

99 PRAYERS
YOUR CHURCH NEEDS
[BUT DOESN'T KNOW IT YET]

PRAYERS FOR UNPREDICTABLE
AND UNUSUAL TIMES

CARA GILGER, EDITOR



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INTRODUCTION

The looming, Southern style pulpit elevated several feet off the ground blocked the congregation's view of the small, hard pew where the preacher sits. This made it hard for the congregation to see my face as it alternated flashing a strange mix of surprise and compassion, with an equal attempt at composure. Across the chancel standing in the lectern was our Elder for the Sunday. He was known for being a tall gentleman in a well-polished gray suit, mid-40s with two teenage daughters and a string of successful entrepreneurial endeavors. As he stood in front of the congregation clutching either side of the lectern, the sanctuary was silent as we listened to the muffled gulping sound that erupted mid-prayer and the silence that followed as he tried to compose himself amid sobs to complete his morning prayer.

The next morning, the senior pastor, who had been out of town, came by my office to see how my solo weekend preaching and leading worship had gone, as this was my first as a seminary student at the church.

"I heard it went well," he began in his usual exuberant way, "You took my advice on your sermon."

I nodded in agreement, even though I had not and paused mulling over what to say next. "Did you already hear about the prayer?" I asked. He looked at me blankly and shook his head so I continued, "Well, the Elder who was doing the morning prayer, he went to Virginia Tech...did anyone on staff know that?" I paused, "He tried to pray for his alma mater, but instead he broke down crying..."

This had all taken place on Sunday, April 22, 2007, the first Sunday after a mass shooting took place on the campus of Virginia Tech.

The Elder in my church wanted to say something meaningful. He had wanted to say a word on behalf of the people gathered in worship to a loving and present God. He had wanted to say something about suffering and heartache, about brokenness and hope. He wanted a prayer that connected to people who were grieving, and he wanted to do something to connect his own heartache with God's embrace. But sometimes in the midst of the rawness of an event or the closeness of heartache or even the intensity of celebration, it is hard to find the words to articulate our deeply human sorrows, longing and joy to God in community.

The conventional wisdom goes, "You don't know what you don't know," and when it comes to ministry—this beautiful, creative, and messy thing God does when people gather and try to build honest, authentic, and loving community—this is certainly true. I remember my first year of ministry slipping into my office, closing the door quietly so as not to alert my suitemates, and calling my closest friend in ministry. In a hushed tone, I remember confessing what I didn't know, and what had caught me off guard, and wondering aloud if today was the day everyone would find out I secretly didn't know what I was doing.

Sometimes we just don't know what we don't know. We don't know our days will be spent breaking up arguments between volunteers at the church garage sale, or that our evenings will be filled with tense leadership meetings about church finances, or that members of our beloved community would face unspeakable personal circumstances and invite us to join them in those tender, sacred moments. And we may not know how to meet them in these moments with the fullness of God's holy presence.

There's a technical term for this—it's called imposters syndrome. After years as a pastor of spiritual formation, I am

aware that when it comes to prayer, often the leaders we serve alongside have a sense that they are woefully inadequate to the task of prayer, at least in the public form it takes when we gather in Christian community. Whether around board meeting tables or personnel gathering or worship, often in the face of new or challenging moments, we find our words inadequate to the size of the situation in which God meets us.

It is in the spirit of these moments that *99 Prayers* was imagined. Sometimes you don't know what obstacles you might face as a minister or church leader, but you may have the sense that prayer is needed in challenging, transitional, and discerning moments. You may know that the Spirit of God that is always present needs space cleared through the practice of prayer to inhabit our moments of need and joy.

At the heart of prayer is a deep longing to connect our lives to the heart of God, but as Henri Nouwen explains, "Prayer is not something that comes naturally or easily. It is something that requires learning and discipline." *99 Prayers* is a tool for learning how to pray together in unexpected circumstances and a companion for when you know you *need* to pray, but you are not sure *what* to pray.

Enclosed in this book you will find prayers for unexpected circumstance from the deeply troubling to the truly celebratory and those times in between. Created to be a resource for pastors and leaders as a reference and guide, they are a starting place for imagining how one might pray in unexpected moments. These prayers are not meant to be the exact perfect prayer for your specific ministry context, rather, they are a suggested starting point for reflecting on where God is and how God might meet us in a particular moment. Perhaps a sentence or two or a turn of phrase will catch your spiritual imagination and set you on the path to writing a prayer that fits you and your situation authentically.

In the end, our prayers in difficult times are much less about having the right words, as they are about having the right spirit. They are about a spirit of genuine care for the people and community you hold dear.

The prayers included in these pages were written by clergy serving in a variety of ministry contexts across the country. The authors each reflect the diversity of these contexts as well as the diverse theologies represented within Bethany Fellowships.



