parents see how it can look, and be a reminder to try it on their own.

20. Prayer Exchange

Some people are willing to pray in public settings and others avoid it like the plague. Public speaking, comfortability with prayer, and a relationship with those gathered all factor in someone's willingness to pray in public. Try turning this on its head by having older adults and youth write prayers for each other's events. This requires a little advance planning and a conversation but is well worth the effort.

Conversation is the first step. One on one or in a small group, adults and youth need to tell each other about an event coming up. This could be a dinner, a retreat, or a hands-on mission event. This could include a trip to the mall, or a larger public event. Invite them to talk about their upcoming event and what it means to them personally. Encourage them to talk about why people come and why they think it is important for the Church or community.

After this conversation, divide them and allow each to write a prayer of blessing for the other's event. This prayer can be shared in print, or spoken as an appropriate time. A guest from the other group can attend to share the prayer, or someone can read it. These prayers can be shared beyond the actual event by posting them on social media. The prayers themselves can be a celebration of the event or part of the promotion and publicity for the upcoming event. Between the events, encourage both age groups to keep the others and their leaders in prayer as they plan and prepare.

21. Headline Prayers

The news can provide a great prayer list for youth. Simple looking through world news section of a newspaper, or clicking the world events tab on a news website is a wonderful way to expand prayer time beyond our own needs. This can be done personally or as a group. This can be done with family or as part of a faith community. However you come to this practice, the concept remains the same. Praying for people in places that are different and praying about issues we don't fully understand reminds us how big God is and calls us to be more informed and engaged in the global community.

This practice can be done as a group or be something you encourage youth to do on their own and share about periodically. It can be integrated into regular programming or something new. Intentionality and consistency are the keys as you try to help youth develop a more global mindset in their prayer life and help them understand the importance of prayer in the face of problems that are bigger than any of us can face alone. As you help youth develop this practice, be sure to remind them about limitations of our understanding and the potential for blinders. Encourage youth to avoid rapid judgment and to do some self-reflection along the way. Just because a story seems strange to us, doesn't make it wrong. This type of prayer practice calls us to pray for others but also pray for ourselves. As much as we pray for someone else's struggles we can also find ourselves confessing our bias, ignorance, or entitlement.

A simple, weekly expression of this exercise is to begin youth meetings or Sunday School by looking through the news. In one column, make a list of people, places, or issues to pray about. In a second column, make a list of questions or unknowns about those issues that might require some research. Spend some time in prayer, and then invite youth to take a picture of the list. Encourage them to take one question or issue for research and look it up on-line. At your next gathering, invite youth to share what they discovered about the issues. After sharing what you have learned and reflecting together,

spend some time in prayer for those issues and anything that comes out of the conversation, then start a new list and start all over again. You can also post the list on-line so youth can check it during the week, or youth who do not attend can still be part of the prayer and reflection practice. Another option is to allow youth to post headlines from the week as they see them, using this social media feed to form the prayer list when you first arrive.