

GETTING STARTED WITH PRAYING TO LISTEN

Guidance for leaders facilitating this session

As with any time of prayer, you will need to pay heed to Methodist Safeguarding guidance. Ensure those in your group are aware that what is said in prayer should be held confidentially and not spoken of outside of the prayer time unless permission has been given to do so. However, also make it clear that if something is said in a prayer time that raises a safeguarding concern then the appropriate safeguarding procedures need to be followed; i.e. the young person should tell the leader; the leader records and reports as appropriate.

This session is about encouraging a focus of prayer that moves away from confession and intercession and into prophetic spaces. This may be a new concept for some, so take the time to explain to your group that you may be trying some different approaches to prayer to help them pay attention to what God may be saying to them. Prepare yourself as leader for what the prayer time may be like, particularly if this way of praying is outside your usual experience. Don't be surprised when God speaks! You don't have to have all the answers or understand everything that may be happening. Be willing to hold whatever the young people bring and respond gently, carefully and without judgement. The young people will learn a great deal from how you respond. Be positive rather than dismissive; teach the young people about discernment, and seeking confirmation from different sources. Prepare the young people that hearing from God may take many different forms; it will happen at different times, and it is not a competition! Be clear that God speaks in many different ways and places. This style of intentional listening may not suit all, and it shouldn't be suggested that this is only way that God speaks to us.

This is not a one-off session, but instead, praying in this way should be something that is incorporated regularly into your time together as a group. This session plan is a tool to help you to get started.

Activity 1: What is prayer and how do we feel about it?

Brainstorm with the group what they think prayer is, and how it takes place. You may find it helpful to jot down ideas onto a large piece of paper so that everyone can see. Explore with them how they feel about prayer: do they find it easy or difficult? Why?

You could watch [this spoken word poem](#) (search “Why Pray? Spoken Word” by Bethany Milne on YouTube) about why we should pray, and then discuss what thoughts it raises.

Activity 2: Bible study

It will be helpful to look at how people speak with God in the Bible. There are many Bible stories that you could use to start a discussion. Or you could ask the young people to start by sharing stories in the Bible of prayer that they already know of. Here are some examples:

Moses

Read the story of Moses as he approaches the burning bush (Exodus 3: 1-12). Ask the young people to say what they notice about how God and Moses interact. If they struggle to do this then use the questions below to prompt responses:

- What was Moses doing when God spoke to him? What can we learn from this?
- Was Moses expecting God to speak?
- How do you think Moses felt when God spoke to him? Why do you think this?
- If you could ask Moses any questions about his experience what would you ask?

Samuel

Read 1 Samuel 3: 1-11

Ask the young people what they notice about how God and Samuel interact. If they struggle with this then you may find it helpful to use the questions below to prompt responses:

- What was Samuel doing when God spoke to him? What can we learn from this?
- Was Samuel expecting God to speak?
- How do you think Samuel felt when God spoke to him? Why do you think this?
- If you could ask Samuel any questions about his experience what would you ask?

If it is appropriate for your group, you may choose to [watch this clip](https://prayercourse.org/session/listening) (<https://prayercourse.org/session/listening>) from a resource produced by 24/7 Prayer, which explores this story of Samuel and Eli (start at 7.15 – 11.27 mins).

Jesus

You may also like to use examples of how Jesus prayed. For example, Jesus often went to solitary places to pray (Mark 1: 35, Luke 5:16); Jesus' famous prayer of anguish on the night of his arrest (Luke 22: 39-42). Jesus also famously taught his disciples how to pray in Luke 11: 1-13.

Ask the group if they have ever felt a particularly special connection with God, felt God's presence, or sensed/felt/heard a message from God. When did it happen? What were they doing at the time?

As facilitator, try to draw out the learning from this activity

- Prayer is a two-way dialogue: you speaking to God, God speaking to you.
- God might not speak to you in words that you can 'hear'; it might be a strong feeling or a sense of something, or God might speak through someone else. You might have a picture or an image in your mind, or God might speak to you through lyrics of a song, or a dream...
- God can speak to us when we read the Bible, or listen to someone preach. God can speak in ordinary situations, such as when we're watching TV – often when you don't expect it. But it can also be useful to set aside specific time to connect with and pay attention to God.
- Prayer isn't just a wish list, but it is about building relationship with God. It is about understanding God better so that you better understand what to pray for.
- Prayer can be very powerful.

Activity 3: Listening to God

This activity involves spending time listening to God, recognising that often prayer becomes a one-way conversation where we do all the communicating. This is an opportunity to try out different ways to **listen** to God, rather than praying for others or ourselves.

You will need to set the scene to make sure people are comfortable with what you will be doing.

