



Navigating Prayer in Digital Spaces

We know that prayer is a fundamental part to any gathering – whether you pray to start or end a group time or you pause to pray for someone in need. But we also know that when it comes to praying in digital spaces, like video calls on Zoom, prayer can get... awkward.

For many people, prayer with other people is already a vulnerable thing and the hiccups that technology creates can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability. But again, I say – prayer *is* important, no matter how awkward or clunky or vulnerable it might feel in digital spaces. We are people who are still called to pray in community, so how can we do it well?

Below are some pieces of advice and recommendations on how to pray while meeting in digital spaces.

Acknowledge and Give Permission

You don't need to pretend that praying over a video call isn't awkward. People will breathe a sigh of relief when you just say "Hey, I know prayer can feel uncomfortable over a video call." Good leadership means you don't just leave it there. Instead, follow up with "But we're created to pray and called to pray in community, so we're going try it today in faith."

Then, give permission for people to pray how they need to. Video calls make us hyper aware of others and ourselves so some of your people might just want to turn their video off during prayer so they can focus. Those who don't typically bow their heads might need to so that they can disengage from everyone else's videos. You might momentarily minimize your Zoom call so that you don't have to work so hard to focus on the prayers rather than your group members cat. Just give people permission to do what they need to do to engage well.

Don't Make it Last Forever

We have tricked ourselves into believing that the longest prayers with the most spiritual and theological words somehow make it to God more quickly than others. This simply is not true. (Say it again for the people in the back!) *This simply is not true.*

I'll offer some suggestions for how to pray later, but if you're going to just do some open-ended prayer time, help people know they can just pray a simple sentence or two and be done. They can pray another sentence after some others have shared. (Picture this – group prayer time no longer becomes listening to monologues... what if prayer was about building off of the small prayers together, as a group?) These are things we already long for in communal prayer and meeting in digital spaces gives us the opportunity to enforce it.

Try New Styles of Prayer

Again, this is something we ought to long for in our groups regardless of how they are meeting. But trying a new style of prayer (especially when a group has been doing it a "certain way") can feel challenging or even unwelcome. (It's also vulnerable to be the leader trying to introduce a new style!) But, because meeting in digital spaces is new, you have lots of room to introduce new prayer styles, too.

Introducing different methods for prayer also gives variety to your calls which means if someone finds one method of prayer challenging, they can rest knowing it won't always be the same each time.

How to Pray in Digital Spaces --- and a few ways you'll want to be careful:

1. Use the Chat Feature

- If you're using Zoom, you have a chat feature where your group can type messages to one another. This can be a super easy way for your group to pray together. If you're tech-savvy, you can play a worship song for your group to listen to or instruct each person to do that individually (with their mics muted, of course!).
- **Why it's helpful:**
 - It gives internal processors more time to think and gives space to those that feel more vulnerable when praying.
 - It allows people to have a record of prayers (you could copy & paste and email out the prayers later.)
 - It's a different sensory experience and gives your brain a break from the constant video/audio feed.
- **Things to be mindful of:**
 - See what devices your people are using. The chat function might not be easy if you have many people using a smartphone.
 - You might have to ask people to mute themselves to avoid the "click clack" of peoples' keyboards. (But I suppose we could just call that a Holy Spirit click clack!)

2. Use Breakout Rooms

- If you're using Zoom, you have breakout room feature where you can break your group into smaller groups to pray – pairs or groups of three.
- **Why it's helpful:**
 - Praying in a smaller group is less intimidating for some.
 - You won't have the same "running into each other" and interruption problem that praying as a group causes on a bigger call.
 - You can assign people to breakout rooms strategically or you can randomize it.
- **Things to be mindful of:**
 - Give people a time limit and use the "broadcast message" function to alert people when you're bringing them back together. When you close a breakout room, users get a 60-second warning, which is helpful too.
 - If people are using a phone (entering the call on audio only), you'll want to give them a heads up because they won't have the same visual experience of moving to and from a breakout room.

3. Follow a Liturgy or Pre-Written Prayer

- Liturgies and pre-written prayers can be powerful tools in community because people are in agreement, lifting up the same prayer in unison. Pre-written prayers that are hallmarks of the faith (like The Lord's Prayer) can be comforting to those who have grown up in more traditional churches and can be a powerful statement of unity.
- **Why it's helpful:**
 - It gives people the words to say so they don't feel like they have to be the "best pray-er"
 - These prayers have often been prayed for hundreds, even thousands of years. There is meaningful truth in joining together now, but also with our brothers and sisters throughout time.
- **Things to be mindful of:**
 - Have people mute themselves. The leader can lead unmuted, but it's best to have everyone else muted because audio and visual will stream in at different times.
 - Make sure people have the words. Don't assume people know a prayer and make sure people have the words to participate – you can use the chat feature or share your screen to show this.

4. One Voice Prayer

- This is a style of prayer where everybody prays at once – the idea is that many people pray different things but at the same time creating "one voice" of prayer that isn't distinguishable to those in the group but builds up the feeling of a community praying.
- **Why it's helpful:**
 - This is a good one to do if people feel wary of praying out loud. It makes it easy to pray with others without feeling the pressure of others listening to your prayer.
 - You won't run into each other praying because the whole point is that everyone is praying at the same time!
- **Things to be mindful of:**
 - Sometimes one-voice prayer ends quickly because people get scared that they will be the last person talking (this happens on or off a video call!). Consider the following options:
 - Have everyone mute themselves but encourage people to pray out loud where they are. After a few minutes, the host can chime in.

- Play a YouTube (or other) video of a worship song at the same time as the prayers – this could work well without having everyone muted.