

# Prayer Journeys with Children

by Elsie Hannah Ruth Rempel

Not only is this a great resource for praying with children and acknowledging their comfort with God, it encourages the adults who are using it to explore prayer. Creating spaces for prayer is essential for our journey of faith, no matter our age, and this booklet gives us a wonderful guide.

- Marla Langelotz, Assistant Pastor,  
Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, MB.

Thank you Elsie for creating this exciting, encouraging and easy guide to help us adults take our first steps in praying with children. I can't wait to incorporate them with the children I am blessed to work with.

- Sunnie Friesen, Pastor of Young Families,  
Steinbach Mennonite Church, Steinbach, MB.



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a guide  
for parents,  
grandparents,  
and other caregivers



## Endnotes

- 1 Walter Wagnerin, *The Orphean Passages*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1986, pp 20-21.
- 2 Sophia Cavaletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, tr. By Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter, (Chicago, IL, archdiocese of Chicago: liturgy Training publications, 1992 edition), 170, describes how young children listen and respond to these themes with passion, that contemplating on these themes leads them to exhibit a profound sense of serene peace and that these spiritual themes become part of the children themselves, as if they had always known them.
- 3 This method of evening blessing is recommended and described in *Circle of Grace: Praying with—and for—your children*, Gregory and Suzanne M.Wolfe, NY, Ballantine Books, 2000, 59.
- 4 *The Woodland Gospels: According to Captain Beaky and His Band* by Jeremy Lloyd (Author), Graham Percy (Illustrator), (Faber & Faber, Boston, 1984) utilizes children's love of, and identification with, animals who exhibit our human foibles, to communicate the gospel's challenging message in a child-appropriate manner. Perhaps that is why it has a special endorsement from the Archbishop of Canterbury.
- 5 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 60.
- 6 Caroljean Willie, *Praying All Ways: A Multiple Intelligences Approach to Prayer* (Orlando, FL, Harcourt Religion Publishers, 2005), iv.
- 7 Adapted from Elsie Rempel and friends, *The Song and Activity Guide for God's love is for everybody* (FLR and Mennonite Church Canada, 2002), 35-37.

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available for loan from

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p: 316-283-6300  
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and the Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre  
600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB, R3P 0M4,  
p: 1-866-888-6785  
Arlyn Friesen Epp, Director

### ***Prayer for People Who Can't Sit Still***

Tenny-Brittian, William. Chalice. 2005.

A wonderful book for folks who prefer to be active and moving in order to learn and pray. Read this for dozens of new ways of praying with art, journaling, music, walking, and much more.

### ***Praying All Ways: A Multiple Intelligences Approach to Prayer***

Willie, Caroljean. Harcourt, 2005.

Provides a fresh perspective on the many ways we can pray through a myriad of prayer models.

### ***The Natural Way of Prayer: being free to express what you feel deep within***

Willowgreen, Video

With nature scenes shown in the background, 12 brief directions for prayer are provided, along with practical suggestions to be patient, honest, receptive to God, and more.

To borrow these and more resources on the topic of Prayer/Spiritual Practices with Children see: [www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/587](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/587)

## **Introduction**

My generation, the “boomers” (those born in the post WW2 economic boom years), who are quickly becoming zoomers (zooming toward retirement and claiming it as an active time), are those who often stopped practicing the engrained rituals of family prayer and regular Bible reading. We still remember those practices from our childhood and what we thought was stiff and formal or uncomfortable about them, but we have not passed these practices on to our children. As grandparents, we are now old enough to know something precious was lost when we entrusted faith nurture to the specialists, the church’s directors of faith formation, the Sunday school teachers, camp counsellors, and club leaders. We are grateful for the second chance we get with our grandchildren but we’ve lost our confidence. And many of our children, the parents of today’s children, also know that something is missing, and long for ways of helping their children know they are part of God’s people, who are called, equipped, and sent to engage the world with the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have been privileged, and deeply blessed, by my journey of praying with children. As a teacher at the Winnipeg Mennonite Elementary School, for twelve years I led children in daily classroom devotions, Bible classes, and weekly chapel services. Then, when I was called to my current ministry as Director of Christian nurture in Mennonite Church Canada, the sacred space with the children and their teachers, in many of our congregations, was opened to me. So were the board room tables where curriculum and worship events for God’s children of all ages were planned. My grandchildren live nearby, and so I’ve been a natural part of their weekly lives, and have experienced first-hand why Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belongs to children and those who are like them. And while I’ve shared that journey, my Masters studies in theology and faith formation opened up to me the community of those who are passionate and informed about the spirituality of children.

It is from this privileged perspective that I share this journey with you, hoping that my journey with children and their spirituality, and the strategies I have picked up and developed along the way, can help others provide the mentoring and encouragement to the children with which God has entrusted us. If this can happen, I can only say thanks and glory be to God, who came to us as a child in Jesus Christ, and who has promised to be with us always, to the end of the age.

- Elsie Hannah Ruth Rempel

## Resources for prayer journeys

### *Savoring God: praying with all our senses*

Finley, Kathleen. Ave Maria Press, 2003.

