



Written by
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Praying with an older person

- Listen to God
- Start where they are
- Draw on the familiar
- Use a pattern
- Broaden your view of prayer
- Leave something behind

Background

In many ways, praying with an older person is no different from praying with someone of any age. Our aim in that moment is to be fully present with that person, in the presence of God and enable their relationship with him – at whatever point that may be – to be strengthened. The suggestions here are for you to bear in mind when praying with an older person.

1 Listen to God

Whenever possible, take time to prepare beforehand. Call to mind what you already know about the person

and their situation (if anything). Hold them before God and ask him if there is anything he wants you to communicate to them. This may be a word (e.g. hope), a Bible verse or an image (e.g. clouds parting). Keep this in your mind during your conversation and be ready to share it at the appropriate time. Listen out for what God may be saying as you pay attention to the stories, feelings and concerns shared by the person. Is there a message of reassurance or comfort that will bring them some peace?

2 Start where they are

People rarely refuse an offer of prayer! If you are unsure where someone stands faith-wise, just ask, 'Are you happy for me to pray with you?' Ask if they would like to pray aloud or prefer you to pray on their behalf. Keep it simple: thank God that he's real, that he loves them and that he cares about the details of their lives. Pray a blessing over them and any family or friends they have mentioned; you could use the the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24–26). It may be the first time anyone has prayed for them, and it can be wonderfully encouraging to hear someone else speaking positive words about us and those we love.

3 Draw on the familiar

Bible passages can be a great focus for prayer as they allow the word of God to speak for itself. Ask them if they have a favourite text. Read Psalm 23, Psalm 91 or part of Psalm 139, then pray through it for the person, applying it to their situation and where relevant, inserting their name into the text. Depending on your – or their – tradition, you may wish to use liturgical prayers or words of well-known hymns. Most older people will be familiar with the Lord's Prayer or the Grace, so beginning or ending your prayer time with one of these ensures they remain an active participant.

4 Use a pattern

One possible example is ACTS.

Adoration: this focuses firmly on God; read a psalm of praise such as 8, 19, 46, 100, 148.

Confession: this may involve a time of quiet to allow space to confess before God; read 1 John 1:9.

Thanksgiving: this encourages the life-giving habit of gratitude which has been proven to improve emotional well-being; read 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

Supplication: it can be faith-inspiring to hear someone else articulate the desires of your heart. If the person has shared concerns with you during their conversation, turn them into prayer requests; read Philippians 4:6.

5 Broaden your view of prayer

As part of your time together, you could use a picture or photo, an object – such as a holding cross, a song or a piece of music, or simply a time of silence, to help focus attention on God and act as a prompt or response for prayer.

6 Leave something behind

This may be something for them to hold, listen to or look at (see 5), or a particular encouragement you feel may be from God. It may be a Bible verse – you could both read a particular passage and then talk about it next time you meet. It may be a written prayer, especially for people who live alone, where it can sometimes be difficult to motivate oneself to pray. It may be a simple 'breath prayer', which is prayed as you breathe in and out, and can help someone to rest in God. For example, Psalm 23:1 – 'The Lord is my shepherd / I shall not want' or John 3:16 – 'For God so loved / that he sent his Son'. Wherever possible, our aim is to encourage the person to continue in prayer when we're no longer together.

Further resources:

Seven Ways to Pray: Time-tested practices for encountering God by Amy Boucher-Pye (SPCK, 2021) – an accessible book which encourages a balance of ancient practices with creativity in prayer.

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