

Overcoming Fear of Praying Aloud

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If you didn't grow up praying around the dinner table or during family devotions, learning to pray aloud in a small group can be downright intimidating. Have you known the sickening feeling of lock jaw, sweaty palms, or stomach nausea that sets in when it's announced the group is going to pray?

A group leader needs to have the utmost sensitivity to a member who proclaims, "I don't pray out loud." Acknowledge her very real feelings, but also give assurance that your job is to gradually assist her overcome the barriers. Don't accept that a woman who doesn't pray aloud today will never pray aloud.

Develop trust with the group, and individually with each member. Let it be known that you won't embarrass or surprise someone by calling on her to pray. Share the incomparable joy of being set free from fear to unite your voice with others in prayer. Tell about your own prayer journey, and remind her that almost everyone felt the same way she does at one time.

Women will learn best by listening while more seasoned prayer warriors intercede. It's been said and often repeated, "Prayer is caught not taught" (D.A. Carson). Reluctant members will be further hindered if long-winded prayers become the norm of the group, or if the same two or three people dominate the prayer time. Announcing a few ground rules will keep it on the right track. I like to say lightheartedly, "Pray in sentences not paragraphs."

Leaders can coach a novice to copy a meaningful Scripture verse ahead of time, and pray it. Writing prayers in a journal at home, and then rehearsing them aloud can also establish a comfort level.

If you're dealing with a group of beginners, try adapting this tried-and-true technique:

- Provide an index card to each member.

- Ask each one to write a short prayer request or simple statement of praise or thanksgiving.
- With a smile, ask the women to raise their hands if they know how to read. Yes, it's a silly question with an obvious answer! (If there are, in fact, ladies who cannot read, omit this step.)
- Say, "If you know how to read, then you can pray out loud because we're each going to take a turn reading the words written on a card—without embellishment."
- Request that each card be passed to the woman on her right so that members are praying for another—not themselves.
- Explain that you will begin, and the person on your right will read after you. Praying progresses around the circle, one person after another, to lessen anxiety about when to pray. (Since this is a training exercise, it's better not to pray popcorn style).
- Continue this process until you feel the group is ready to graduate to voluntary popcorn praying.

Women who learn to pray aloud in a safe and nurturing environment will sing your praises for extending empathy and grace to help them overcome their hesitancy. Their prayer lives will soar as they engage in united, community praying.