Being with God through very tangible, specific objects of everyday life – clouds, rocks, rain, salt, and more. Based on the premise that we are created with senses for a reason and that Jesus used many senses as he loved, related to, and ministered to people.

### *Heart Ignite: 166 engaging prayer experiences for all ages*

Griner, Lyle and Diane Monroe. Youth and Family Institute, 2003.

Includes ideas for prayer that include nature, voice, food, fire, non-verbal, and more.

### *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom: Experiences for Children and Youth*

Halverson, Delia. Abingdon, 1989.

Briefly presents sound theological, theoretical, and educational principles and focuses on practical step-by-step activities to engage children in many different prayer experiences.

### *Beyond Words: 15 ways of doing prayer*

Ingram, Kristen Johnson. Morehouse, 2004.

Invites the reader to pray in old and new ways, through music, gardening, walking, art, and more. Sometimes we can pray without saying any words at all! It's a truth Ingram discovered when she was stopped from photographing a pow-wow because a Native American tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Wait, this is a prayer the dancer is doing."

### *Circle of Grace: Praying with—and for—your children*

Wolfe, Gregory and Suzanne M., Ballantine Books, 2000.

Anecdotal and insightful reflections on the actual rough and tumble of a family's prayer life plus a wealth of formal prayers for the many occasions of family life and the different aspects of prayer such as thanksgiving, praise, petitions, and intercession. Written with a healthy blend of wit and wisdom, this book will encourage many families to deepen their connections to God and each other.

## Tips on leading children in prayer

- Create a safe informal environment in which to ask children when they feel or have felt close to God. Invite adults to tell of their similar experiences.
- Remember that children are physical and full of energy. Like young puppies, they express themselves physically, but they also respond to short periods of contemplative silence.
- Encourage and support families as they reclaim and restore the home as a centre of faith formation.
- Check out and borrow from the wealth of resources from the Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre, Western District Conference Resource Library, [crlib@mennowdc.org](mailto:crlib@mennowdc.org), and Mennonite Church USA MennoSource.
- Access the gifts already present in the *Gather 'Round* Sunday School curriculum.
  - o The Winter, 2008 issue of Parent/Caregiver, pages 122–124 includes an inventory for parents, some sample prayers, and quotations about praying with children.
  - o Use the *Gather 'Round At Home* resources. Each quarter includes a unique Talkabout with many creative responses to the scriptures and themes of each week's session.
- Host a seminar or weekend workshop on children's spirituality.
- Devote a Kid's club event to exploring the types of prayer found in this booklet.

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### Additional Ideas and Resources

Christian Educators have frequently emphasized adults' responsibility to teach children about faith, with little recognition that children experience God in authentic ways and have experiences of God that are instructive to adults.

We've taught children ways to recognize God in their head space, but not in their heart space. Some people even say that if you get it all into the head without working on the encounter with God, you can inoculate children against faith. What a loss and stumbling block on a child's spiritual journey! However, children are not the only ones who lose in such an approach to Christian Education, so do the adults. If this anecdotal account of prayer journeys with children has blessed you and encouraged you to embark on a similar journey with the children God has blessed your life with, here are a few tips to help you get started.

This booklet began by acknowledging the deep desire of Christian parents and grandparents for our children and grandchildren to be in a life-giving, or saving, relationship with God. The journey into praying with children, shared with you on these pages, has enriched this teacher/grandma/director of faith nurture's relationship with God immeasurably. That's no guarantee her grandchildren won't think Grandma Elsie sometimes prays dumb prayers, even if she has learned that children don't need to grow up before they can love God. But God and our children are gracious, and the journey of praying with and for our children is filled with opportunities for forgiveness and renewal.

If we return to the image of our relationship with God as a dance that begins in the mists of time, we can also claim and trust that this dance continues and that God is the leading partner in this dance. God, our dance partner, is confidently in the lead, and will not be discouraged by our missteps. Faith will be formed as we dance and journey on. Thanks be to God.

feelings, grateful feelings, sad feelings, sorry feelings, and even angry feelings. (Imagine you have an experience, or a problem that you'd really like to get rid of. Hold it in your hand, like a stone, and use all your energy to throw it away so God can take care of it for you.) This idea acknowledges our so-called 'negative' emotions and the largeness of God.

## Prayer Stick Journey

Go on a nature walk and look for a twig with at least one fork. Sit with it and thank God for the life it represents. Find some other natural objects that you can add to your twig. Tie some colourful yarn and the objects onto the prayer stick, thinking about what each has to teach you. Offer a prayer of thanks and place your stick into the ground. Watch the way the wind moves the yarn and objects and think about the way God wants to move in you to release your gifts for blessing others. (from *Praying All Ways*, p 145)

## Responding to music

Listen to the instrumental piece, "God's Family," Track 16 on Bryan Moyer Suderman's CD: *God's Love is for everybody*, 2002. Bryan writes about this song, "God's great song invites us all to join in, whoever we are and wherever we come from. How many different instruments do you hear in this song? Do you know where they come from? What instrument, melody or rhythm will you add? In God's family, there is always room for more."