PRAYERS FOR INDIVIDUALS IN
CHALLENGING TIMES



A family in your congregation has experienced a traumatic death

God, we cry out to you today confused, hurting, and not prepared for this moment. But here and now we turn to you, and to each other, seeking strength for what lies ahead.

We thank you for the gift of (insert deceased name), and we hold tight to (her/his/their) presence, which we sense is still close.

Guide this family, O God, and allow them to accept help from those who love them. When they feel lost or afraid, comfort them with your presence, and with the knowledge that they are being held by a greater and deeper love, O God. May your love, which will be made known in family and friends, be steadfast and near in the days ahead.

In the Name of the Living Christ we pray. Amen.



A member of your congregation has committed suicide

God of strength, we come to you in these moments of deep hurt and confusion. Wrap our souls with your unconditional love to hold our broken hearts, seeking understanding of how a person would feel so alone to take their own life. We feel struggle as we wish we had seen signs that would have helped (deceased name).

Receive (deceased name) in your divine care like no other presence could. In the absence of works may we simply hold this dear one to you in your unfailing light so as to shine a presence of companionship that seemed missing in their life. Let us lean into your presence as our own faith is shaken. We turn to you as our rock and foundation during this time of struggle and pain. May Christ, who knew pain, guide us in the days to come. We pray in your holy name. Amen.



For those who have lost a loved one to an overdose

God of eternal presence, we stand in the unsettled stillness of uninvited grief. We confess our powerlessness over the wretchedness of drug addiction. We, who have stood upon the precipice of lost hope, who have prayed our desperate hearts dry, who have burned with frustrated anger among the broken pieces of shattered promises, stand now before you in exhausted lament.

We call upon your merciful hand to touch the tender wounds of betrayal, that deep well of sadness, and heal us. We ask that you release us from the remaining power of addiction that survives the death of our beloved (deceased name). We ask for grace to endure the misunderstanding of others and deliverance from the clouds of shame. We yearn for your light and recovery of wholeness for we who hold the memory of your beloved in our hearts. It is in the Spirit of the resurrected Christ we pray. Amen.



A member or close relative of the congregation passes away on deployment

O God, my Lord,
Keeper of my heart and guardian of my soul,
Reach me through the darkness of this moment.
I am empty.
I am alone.
I am surrounded by a war a thousand miles away;
And I feel lost in its noise and destruction even here.
Hear my plea, God, for my heart is broken:
A good friend and saint of my beloved church was killed in
action.
In my own mind I strived to prepare my heart for this
possibility,
“You’ve buried saints before this and you will bury saints after
this,”
But this grief is different;
It is filled with a discriminate anger: at the enemy, at the
military, at my country.
These perpetual wars continue to manipulate my deepest
being.
I am a tear-stained servant; I try to heal myself of this loss.
I search for the familiar words of assurance; I cannot find them.
I wrestle with how I will speak love to the casualties of this
moment,
Her father, her mother, her brothers, her friends - all that
prayed to you for her.
Sometimes I wonder, God, whether war creates more tears
than you can hold in your heart,
But I pray you hold my friend within your peace.
Hear my prayer, O God, my Lord. Amen.



A member of your community is facing mental health issues

Creator God, you made humanity in your image and said that it was very good. You knit us together in our mother's womb, and we are fearfully and wonderfully made. But sometimes darkness casts a shadow on the beauty of your creation; a darkness that overwhelms and suffocates; a darkness found in the wilderness of mental illness.

We blame those who suffer, calling them weak, crazy, and broken, but it's not their fault. This disease of the mind is debilitating, life altering, and dangerous. For the afflicted, there are no feelings of peace and no reassurance of comfort, and little hope remains. Fear has replaced control.

Provide us with the tools to care for our friends and neighbors. Encourage us to educate ourselves, not only so we can spread awareness, but so we can also cultivate compassion and promote better understanding.

For those who suffer, we pray for peace. For those wandering in the wilderness, we pray for a glimpse of paradise. For those trying so hard to get back to what used to be, we pray for acceptance of the new normal that is to come.

God of comfort, we know that you are in control even when our mind tells us otherwise. You are there for your children who are hurting and scared. You reach down with your loving hand and calm the storm that rages within. It is to you, O God, that we look for our guidance and hope as we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.



A member of your congregation is struggling with depression

God you know how dark the darkness can be, and you know how much pain the human heart can hold. (Name) is suffering right now, this disease of depression has reared up one more time and it is telling (her/him/them) lies about who they are and who you created them to be in your image, O God. Depression tells us that we are nothing, that the world is empty, that we are alone. But God we pray: come now and be the truth, come and be the morning that follows the night of weeping. Come, God, and speak your promises again; come and be hope; come and be the strength and courage for another minute, another hour, another day. Surround (name) with your loving care; send them the help and company they need, and make your presence known to them in these difficult days, bringing them rest and peace. Amen.



