



Practical input

5. Silencing injustice – intercessory prayer at every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentr.org-whereworldandworshipmeet-everyage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

The big questions:

Is intercessory prayer age-appropriate?

How do we help children to really connect with justice issues in prayer?

How do we model lifestyles of prayer to our children and young people?

Part 1 – Value input

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
above the heavens.
From the lips of children and infants
you have ordained praise
because of your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.

Psalm 8:1-2 (NIV 1984)

The words of this psalm are challenging and troubling. After all, most of us don't want our children and young people in the same sentences as 'enemies, the foe and the avenger'. We'd rather they were safe from any encounter of this nature. But perhaps one of the reasons many of us experience a kind of fear about children getting involved with 'intercession' is because we are misunderstanding it?

Intercession has become something of a loaded term – say it in more traditional church contexts and it often describes a specific slot of prayer in the service... say it in charismatic churches and it conjures very different images – more of a type or style of prayer. In this part of the church, there is even a sense that there are some people who feel called to be 'intercessors' – people who are called to pray (often very passionately) for particular areas or situations in the world.

In most churches, the word 'intercede', and the process of 'intercession' in the context of prayer have come to be understood as the process of being the go between, or mediator, between God and situations or people in the world.

A quick Bible study using the NIV will bring up just seven occurrences of the word ‘intercede’ and only two for ‘intercession’ – and not all these are in reference to prayer. None of them (nor any of the references to prayer more generally) refer to some individuals being more called to prayer than others.

One of these is 2 Timothy 1, which is written to a leader, but it contains the same instruction as passages such as Ephesians 8:18-20 and Philippians 4:6-7 – that we should all be praying, at all times, with all kinds of petitions, requests and intercessions to God. The Lord’s prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) further demystifies outward focused prayer – praise, personal petition, and prayer for the kingdom to come, are all put together as being vital components of the prayers of all who seek God.

Whenever we see injustice, our most natural response should be to intercede for the kingdom to come – for God’s order and perfect plan for that person, situation, circumstance or nation to be restored and redeemed.

In a sense we are saying that the first response should always be prayer – a re-ordering of our perspective, a listening to God, and a bringing to him what is on our heart – knowing that it is already deeply etched onto his.

Surely this shouldn’t be any different for children and young people? Surely we want them to be prayer warriors, not circumstance worriers?

But then comes Romans 8:26... this verse is a beautiful description of how it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to pray for the things on God’s heart. But perhaps in some circles there has been an over-focus on certain aspects or interpretations of it which have led to a feeling that “intercessory prayer” is by nature raw, emotional, beyond our control and as a result of this “adult”.

This has led many of us to be naturally cautious about involving children and young people in heartfelt outward focused prayer and this is understandable.

But this wariness often results in two equally damaging pitfalls. The first is that we can unwittingly build a perception that prayer is simply the right and religious thing to do – a process of listing people to bless without much expectation that anything will be (or indeed even needs to be) different as a result. The second is that we can fail to help children understand how prayer connects to God’s purpose, and heart, for people and his world. So when we ask them what they want to pray for, they aren’t likely to suggest things from an understanding of what is wrong, but simply list things that come to mind.

And both these pitfalls are likely to result in our children seeing prayer as routine, perfunctory, and ultimately – irrelevant to the biggest questions and challenges they, and those around them, face.

But in Romans 8:26 it is the Spirit interceding not us. And we can always trust the Holy Spirit with our children and young people. So if we’re worried that what’s happening is not appropriate for our children, could it be that we are actually worried about something different to what is being discussed in the Bible?

Biblically, there is no distinction made for age on this matter – all Christians should be praying continuously – asking for governments to have wisdom, petitioning for provision for those in need, and longing for individuals and nations to meet and know God.

Is intercession ‘age-appropriate’?

The short answer is that if everyone is to pray as the Lord’s Prayer sets out, then it must be.

The fuller answer is another question.

Do we need to redefine intercession?

We need to take away some of the unnecessary mystery and otherness that has crept in around outward focused prayer, and particularly that which involves the prophetic, in some of our churches.

Not because there is a problem with the passionate pray-ers. In almost all cases, their heart for prayer, maturity in it, and passion as they move in it, are simply an indication of where most of us should be but aren't. But there is a problem nevertheless, because there is a worrying sense amongst many people outside of this group that intercessory prayer is only for some people – those who know how to pray in a particular way, or have been given a particular, and slightly mysterious, passion as they do it.

Prayer is a great mystery – yes. But it is also simply the incredible privilege and wonder of being able to talk to God and know that he is listening, and looking to guide us both to hear, and be, the answer.