Listen to this song again and let it help you relax into God's love. Imagine yourself into God's lap, hand, or heart.

Imagine God is showing you a video of the places he loves as you hear the instruments from different places. What do you see? What does this encourage you to pray about?

Develop a liturgical dance for this music. Pray through your dance movements.

Hold play dough as you listen and let your fingers make whatever they want out of the play dough as a way of praying with your hands.<sup>7</sup>

# part1 getting started

As Christian parents and grandparents, one of our deepest desires is for our children and grandchildren to be in a life-giving, or saving, relationship with God. So it is not surprising that Grandma Nancy prayed that her three year old granddaughter would grow to know and love the Lord. What is more surprising is little Megan's response. Megan loved Grandma Nancy and had learned not to contradict her, but she drew her mother aside to tell her that Grandma Nancy had just prayed a dumb prayer. "Oh really," her mother replied, "and what did you think was dumb about it?"

**"Well, Mommy, I already know and love God!  
I don't need to grow up first."**

Megan had sensed and resented the common assumption that Christian faith begins after children have learned many stories and teachings about God and God's people, once they are old enough to understand, articulate, and make mature decisions about following Jesus. Thankfully, several decades of work in the area of Children's Spirituality are confirming that children have a natural awareness of the divine, or, as Walter Wagnerin says, that "our dance with God begins in the mists of time."<sup>1</sup>

What could have happened if Grandma Nancy had prayed with Megan, instead of for Megan; if Grandma Nancy had known and believed that young children are capable of faith? Perhaps they could have held hands and Grandma Nancy could have lit a candle, as a God light or Christ candle, and begun the prayer time by saying, "We light this candle to help us remember that Jesus is the light of the world." They could have held hands as she prayed,

"God, we love you and feel your love for us in the love we share as a family. Thank you God, for being with us and bringing light into the dark and scary places of our lives. Thank you for this food. Please help those who are hungry, or lonely, or frightened tonight. Bless us and help us to be a blessing."

And then the prayer time could have finished with a ritual of placing a hand over the folded hands of the person on their right, saying “may the peace of Christ be with you.” That person could have responded with, “and also with you.” As the blessing worked its way around the table Megan could have blown out the candle and might have said, “Now we see the God light. Now we blow it out and God is everywhere!” Grandma Nancy could have given her a hug and thanked her for the blessing of her childlike confession of faith.

While the names have been changed and the stories of two extended families have been blended, these are true examples of praying for and with young children in a three generational context. Children under 6 years of age cannot understand or articulate abstract concepts, but they have an intuitive awareness of the presence of God. If we provide language and practices that help them express this awareness of God, they will pray and bless us with their prayers. But how?

### Repeated Symbolic Actions

Young children respond positively to repeated, symbolic actions for the relationship between God and God’s people. They have a natural attraction to Jesus’ symbolic “I am” statements, as recorded in the Gospel of John, especially to “I am the light of the world,” and “I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep by name.”<sup>2</sup>

My granddaughters grew up with a predictable bedtime prayer ritual. It began by becoming quiet and remembering that God was present, and then reflecting together on the happy and sad parts of the day. It included opportunities to say sorry to God for things they, or the adult who was praying with them, regretted, and opportunities to pray for others. This informal time was completed with a blessing for each child that concluded with this blessing, “The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26). In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.” The final words were accompanied by making a cross on the child’s forehead.<sup>3</sup> And as they drifted off to sleep, the day’s end conversation with God sometimes continued in ways that deeply blessed the adult fortunate enough to be in earshot. As a grandmother who lived near her grandchildren, I was that adult, once a week for about five years, and basked in the intimate holiness of those evening prayers. Once, one of them responded to the signing

In planning that evening, the club leader and I had selected the prayer activities from a broader resource of activities that had been successfully used in an intergenerational Mennonite church retreat setting. At the retreat, these prayer activities formed the basis for participation in the Sunday morning worship service.

The list and description of the activities we didn’t have time for is included here for others to be encouraged and inspired by.

### Sacred Geometry or Addition and Subtraction Prayer

(*Praying All Ways*, pp 49, 50 or 52)

Walk outside and look for geometric shapes in nature, or look at a collection of paper, or wooden, geometric shapes. Thank God for the simplicity of shapes, or reflect on how God is like that shape, what that shape can teach you, what role it plays in your life, etc. Or, think about the things we can add to, or subtract from, our lives to help us connect with God and God’s purposes.

### Interview (from *Praying all Ways* p. 28)

Imagine yourself chatting with a favourite Bible character. Ask him or her about his or her life, and tell him how yours is the same and different. Write up the conversation. Talk to him or her about a current problem in the world and ask for their advice on what we could do to solve it. After you have finished the conversation, ask God to give you the courage and strength to respond to that problem.

