

praying for the whole world

A HANDBOOK FOR
INTERCESSORS

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Before you begin



In many churches, the assembly's worship includes a substantial set of intercessions. Through these petitions, worshipers respond to the word of God that was proclaimed in the biblical readings and sermon, and they enact their baptismal calling to intercede for the well-being of all things.

“ In about the year 150 CE, the layman Justin wrote as part of his description of Sunday worship: “Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer. And . . . when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat . . .”¹

1 Justin Martyr, in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 79.

You are to prepare these intercessions for an upcoming liturgy. In many churches, laypersons who are especially attentive to the community's needs are trained in the discipline of prayer, their voices welcomed into the Sunday ensemble. We are promised the help of the Holy Spirit for this momentous ministry. You might begin by thanking God for the task of articulating the world's needs and by asking for the Spirit's guidance throughout your assignment.

This handbook contains much advice and many suggestions. Who am I to compile this handbook for you? A Lutheran laywoman, I first crafted Sunday's prayers of intercession in 1965, and for fifty years I have continued this task, always seeking the language of prayer. Use whatever in this handbook you find helpful as you craft intercessions that are faithful and insightful, engaging and profound.

This handbook proposes seven steps, from Monday through Sunday, to assist your crafting of the prayers of the faithful. Welcome to the seven steps.

On Monday,
step one

1

Think again about intercessions

In the intercessions, the baptized assembly begs a merciful God to respond to the needs of the whole world. This prayer is not a confession of sin, another sermon, a poetic interlude, or the parish announcements. Rather, by means of both general and specific petitions, the intercessions you craft will be both traditional, by voicing those requests that Christians have offered for centuries, and contemporary, by naming whatever calls for God's help this week.



When in the year 156 CE the elderly bishop Polycarp was arrested for being a Christian, the account says that he “requested that they might

grant him an hour to pray undisturbed. He was unable to stop for two hours, calling to mind all those who had ever come into contact with him, both important and insignificant, famous and obscure, and the entire catholic church scattered through the world.”²

Using a standard outline for these intercessions coaxes the prayers to be comprehensive, and during worship the familiar outline guides the worshipers from one topic to the next. Such an outline is provided in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 105 and 218:

Prayers reflect the wideness of God’s mercy for the whole world—

for the church universal, its ministry, and the mission of the gospel;

for the well-being of creation;

for peace and justice in the world, the nations and those in authority, the community;

for the poor, oppressed, sick, bereaved, lonely;

² “The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp,” *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (New York: Oxford, 1972), 7, 9.

*for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit;
for the congregation, and for special concerns.
Additional prayers may come from the assembly.*

Prayers of thanksgiving for the faithful departed may include those who recently have died and those commemorated on the church's calendar.

The presiding minister concludes the prayers. . . .

That outline is introduced with this sentence: “The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion, using the following pattern or another appropriate form.”

As intercessor, you are to put flesh onto the skeleton of the outline. All week long you will think about prayers (1) for the universal church, (2) for the earth, (3) for the nations, (4) for the needy, (5) for the suffering, (6) for the congregation, (7) for any other concerns. These seven topics for the living conclude with (8) thanksgiving for Christians who have died. Early in the week you might write up this outline, leaving plenty of white space so you can place each concern you identify into its appropriate place.

For a blast from the past, read through the General Prayer that was appointed for use each Sunday in the 1917 *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* (see the appendix, pp. 57–60).

First Thessalonians 5:17 reads, “Pray without ceasing.” Romans 8:26 admits, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” Something to consider: how many minutes of worship should the assembly dedicate to the intercessions?