Key points that you will need to make clear to the group

- God speaks to different people in different ways and at different times. If you don't feel that God has said anything at this time then that is ok – it is nothing to feel disappointed or embarrassed about.
- It may be that you have one word going round in your head, or a song lyric, or maybe you see a picture in your head. If it doesn't make sense then that is okay; God doesn't always speak clearly for us to understand straight away, but it might make sense to someone else, or it might make sense eventually in the future!
- You can't force God to speak – just allow space and time. Sometimes just being with God, even if you don't get a sense of God speaking, can be comforting.
- Connecting with God and the Holy Spirit is a deeply spiritual experience that overlaps with the natural world we inhabit all the time. You may feel unusual sensations that are hard to explain, or witness others experiencing something different to the norm (for example, shaking hands, falling down, using a language that is unfamiliar – speaking in tongues). At times it may make you feel uncomfortable or that it's all a bit strange, but that's okay; people in the Bible found it strange too! Make sure you talk about it afterwards if anyone did feel or see something that was unusual. Also remember that God connects with us all in different ways, and no one's experience is more important than anyone else's.
- God shows up in surprising and unexpected ways – expect the unexpected.
- Having paper and a pen (or a phone) handy to jot things down can be helpful when praying.

Approaches to prayer

Once you have explained to the group what you are going to be doing, you can try different ways of spending time listening to God. Choose options that are the most appropriate for your group, but don't be afraid to try something different to the norm! You may want to try all of these options over a number of weeks. This could be a useful way to help the young people discern which approach they find the most helpful.

If you are meeting virtually, then the activities below will need to be adapted to work within that context. You may find praying together online more difficult than face to face. You may therefore find it helpful to explain the techniques and then challenge members of the group to try it on their own, and to then discuss their experience when you next meet.

Option 1: Use pictures

Spread a range of pictures/photographs onto the floor or table. Ask the group to spend some time looking at the pictures and see if they feel drawn to one in

particular. Then take the card and spend some time in silence thinking about what God may be saying to them through that picture.

Reflecting on specific questions may help. What stands out to them in that picture? Is there a particular image or colour within the picture that they are drawn to? What emotion do they feel while looking at the picture?

Option 2: Use music/sound

Encourage the group to get comfortable – that could be on a comfy chair, or lying on the floor or a beanbag. Play a medley of music and ask them just to listen to the music. Encourage them to relax and listen to the music as a way of hearing from God. Let the music play for 10 minutes (or longer). Encourage them to notice what they are feeling or if any words or lyrics stand out to them.

You may want to use sounds instead of music, for example use sounds from nature such as birds singing, sounds of the sea, or be more creative with your soundscape and use every day noises such as traffic, the chatter of people, phones ringing, etc.

Option 3: Whole body experience

Some people focus through keeping their hands busy. For example, you could have moulding clay available for people to shape. God may be speaking to people through the image/object that they create. Using whole body movement could be a powerful experience for some. Create a series of movements by putting your body into different positions (such as curled up on the floor, standing up arms raised to the sky, etc). In silence go through the series of movements slowly a number of times.

Option 4: Create art

Make art equipment available (paper, pencils, paints, etc). Encourage the young people to draw as they listen to God and to put God's message into picture form. It might be quite an abstract picture, or just colours, but that is okay!

Option 5: Use Scripture/Lectio Divina

Use Scripture as a way of listening to God. Take one passage and focus on it, reading it several times. Spend some time reflecting and thinking about what the message of the passage might be for you. Then spend time listening to God and finally contemplating what you have heard. Some people may find it helpful to have a piece of Scripture that they can write or draw on. Young people could colour in words or phrases that stand out to them. Relax into it and see where the colouring leads – they might be surprised at the end of the session as to what and how they have used colour on the Scripture.

Option 6: Use silence

Although sometimes off-putting, silence can be very powerful. Try to be silent together and aim for a longer period of silence, for example 15-20 mins. It might seem like a very long time, but after the initial fidgeting it can become a powerful experience for the group. Encourage the young people to remain focused on God

during this time; repeating a helpful word or phrase when the mind starts to wander can be useful. You could also have a specific person or situation to focus on for a short time, to see if God speaks to members of the group with a word, picture, or feeling about that situation or person.

Activity 4: Sharing

It can be a helpful practice to share with others what we think God has been saying to us – this can be a testing ground, and may help with clarification. Sharing can be done in a variety of different ways, for example:

- out loud to the whole group
- by responding to reflective questions (possibly written privately)
- looking at people's drawings/models/artwork
- anonymous post-it notes, which are then read and shared
- one to one with the youth leader
- on the 3Gen App.

Before any sharing takes place it is important to emphasise to the group that

- it is okay to not share
- it is okay if you feel like God hasn't really said anything
- everyone needs to listen and be respectful to what others are saying and hold it confidentially
- if you are concerned about anything then speak to your youth leader
- sharing should not make anyone else feel uncomfortable or under pressure.

Activity 5: What next?

Discuss with the group how they felt about the prayer experiences after they first tried them. Return to this exercise in later weeks and reflect again on their experiences when they have tried different ways to listen to God more than once. Reassure people that if they didn't connect with God in these spaces that is okay; there are many ways to hear God. God can and will speak to people in different ways and places.

Explain to the group that praying regularly is important to building your relationship with God, whether it is speaking or listening. It's an important and essential investment of time as a disciple of Christ. Explore with the group how they want to go forward with praying where time is spent listening to God, as well as speaking to God. What commitments do they want to make as a group? What commitments do they want to make as individuals? Discuss tools that could help as a group and as individuals, such as prayer journals, apps, etc.