### Praying with our bodies:

- Learn the actions for St. Patrick’s Prayer “Christ be with me”.
- Pick a familiar table grace and develop your own simple movements for it. Explore a few simple movements (adapted from Tai Chi) to help you listen for and to God, or pray with clay and remember we are as clay in God’s hands. (*Praying All Ways*, pp 120 -124)
- Think of actions that express our feelings about God. Actions can show God how we are feeling better than words can. Try out actions for happy

*What does that shape look like? You are right, it looks like a pretzel. I am going to give each of you a pretzel, and when you get it, keep it until everyone has one. Then we will put our arms into a pretzel prayer position and eat it. While we eat we will remember how much God loves us, how much the church loves us, and thank God that the family of God is such a loving place. We will tell God about our love.*

*While I hand out these pretzels, I invite you to connect with that quiet place inside of you where you know God is near. Are you ready? (Hand out pretzels)*

*Let's eat together, pray together, and know the blessings of God and God's church. (Silence and a short prayer of thanks)*

The evening was drawing to a close, and a rich sense of benediction rested on us all, the leaders, the children, and the parents who had been there to observe this curiosity-generating event. When an 11 year old girl came up to me with shining eyes to thank me for coming and to tell me how much closer she felt to God, my cup of blessing overflowed. What a privilege it is to facilitate and remove some of the clutter on a few of the many pathways to God for children.

of the cross on her forehead by saying, "That felt so nice. Will you do it again?" After I did so, gladly and gently, and planted a kiss on her forehead, she asked for permission and did the same for me on my forehead. That evening's ritual of blessing still blesses me. No wonder Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14)

Other children are nurtured in the tradition of memorized, or formal, bedtime prayers. Memorized bedtime prayers have the benefit of always being there for you and reminding you of their profound truth even when you are too tired or distraught to formulate such thoughts yourself. They allow us to grow into, or back into, the meaning of the words we pray. On the other hand, when prayed without attentiveness, the intentionality of prayer can be reduced. With any form of prayer, it is important to grow still and aware of being in the presence of God.

## **Memorized and Spontaneous Prayers**

My colleague has three boys, aged 2, 4 and 6. When the oldest, Micah, entered kindergarten, he was introduced to the daily ritual of praying the Lord's Prayer at school. Norm supported this increasingly rare public school experience of his son by discussing each line of the prayer with him and adding it to the bedtime prayer ritual at home. When Micah learned some of the American Sign Language signs for this prayer at the children's program of our denomination's annual assembly, he volunteered to lead the congregation in this prayer when they reported their Assembly experiences. Lord's Prayer had also become his prayer. His younger brothers have learned it as well by participating in the bedtime ritual where the whole family kneels around their bunk beds and prays it together. The two year old chimes in on the occasional word and joins in heartily on the Amen.

When it comes to meal-time prayers, the two year old has his definite preferences for which memorized prayer it will be, and prayer time goes more smoothly if his agreement has been secured before they begin. Since they held hands to pray in a friend's home, this has become the favoured prayer action for all three boys.

The young faith of Marge's 5 year old granddaughter (let's call her Stephanie) had also been nurtured with memorized prayers. While there are many benefits to memorizing table and bedtime prayers, they can lack the intimacy of

spontaneous prayers. Stephanie longed for the richness and intimacy she noticed in her grandmother's spontaneous prayers. So, when a weekend sleepover offered the right opportunity, Stephanie told her grandmother that she wanted to learn how to pray like that. Marge explained the method involved in spontaneous prayer as well as she could and then modeled that method of prayer with her at bedtime. Stephanie was very silent and didn't pray audibly that night, but by the next night she was ready and happy to pray first. She prayed a simple and sincere and spontaneous prayer that expressed her desire for intimacy with God. In the process she blessed her grandmother deeply.

### Silent, Listening Prayer

Twelve years as a third grade teacher in a Mennonite elementary school taught me much about the spirituality of eight year old children. Each school day provided the unique opportunity of overseeing a classroom community of learning and faith practice. Sometimes, I thought of them as my little congregation.

But teaching was also exhausting, and by the end of each school year, I needed physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual renewal. In 1996, I took the study and prayer guides on our denomination's vision statement along on a camping trip. In the dappled sunlight of an aspen glade I deepened my practice of silent, listening prayer with these resources and found it particularly rejuvenating. Because it was such a blessing to engage in the guided, silent, listening prayers, I looked for ways of sharing its blessings with my students.

The following September, filled with inner hope and trepidation, and an outer display of confidence and enthusiasm, I introduced a time of silent prayer into the class's regular opening exercises. Each morning, after singing the national anthem and saying the prayer Jesus taught us, I encouraged the children to put their heads on their desks and imagine themselves into the heart of God. After a period of silent contemplation I guided them to look and see who else was in God's heart and then to share brief spoken prayers of intercession. I was surprised at how easily and naturally the children accepted this routine.

Of course, there was a learning curve. Each September weekday morning included heads turned toward the clock to see if everyone could actually stay quiet for one whole minute, then 1 ½, then two minutes. There were giggles and reminders that we'd have to start over, but after two weeks the pattern was set and accepted. That says at least as much about the co-operative nature of

### Pretzel Prayer (kinesthetic/intrapersonal)



After this rather exhilarating experience in the sanctuary, Pamela led the children back into their regular club room where we sat in a circle and ate a snack of soft pretzels and juice. Even before the relationship that pretzels have to prayer was shared with them, one girl exclaimed, "This is like Jesus eating with his disciples on the night before he was arrested. Pretzels are bread, and juice is a lot like wine." It was a holy, comfortable, informal time of conversation and food fellowship.