A member in your congregation is experiencing personal financial crisis

Holy One,

At times we feel so far from your radical abundance,
far from having what we need to flourish and to thrive,
far from a financial space of stability and safety.

Your people are no stranger to these wilderness times—
as the Israelites longed for the promised land,
as Abraham waited for a people,
as Sarah yearned for a child,
so we desire a space of security, a place where we have access
to the resources we need.

We are not alone in this seeking, in this desiring, in this
yearning for peace of mind.

Your people have walked this road before, and you have walked
with them.

Step by step, day by day,
and today, Holy One, you walk with us still.

Strengthen us for the work ahead.

Embolden us to seek out resources, services, and the assistance
we require,

Remind us that to yearn for something better,
for flourishing and abundance, for stability and security,
requires courage, persistence, and faithfulness, and all of this
is indeed possible because we are not alone.

As you have been with your people throughout history,
so you are with us now, as
step by step, day by day,
you walk with us still.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



A member is placing their spouse into assisted living

God of all our days,

God who holds the future: Sometimes it is so hard to change. We come into different seasons of life; we are faced with new challenges as well as new limitations; and sometimes we must make impossible choices. We lift up to you our sister/brother (name) who has had to make one of those choices. God, we pray now that you will give (him/her/them) peace, that you will protect them from doubt, fear, and guilt, and that you will walk beside them through this time of change.

And we pray also for (spouse's name), that you will be present to (her/him/them), that you will speak to their heart and help them believe that they are safe and loved. Faithful God, as you have been in this marriage always, continue to be part of it now, and show the way into the future. Amen.



A member of your congregation has miscarried

God of the brokenhearted,

We come to you this day with sighs too deep for words. We hold the (insert name) family in your light. God, they were expecting a child, not this pain. They were expecting sleepless nights with a crying infant, not sleepless nights filled with the utter despair of silence. They were expecting the cries of a newborn, and instead they are holding the cries of their own grief. Comfort them, O God.

Lay your healing presence upon broken hearts. And God, we pray that you embolden us to surround them in our prayers and our love both in word and in deed. Help us to hold their grief tenderly with them, reminding them that they are not alone. Reminding them that just as you surround them with loving care, O God, so does this community of faith. May we together lean into you as we seek your healing and your hope. Amen.



Social services has become involved with a family in your community

O God,

You seek to shelter us all as a mother hen, pulling us into the
safety of your embrace.

And yet sometimes we do not experience that safety in our
relationships.

As flawed and sinful human beings,

We can fall short of caring for one another.

We can experience pain caused by those who are called to love
us.

In this time of unknowing, in this time of questions, anger, and
distress,

O God we come to you.

Where there is need for reconciliation and open hearts and
minds.

Where there is need for protection, shelter your children from
harm.

Where there is hate and anger, be a source of peace.

Grant all involved your wisdom and mercy.

Guide us in the pursuit of justice and safety for all your beloved
children.

Guide us into the safety of your embrace.

Amen.



For someone beginning treatment for a longterm illness

Great God, you are our refuge and strength, our very present help in times of trouble. We turn to you now, lifting (name) in love and care. Enfold (her/him/them) in your protective embrace. Hold their heart within your heart and make your abiding presence known during each and every step of the journey that lies ahead. Reside with them as they sit in waiting rooms and exam rooms. Provide them with courageous fortitude during all tests, procedures, and treatments. Grant them your peace, especially during times of anxious waiting and uncertainty. Gift the entire care team with wisdom, compassion, and the expertise needed to provide the best care to our beloved. (name) is your precious child, your beautiful creation. Embolden and empower them now—in mind, body, and spirit—and instill within him/her a hopeful reassurance of your faithful promises.

Bring your wholeness to brokenness, your healing to illness, your strength to weakness, and cover us in your all-surpassing grace. We trust in your healing Spirit and providential care. Amen.



A family in your church is being deported unexpectedly

O God, Dieu, Dios, and Gott, (inserting any other language within the community) we are a community from many different backgrounds, cultures, and journeys, but we are all gathered here, following your call to love and support one another. Be with the (insert name) family, as your beloved children face the challenge of staying in the land they call home. May they know that you are with them on every step of the journey. Help them to know that they are yours without reservations or papers. And may we as a community help them to know your church is built on people and not boundaries. This is not a struggle they face alone.

Holy One, be with each of us as we offer sanctuary in our hearts when we cannot offer the security of space. We follow Jesus, as one born in persecution, forced to leave home and family behind, and yet returned into your loving embrace. May we act with such courage and faith, and forever keep in our hearts your abundant love and eternal grace. In the name of Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.