The psalms, Jesus' teaching, and the epistles, all give us clear indication that personal prayer and outward focused intercession are as related as breathing in and out.

And when we begin to understand this, we see that there are many ways for children to learn to intercede.

Similar to our discussion in the first of these articles, *Telling the whole story – teaching about justice at every age*, the issue of age-appropriateness should again be related to approach rather than content. So the way we encourage children to connect with interceding about issues of injustice should and must differ at different ages, but we should always be helping them to do so – and do so in a genuine and heartfelt way which grows their understanding of prayer, and of God's heart for the world and all his people.

When we encourage children to pray, we must also teach them the power of prayer in affecting things on earth. Too often prayer ends up being seen as us passively begging a reluctant God to change things, and rarely seeing anything happen in response. Children need to explore with adults the power and purpose of prayer:

- God is wholly good so his heart breaks when he sees pain and injustice (e.g. John 3:16; Romans 8:31; Psalm 68:4-6)
- God longs to hear our prayers (e.g. 1 Peter 3:12a; Colossians 4:2)
- how important it is to pray in agreement with other believers (e.g. Matthew 18:19-20)
- how important it is to persevere in prayer (e.g. Luke 11:5-13, Luke 18:1-8)
- how he responds to our prayers (e.g.1 John 5:14-15; Matthew 7:7-8; Matthew 18:19-20; Matthew 21:22; James 5:15-16)
- how prayer changes us (e.g. Philippians 4:6-7).

They need to understand more about it through scripture, practice and testimony. And we need to help them learn how to see what the Holy Spirit is doing, and how to pray with the authority Jesus has given them.

Blessing models

One of the issues with some of the misconceptions that have grown up around "intercession" is around negativity. Essentially, much intercessory prayer in some contexts is framed around "coming against" things and it is little wonder that this type of approach concerns many of us with regard to children.

Perhaps one of the most helpful approaches – for adults as well as children – is in using "blessing models" of prayer. Essentially, these focus more on the missing (positive) attributes of the kingdom than on the present (negative) aspects of evil –i.e. children might be encouraged to pray for peace where there is no peace, but not to come against fighting; or to intercede for provision and jobs for people rather than to come against unemployment. So we focus

more on the solutions we are praying for than the problems people are facing – not dwelling on distressing mental images such as famine, but instead concentrating on praying for food.

Essentially, this is an outworking of praying for the kingdom to come – by focusing on applying elements of God’s promises of redemption and renewal on existing situations.

We need to avoid the temptation to be too formulaic, or to reduce everything to spiritual concepts and safe words, but there is definitely a place for ensuring that we are focusing on celebrating and blessing whatever is the light, rather than going after the dark.

The former approach recognises that the battle between good and evil is not fought between two equal sides, and empowers our young people to have faith, and pray for, big change.

There will be times, such as in the case of night terrors, where we want to encourage children and young people to tell a dream to go, but this should always be in the context of focusing on Jesus’ light and grace.

Proactive intercession

The blessing model also opens the door for exploring what we might call proactive intercession. Essentially speaking God’s blessing and peace over homes, families, situations and nations – not necessarily in response to something going wrong, but also proactively – in response to the fact that all good things come from God (James 1:17).

Encouraging our children, and ourselves, to bless the good things they see God doing, and to pray for their protection also helps us understand the depth and breadth of outward focused prayer.

Are there some areas to avoid with children and young people?

Clearly not every subject is to be sought out or desired as appropriate for children and young people. Issues of violence and sexual exploitation should of course be avoided, or handled extremely carefully (depending on age).

However, where these issues are coming up for some children, as they tragically sometimes do, we need to find ways to talk about things appropriately so that they can be empowered to pray for a change in their or someone else’s situation.

Growing a new generation of “intercessors”

Our world is in desperate need. Global poverty; climate change; a wave of political change in the Middle East and parts of Africa; Europe and the UK in financial crisis; and many issues of social and family breakdown are threatening the stability of our nation, and the individuals and communities that constitute it.

We need a generation of Christians (across the generations) who will stand up and be counted through the jobs they take, the words they speak, the money they give and the counter-cultural lives they lead.

We also need them on their knees. Our actions are only part of the answer – we desperately need God to move – and both the Bible and history teach us that united, consistent, persistent prayer for our land, and the nations, is the most urgent thing we need to do.

Our children and young people need to learn to pray – not just so they can develop and maintain their personal walks with God (although this is absolutely vital) – but because the world needs the power of their praise, and the change their prayers will bring.

They need to be empowered and released to pray, and they need to see approachable intercession being modelled as the first response in the family, in church, and in children's work. Whether it's the news that someone is ill; reactions to headlines in the news; someone who has been bereaved at school; or the loss of a parent's job; or protection for their friends – turning to God first is always the best approach for all of us.