After we were finished our snack, we gathered around the labyrinth for a more formalized "pretzel prayer," which was introduced with the following text.

*A long time ago there was man who loved Jesus and who loved children very much. He wanted the children to remember how much God loved them and wanted their love. This man baked bread, so he took strips of leftover bread dough and shaped them like praying arms. He baked them and gave them to the children in his village. In those days people prayed like this: they kept their eyes open and they put each hand across their bodies to hold their other shoulder. It was like getting a hug from God and giving a hug back to God.*

## Indoor Prayer Walk (interpersonal/ verbal/musical)

Stop at the pastor's office and pray for the pastor; stop by the piano and pray for people who provide music for the church; stop by the kitchen and pray for people who provide food and wash dishes at fellowship times by the cleaning closet to pray for those who keep the church clean; in the sanctuary to pray for the people who worship there, etc. Before starting the walk, teach the children how to pray sentence prayers. Give examples, such as "Dear God, thank you for the work our custodian does. We like a clean church." "We pray that the people who worship here will feel welcomed and know you are with them. We pray that you will be pleased by their love and worship."

During this particular prayer walk, my heart was warmed by the thankful delight these children expressed about the infants and children who were younger than they were, by their love for their pastor, who knew them all by name and enjoyed playing a bit of ball with them, and by the antiphonal singing of "Lord, listen to your children praying" that became the right thing to do as we entered the sanctuary in which the choir was rehearsing for Sunday's service.



eight year olds as it does about the effectiveness of the teaching method. My granddaughters' public school teacher does something similar by beginning each afternoon with a five minute period of 'meditation'. My granddaughters were fascinated by this practice and also talked about the giggles that were part of learning to meditate.

## Prayer Journals

After several years of such silent, guided prayer in my classroom, I introduced the use of weekly prayer journals. Delia Halverson's *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom: Experiences for Children and Youth*, (Abingdon, 1989) and the example of a teaching colleague were my guides. I began by selecting a variety of prayer starters that we pasted into our journals each Monday morning. These included short pieces of Scripture, prayers from the back of *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, and samples of prayer patterns. Prayer patterns were taught by composing a class prayer according to that pattern before composing their individual prayers.

After establishing a worshipful mood by singing and signing a worship song, we dwelled in individual prayer time for about ten minutes. I, and they, would draw around the sample prayer, rewrite the prayer in our own words, and highlight words that were particularly meaningful, or just look at them. As children finished their prayers they brought me the prayer journals and moved to the class carpet, where they waited quietly for the others to finish. When I received the journal in a closed condition, its contents remained between them and God, but when I received an open journal, its contents blessed me deeply. During 'carpet time' four or five children generally gave me permission to share their prayer work with the others.

The way these children prayed in their journals taught me so much about the depth of children's spiritual life that I became passionate about wanting to share it with the broader church. A number of them gifted me with a favourite prayer so that I could share them in print with others. The "favourite prayers" reflect these six different approaches: invitations to pray about a current issue, pop-up prayers, additions to a prayer frame, sense prayers, and reflections: on a religious symbol, on heritage prayers, and on Psalms. (Note: The children's spelling, wording, and punctuation has been retained in the prayers.)

## Current Issue

At the beginning of the year I encouraged each child to write a prayer about their fears and dreams regarding grade three. They sealed the letters and gave them to me. At the end of the year I gave them back to the students to see how God had responded to their prayer. These freestyle 'issue prayers' came from two of the younger boys in the class: Eric's prayer may have been stimulated by the pictures on the page he wrote on, but a passionate concern for plants and animals is quite common at this age. He described his understanding of the right and wrong way to respond to our environment with the following words and pictures. Note the pavement lines behind the protest signs and his arrows pointing to the 'wrong way':

*Dear God Thank you for the Birds that sing Thank you for the plants and trees and help all the endangered species.*  
- Eric, 7

And this heartfelt petition was stimulated by the need of the child, who knew how hard it was to be nice when he was over-tired:

*God please help me be nice today and stay awake.*  
- Dillon



## Painting Prayer (visual/logical-mathematical/intrapersonal)



Set up easels for painting, or place a large piece of mural paper on the floor. Provide paints, markers or chalk. Discuss with children how God hears our unspoken prayers as well as our spoken prayers, and that God speaks to our inner ears if we become quiet and listen. The pictures they create can express their unspoken messages to God and their responses to what they sense God saying to them. They can use geometric shapes that help them think about God and their problems. With that in mind, invite children to quietly paint their prayers.

After this relatively quiet half hour in which the children reflected and listened to the inner voice of God, they were definitely ready for something that was more socially interactive. We gathered in the hallway between the pastor's and church secretary's offices to begin our prayer walk through the church, in which we would walk through the church and stop at various places to pray, inviting them to say sentence prayers in which they thanked and prayed for what happened in those rooms.

