
Congregational Prayer as Witness

Carol Penner

Constant Calling Congregational Prayer

Great God,
thank you for the constant call we hear from you every day:
the wind whispering around our ears,
the birds singing to us from the trees,
rain pinging on the window,
the good earth inviting our steps.
We hear that call again and again,
through kind hands and warm hearts around us.
Open our ears to your call,
which is as expansive as the world,
and as particular as a poor man walking a dusty road
to a cross on Calvary.
Like him, help us to live our love, not just in word but also in deed:
love for our neighbors who are hard to love,
love for newcomers in our community,
love for people who are cast out by others.
Forgive us for the times we have failed to share your love,
choosing to hoard what is freely given,
fearful that we have limited resources, limited time . . . we're too tired.
Thank you that even then your consoling voice calls us.
Help us respond with cheerful hearts as we do your work.
Strengthen those among us who face heavy burdens;
some of us are living with pain—physical, emotional, spiritual.
Some of us live with injustice, and we need your help.

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Holy Spirit, bind us together as a community
to sing your chorus of love faithfully, heartily.
Help us stick together even when harmony eludes us.
Multiply your call in us and through us.
In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Congregational prayers can be mundane in that we hear them, or say them, every Sunday. They look simple, but they bear witness in a lot of ways.

In this prayer we bear witness to a God who created our beautiful world. I almost always try to begin a congregational prayer with vivid, tactile images that people can picture and “touch.” Prayers can shape us into thankful people, so whenever we pray, we want to give thanks.

The theme of calling is also a witness. It reminds us that God is communicating with us, inviting us to follow. By the end of the prayer, we are the ones doing the calling, reaching out to others.

In a congregational prayer, I try to be honest. I know, for instance, that sometimes I am too tired to be good and that I can be terribly selfish. That’s part of the human condition. We lay it before God. There is so much to pray about, we could fill our whole congregational prayer with petitions. In this prayer, I chose just a couple of things—pain and injustice. Naming our needs bears witness to our faith that God hears our cries.

I often try to end a congregational prayer by focusing on the community rather than the individual. We are praying communally, witnessing to the connecting power of the Holy Spirit. Our congregation is far from pitch perfect, but God can still use us.

It’s a simple prayer, quite mundane, but it is what we’ll say this week. It expresses who we are, and it shapes who we are as followers of Jesus.

Big Picture Congregational Prayer

Thank you, God, for everything under us;
 for these chairs on which we sit,
 for this church's firm foundation,
 for the soil with its burrowing animals and insects,
 for the rock down under that, layered by the sea in ancient times,
 for the water that flows in subterranean channels far beneath us,
 and for the miles upon miles of bedrock
 (unknown and unexplored by all but you),
 all the way down to the living heat of our planet,
 the molten rock deep in the heart of the earth.

Thank you God for everything above us;
 for this solid roof that shelters us,
 for the wind swirling and birds soaring skyward,
 for the airplanes and clouds high above,
 for the upper atmosphere and the stratosphere,
 for satellites orbiting, for meteors whizzing,
 for the moon and the planets of our solar system,
 for asteroids and comets and supernovae and black holes,
 for galaxy upon galaxy stretching away into the vastness of space.

The wide span of your work is a mystery we cannot fathom.
 You are beneath us, you are above us, God of creation!
 We pause now in silence as you hear what's within us . . .
 we bring our confessions and concerns.

[silence]

Thank you that even though we are so small in the scheme of things,
 you hear our prayers, you answer our prayers.
 Bless our church, and help us to be people who point others to you.
 Help us to be a faithful part of your big picture.
 In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

I love this congregational prayer because it takes us somewhere. It's a very simple prayer without pretensions. It just takes the congregation down, and then it takes them up, with God. And then we go inward for some moments of silence. After the silence, I name the reality: we feel small. But God hears our prayers.

People have talked to me about how meaningful this prayer was for them. It helped them connect with God.

The prayer ends with the church. I emphasize the word “our”—we aren’t just on individual journeys. We are praying together, seeking to live into our call to bear witness, or point, to God. I can bear witness to the power of God who meets us even on a journey as small as this prayer.

Feel free to use or adapt these prayers; in a bulletin, a credit line could read “Carol Penner <http://www.leadinginworship.com>.”