Giving our young people faith and belief in the power of prayer, and the tools to engage with God naturally and proactively as their first response to living in his world, is more than just teaching them something that's right. It's empowering them with one of the greatest life skills they can have – we want them to grow up equipped and expectant that the world can and will be changed.

The place of prayer in the heart of world changers

There are many famous quotes that talk about our prayers convicting us to be part of the answer. As we fall to our knees and draw closer to the heart of God for those who don't know him, or for those who are need, we will find ourselves compelled to go – to change the world by our actions as well as our words.

We must realise that if we raise a generation of prayers we are creating a generation of world-changers. This is a wonderful thing, but a sacrificial thing too – because as they grow into passionate adults, and catch God's heart for justice in their communities and in the nations, we are likely to find that they are bolder than we ever were.

The parents and leaders who raise pray-ers, raise world-changers. Being one of those is ultimately the safest type of person for our children to be – because they will be in the centre of God's love and kingdom. But God's safety is not our safety, and so we must count the cost that as our children pray differently, they will want to live differently.

May the same be true of us too.

Part 2 – Doing things differently

Families

- Encourage children to pray for people and situations they feel strongly about beyond themselves, perhaps at meal times or before bed when there is prayer time. Try praying with them, and taking it in turns to pray about things you care about that you've seen on the news, or witnessed in your community.
- You could spend some time creating a photo board with your children, again encouraging them to choose photos that represent the things they feel strongly about, or feel it's important to pray for. Then use this board in times of prayer, again allowing the children to choose what they want to focus on.
- Encourage older kids to begin to explore watching programmes such as BBC1's *Newsround* prayerfully by imagining how Jesus feels when he sees these things. Ask your children what they want to say to God about how he feels, and how we feel. And also discuss whether there is anything you want to do differently as a family in response where this is relevant.
- Create a family prayer journal to track what you have prayed for, and how you have seen prayer answered. Follow up with people you have been praying for; watch the news; and actively discuss how you feel when you see prayers answered in the way you were hoping for, and when you don't.

Children's work

- Explore using blessing models to help children affirm the good things they see, and focus on the positive change they want to see happen, and the wholeness that the kingdom brings, rather than on the negative problems and suffering themselves.
- Re-examine whether your curriculum includes teaching about praying for other people, situations and nations. If not, explore how you could cover this with the children. If it does, what does it say? Is it encouraging children to be expectant and persistent in prayer? Adapt it if necessary.
- Try starting from a place where you talk about God's character and what he desires for his people and his world. Then ask the children to suggest things that he might be sad about when he looks at the world. Pray about these things together.
- Use some outward focused Bible stories which focus on people interceding for others (a few are identified in *Exploring the word on justice – Reading the Bible at every age*) to explore the power of praying for others in scripture with the children. Then follow this teaching by encouraging them to share the things that are on their hearts and praying about these together. Try to also talk about what made the people featured aware of others' needs and talk to the children about becoming people who catch God's heart for people and situations.
- Invite someone you know well from the congregation who is working to help people, facing a big decision, or unwell and encourage them to share with the children enough about their situation for them to be able to pray for them. Regularly invite this person back to be prayed for by the children, and to report back to them how God is working in the situation, and helping them persevere.

Youth work

- Encourage young people to engage with the issues that make them angry in society and to turn these into prayer instead of disengaging from them, or rebelling against them. Find creative ways to record these issues, such as having a graffiti wall, or writing protest songs or placards... and then regularly pray about these things together as a group. Talk to the youth about the difference their prayers are making – to the situations themselves, to how they feel about them, and to what they want to do in response.
- Many young people have taken part in the 24:7 prayer movement's approach of creating a prayer room and holding a season of 24:7 prayer for a weekend, week or longer. Visit <http://uk.24-7prayer.com> to find out more. Wherever possible, give the young people ownership of preparing the room, and taking ownership of as many elements of the organisation as possible.

All-ages together

- Encourage different members of the congregation (including children and young people) to share issues they are passionate about and then to lead prayers in those areas to encourage children to connect with their particular heart from God for certain people, situations or areas.
- Encourage members of the congregation to share testimonies of transformation that has happened as a result of prayer, and also a bit about their journeys with waiting for change, and persevering in prayer.

Practical input

Silencing injustice– interceding at every age

- Host an open mic intercession time, where people of all ages can pray informally for whatever God is directing their hearts and thoughts toward.
- Use one or more of the Sanctuary's creative, kinaesthetic resources to explore interceding creatively. Visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer to access these.