The children's enthusiasm and curiosity had definitely been sparked, and they had accepted my leadership as their guide for the evening. Therefore, they were ready to move into two groups, one led by their loved and trusted club leader, and the other by the guest from the Mennonite Church Canada offices with her blue cloth labyrinth that filled a large Sunday school room. Pamela, the club leader, supervised a large prayer mural painting activity while I introduced groups of four or five to the ancient form of prayer walking, known as the labyrinth.

### Labyrinth walking (kinesthetic/intrapersonal)



On a labyrinth, we walk the path, prayerfully bringing all that we are, all joys and concerns, our plans and our worries to God. When we get to the centre, we pause to leave them there at the foot of the cross, or other sacred symbol. As we walk out, we listen for what God wants to fill our emptied hearts and hands with for our continuing journey of faithful living.

### Pop-up prayers

Pop up prayers consist of several short sentences or phrases that just seem to pop up in your mind after you spend some time thinking about a subject or relaxing in the heart of God. (Halverson, 43) Here are two samples that reveal the intimacy these girls experience with the divine, seamlessly integrated with their awareness of creation and their daily activities:

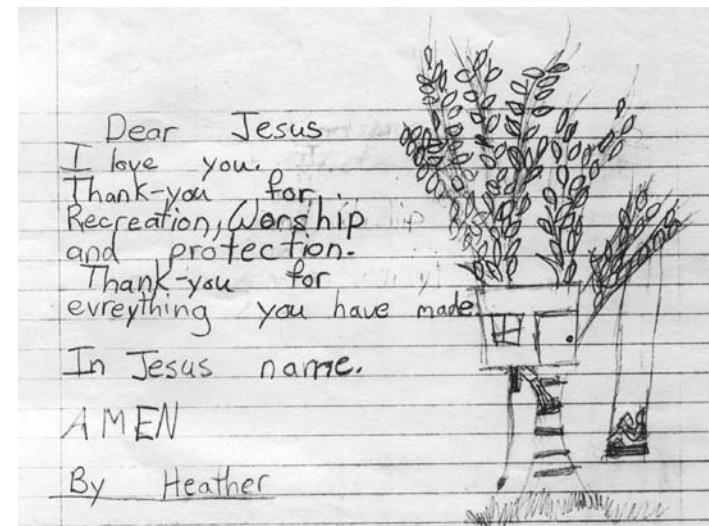
*Dear Jesus I love you. Thank you for Recreation, Worship and protection. Thank you for Everything you have made.*

*In Jesus name. AMEN.*

*– Heather, 8*

*Dear God, I am so happy for the birds that fly so high.  
Thank you for the stars look like diamonds in the night sky.  
Thank you that Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sin.*

*– Emily, 8*



## Additions to a prayer frame

In this form of prayer, the frame provides an opening and closing line with space for reflection and participation in the middle.

Because Halloween was a controversial subject at our school, I focused on its Christian meaning as “All Hallows Eve” and then introduced an All Saints Day prayer frame the next morning to help us remember how we were being blessed by the memories of people and pets that had died. This prayer, which reflects on the grandfather she never got to meet, became Alexandra’s favourite prayer of the year.

*On All Saints Day we remember*

*I remember when my dad told me a story about his dad that he hardly got to see his dad he owly (only) got to see him till he was 6. And he died when my dad was in grade one.*

*Their memories still bless us.*

## Sense prayers

It was finally spring and the frozen world of a prairie winter no more. The long hours of sunshine were working their magic and we could almost see the leaves and grass grow. We were just finishing a health unit on our five senses, so this simple form helped to integrate their spirituality and their ‘spring fever’ with their curricular learning. This poetic sense prayer (Halverson, 43), encouraged the class to pray holistically and provided the stimulus for the prayers that follow it:

*Thank you, God, for my friend.*

*I see her, and I am happy.*

*I hear her voice; it sounds glad.*

*I taste the lunch we share.*

*I smell the flowers as we walk together.*

*I feel important when I am with her.*

*Thank you, God.*

*– Delia Halverson*

## Drumming Prayer (kinesthetic/musical)

From this beginning we moved into a drumming circle to experiment with rhythms of prayer (kinesthetic/musical/naturalist). We lacked other drums, so we used our chest bones as the percussive surface after hearing this introduction, adapted from Willie, 81-82:

*“The drum is the Great Spirit’s favorite instrument. That’s why we were all given a heartbeat.” –Mano, Navajo Elder*

The drumbeat’s similarity to our heartbeats may be the major reason that drumming is used in cultures around the world. Drumming has been used for keeping sacred traditions in many cultures, and is becoming increasingly common in Christian worship as well. Drumming connects us with a language we all speak because we all have a heart beating steadily, deep within us. It can help us connect our individual heart beats with the heart beat of God.

This is how we structured our drumming prayer:

- 1) Find your heartbeat by placing your fingertips under your ear and your hand along your neck. Place your other hand on your chest bone and beat in time with your heart.
- 2) Smaller animals have much faster heart beats than humans. Larger animals, like a moose, have much slower heart rates. Pick an animal whose heartbeat you would like to simulate with your drumming. Create a sound collage of human and animal heartbeats.
- 3) God is both big and small at the same time. How do you imagine the heartbeat of God to sound? Reflect on this silently for a minute.
- 4) Say together: (Leader speaks a phrase and the group repeats it)

*God, who created all the heartbeats on this Earth,  
we want to worship and praise you  
with the divine heartbeats  
we imagined and drummed.  
Amen.*
- 5) Begin quietly and form a drum choir of praise. Allow the sound to crescendo and then diminish into a whisper. Sit in silence for a few breaths.
- 6) Take each others’ hands and say: *Amen, Thanks be to God.*

preferred ways of worshiping and praying and then devotes a chapter to prayer approaches that correspond to each intelligence. The Sunday school curriculum, *Gather 'Round: hearing and sharing God's good news*, integrates this theory into every session and includes a good introduction to the theory in the *Gather 'Round Handbook* (pages 58-59). As opportunities to lead adults and children presented themselves in my work and congregational life, I have implemented a multiple intelligence approach to prayer in a variety of settings. The one that brought me the greatest joy was the evening with the "Kingdom Kids" in Trinity Mennonite Church, Calgary, AB, during Lent of 2008. Their club leader, Pamela Fast, had chosen prayer as their theme for the year, and had prepared the energetic group of children well for our evening together.

### Praying with Action Songs (kinesthetic/musical)



The evening began by praying musically through some familiar action songs from Bryan Moyer Suderman's *God's Love is For Everybody*, a favourite camp song, and a folksy rendition of the Lord's Prayer, to which we added some movements.

Bryan's songs provided us with the chance to create actions that depict the meaning of the lyrics. Some of the camp songs did that as well, though the member camps of the Mennonite Camping Association often use American Sign Language with their singing. In either case, the motions we engaged in combined with the meaning of the words and melodies we sang and helped "everything within us praise the Lord" (Psalm 103:1). The picture above shows part of the ASL action for "heaven" in the Lord's Prayer. While the initial focus of learning the actions can detract from a prayerful attitude, once actions are learned, they can support and deepen one's engagement in praying.

On this occasion the class became familiar with the form by composing the sense prayer, below, as a group:

*Thank you God for Nature  
I see the beautiful plants  
And remember God's love.  
From the morning song of the birds  
to the frog's lullaby,  
Nature fills me with joy.  
I taste Nature's banquet  
And am filled with thanks.  
I smell God's essence of spring  
and relax in God's love  
and give my praise and love to the LORD.  
Amen – 3B, June 3, 2002*

An enthusiastic contributor to our class prayer chose to contribute the prayer he wrote on his own, stimulated by the group composition process. In the following prayer, this boy's love for God and gratitude for creation blend with his personal satisfaction with planting a garden.

*Thank you God for nature.  
I see blooming flowers.  
I hear birds chirping In the golden sun.  
I taste sweet nectar in a lily.  
I smell dew drops in the emerald grass.  
I feel important for the enchanted nature that I grew.  
Thank you God.  
– Alec, 8*

## Reflections on a religious symbol

For our devotions during Lent, we focused on the story of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> When our journaling time arrived in the fourth week of Lent, the children received an embellished cross to colour or reflect on. Several children chose to give me the prayers they wrote after reflecting on this cross. I was inspired by the tone of gratitude and the theological processing that was going on in them.

*Dear Lord, Thank you that you died on the cross.*

*Thank you that you took away our sins and that you rose again from the tomb.*

*Thank you that I could learn about you and that I could believe in you.*

*I thank you for this beautiful day and that spring is here. – Marie, 9*

*Dear God, thank you for sending your son to us on earth and thank you for your son dieing on the cross to save us from our sins. Thank you that you helped the irelites (Israelites) win the battle agenst Rom. And thank you that you did not give in to the devels temptation of reveng and hatrede and went on loveing them even when they did things they new they shouldn't do. And I am glad that some of those people hwo kroosifid him turned back to loveing you. And those priestis went back to you.*

*– Hannah, 8*

During this last occasion of class worship, two boys, whose main aim in life seemed to be winning hockey and soccer games, and who had never shared their prayers with me, expressed how much they would miss this prayer time and thanked me for introducing them to God. So often we don't get to see the results of the seeds we are planting. Thankfully, I was given this peek into their hearts, even if I never got to see more than the covers of their prayer journals. Four years later, I heard through a common friend that one of these boys continued to pause for a period of silent prayer at the beginning of each school day, even after he left our private Mennonite elementary school and attended a public junior high school. Clearly, learning to 'rest in God's heart' satisfied a deep need and helped to sustain this active boy's spiritual journey.

As we worshiped together, the children in my third grade classroom became my companions of faith, and my respect for the integrity and liveliness of their relationship with God grew. The witness of their spirituality transformed me into a passionate advocate for integrating children into the worship life of the church. This, in turn, helped me accept a new vocation in 2002 and changed me from being an elementary school teacher to a national director of Christian Education and Nurture. This illustrates what Bonnie Miller-McLemore raises as a challenge in *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*, where she writes: "How can we begin to see the daily care of children as a spiritual practice if we do not take children seriously as thinkers, and as our companions in faith?"<sup>5</sup>

Leaving the classroom changed my exposure to children. The indirect exposure to children through the devotional resources I developed for families increased dramatically, but the direct encounter with children decreased. To keep me from going into acute withdrawal from the blessings of this uniquely fresh spiritual fellowship, I continued teaching Sunday school, telling children's stories in congregations across Canada, and reading about prayer and children's spirituality.

Caroljean Willie's *Praying All Ways: A Multiple Intelligences Approach to Prayer* applied the Learning Theory that had guided my last years of teaching to the world of prayer. This book recognizes, as do other books on the topic of Multiple Intelligence, eight intelligences as pathways to the brain for taking in, processing, and giving back information, and that our individual blends of these patterns are as unique as fingerprints.<sup>6</sup> Willie contends that these patterns also apply to our

*Our worship time, our prayer journal time with these children  
has been a sanctuary.*

*In these students of 3B, I have beheld your power and glory at work.*

*Our lips have praised you, Our hearts have loved you.*

*You, oh God, have blessed our times together.*

*Have we blessed you? Have we put a smile into your heart?  
Yes.*

*When we encouraged each other,*

*When we learned to be peacemakers,*

*When we did our best at learning*

*At being creative*

*At caring for our planet Earth,*

*Then we were doing*

*what you made us for.*

*We blessed you.*

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

## Reflections on heritage prayers

We reflected on a variety of heritage prayers, beginning with the Lord's Prayer, St. Francis' Prayer for Peace, an excerpt from the Westminster Catechism and prayers written for Mennonite worship in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. As an adult, I was deeply moved by praying through the ages with saints from long ago, but none of those prayer responses were selected as favourites by the third graders who were praying with me. I suspect that children who were older and had a greater sense of history would have a greater appreciation for this practice. The only prayer gift I received from this approach was based on the following modern prayer in the worship resources section of *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

680 God of all life,  
we thank you  
for the signs of your love that surround us,  
for sun and warmth and all that comes to life  
within creation,  
for all that sleeps within the earth awaiting birth.

We praise you  
for the wisdom of your care,  
water on the earth,  
sunlight on our spirits,  
hands on blinded eyes.

Continue to touch us.

Reach out to us with compassion and forgiveness  
that we may receive your gifts,  
that we may know your love and grace  
and rise to new life in Jesus Christ. AMEN

Matthew connected with and expanded on the prayer's references to creation by getting more explicit and naming specific trees and animals. His processing of the illness or death of an extended family member also finds expression in his moving confession of faith.

*Dear God you take care of everything  
From the tiny saplings to the huge oaks.  
from the tiniest mouse to the biggest whale.  
You take care of us throughout life  
from when we are first born to our painful death.  
But it isn't painful when we will afterwards be with you.  
You are the source of our living. Amen.  
– Matthew, 9*

The community of those who pray often supports and encourages our individual prayers. And so it was that Matthew's desk mate, Dillon, was inspired by the prayer pouring out of Matthew's pen, for he echoed parts of Matthew's prayer when he wrote:

*Dear God you are the most powerful Lord. You created humans  
and animals from a tiny mouse to a blue whale.  
I love you.  
– Dillon, 8*

## Reflections on Psalm 51

Saying "Sorry" is hard for people of all ages. Our Bible curriculum focused on faith heroes. The session on King David included an opportunity to rewrite Psalm 51 in our own words. As we looked at the different parts of this classic psalm of confession as a model of how to say "Sorry," one of the boys in class who had considerable experience with sitting out in the hall, or in the principal's office, and writing out apologies, became intensely interested in this Psalm. We looked at the progression from "have mercy" and "my sin is ever before me" to "create in me a clean heart" and "then I will teach...open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise" and noticed how David moved on from his apology to doing something positive. At this point, this boy could no longer contain himself and exclaimed "Sweet Psalm!!!" A sweet psalm indeed, with a restorative message for all of us as we confess and move forward in our journeys of faith.

## Reflections on Psalm 63

Psalm 63 is a favourite for introducing adults to the ancient art of praying with scripture, known as lectio divina. As this prayer response from Emily indicates, it is a most appropriate text for primary school aged children as well.

*Dear God and Jesus, you are everywhere  
You are like the getale (gentle) falling rain.  
You are so getale and kind, and you are like a thunder storm  
You are so magnifasnt when you do  
your wonders and miricals.  
Your love is in everyone of use. You  
give us your banqate of fruit and vegetables.  
You give us warm loving familys  
You give us the birds and the animals  
That walk on this wonderful erth that you made. Amen. – Emily, 9*

Emily wrote this prayer during our last session of prayer journaling. It had been a rich spiritual journey for us all.

My heart was full as I wrote that last class prayer journal entry and I wrote with the intention of sharing and blessing my students with a pastoral prayer. It stands here as a testimony to the blessings that come from praying with children.

As I pondered the words of Psalm 63:1-4, the words "sanctuary" and "bless you" stood out for me. This is what I wrote in response to the psalm.