

CHAPTER 4

PRAYER GROUPS AND XLTS

Why Prayer Opportunities Are Important

My sophomore year of high school, I finally earned a spot on the basketball team. You feel pretty great when you see your name on a varsity roster. However, it wasn't long after that the joy of being accepted on the team quickly turned into embarrassment and flat-out boredom. I was a bench warmer. I was at practice to help the starters get better, and I was a "voluntold" cheerleader for them at every game. Soon enough, I started to hate basketball. The following year, I chose not to play.

There are some things in life that we can sit back and enjoy for pure entertainment. Most of us, though, greatly appreciate the things in our lives that we can really engage, fully participate in, and experience. I quit basketball because it never became mine: I wasn't able to practice in order to better myself, I didn't have a chance to experience the game in a way that allowed me to grow as a player, and my relationship with the coach was non-existent compared to the star players. All that to say, it is so important for us to practice what we learn, to have opportunities to "play the game" we are practicing for, and to personally engage in the different aspects of the experience.

How does this correlate to prayer? To put it simply, if we don't provide the teens in our care the opportunity to practice what we preach to them, then we are essentially benching them in the spiritual life. As youth ministers, we can't (and shouldn't try to) force growth in the heart of a teen, but we can foster it by tending the soil and providing a variety of opportunities for them to take the initiative in their spiritual growth.

When you offer prayer opportunities for the teens, you remove yourself more from the picture and allow God to be front and center of the event and of the teen's attention. Teens are often being led in discussion, listening to talks, and hearing from many different voices regarding how they should live their faith. Too few of them are given the opportunity to sit and listen to God. Many of them do not even know how to begin hearing what he has to say, much less how to dialogue with him.

It is easy to get caught up in the many wonderful youth nights, retreats, social outings, and big Catholic conferences while unintentionally overlooking the great need to develop a personal prayer life in daily circumstances. Teens not only *need* the opportunity to encounter God personally, they *deserve* it. We are a blessed people whose God will always show up in the "big" ways and events. However, he also desires to meet each soul in a very individual, private way. Teens have very busy schedules that often leave little to no room for a prayer life. Simple, regular prayer opportunities during these formative years will allow teens the space and time to foster a personal prayer life that will carry them far beyond the years of youth group and organized events.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first section focuses on different prayer opportunities you can offer for teens. The second gives advice for XLTs, which are larger, one-time prayer events that can include the whole youth group or parish.

The Practicals of Prayer Groups

There is a tremendous amount of flexibility when it comes to how you implement and execute prayer opportunities with your youth group. Different practices of prayer honed over centuries enrich the Church with various ways to dialogue with God, which means the opportunities you offer are seemingly endless!

The first step — and the most important — is for you to pray. Jesus warns us to “not be like the hypocrites,” and many of the saints speak about the necessity of personal prayer. As a minister of the faith, it is vital that everything you do springs from the Holy Spirit at work in you. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to pray, and it is the Holy Spirit who will guide you in the discernment of what your teens need and how God desires to meet them. The more you know your teens — which comes from time spent with them — and the closer you draw to God through your own spiritual life, the easier it is to recognize and provide ways to bring the two together in fruitful encounters. **(Matthew 6:5)**

When you offer a prayer group, there are a number of things you will need to decide: who will lead it, how they will lead it, where and how often you will meet, what sort of prayer experience you will engage in, how long you will offer this particular event, etc. Again, taking all of this to prayer is always encouraged, but don’t stress over it. Pick something, do your part to get it rolling, and then let the Holy Spirit lead the way.

On that note, make sure that you recognize the difference between a prayer group and a Life Night. You don’t necessarily need to give a Proclaim or any real lesson here. Prayer groups are for allowing God time and space to dialogue with his children. Set the atmosphere, choose the material if it’s needed, provide an introduction and guidelines, and then sit back and let God lead their minds and hearts.

Think through the following practical considerations when starting prayer groups. They will provide insight into when and what you should offer:

- What are you looking to provide through this opportunity? Does it require in-person participation, or should it be a remote or live stream experience? Is this a large group or small group activity?
- What time and day of the week is most conducive to having teens at the parish outside of your normal meeting time while also not conflicting with a higher priority for the teens? (For example, Friday nights in the fall might not be the best evening if your teens are really involved in the high school football scene.)

- Do you have room in the budget to put towards this opportunity, such as funds for pizza, snacks, or some sort of sweet treat or funds to provide books for a study?
- What do you already have that you can work with, such as a large number of rosaries and rosary pamphlets, Bibles for everyone to read along, or online resources that you can print or put up on a screen?
- What do your teens want? If your teens are not yet in a place to just show up for a night of Adoration or an hour of theological discussion, find out what particular sport or game they love and make that a part of the offering for the night to draw them in. If your teens desire to go deeper, spend less time with the social side of the prayer group. Ask the teens what they want and use this as evidence but not the whole case for what to offer. Honor the teens' contributions and take them to prayerful discernment on what the Lord wants for the teens in this program at this time.

As you begin to answer these questions, you will start to narrow down what prayer experience you want to offer your teens. It is important to keep your purpose for the group in mind. This will ensure that their experience of prayer is rooted in the need you are trying to meet. For example, if you discerned that your teens need to be exposed to Scripture, then you need to spend time preparing reflections or selecting Scripture passages to read with them and not show up with a plan to say the Rosary because you didn't take the time to prepare.

Selecting a prayer experience doesn't have to be overwhelming. There are a lot of great options for teens who are ready to go in-depth. There are also numerous options for teens who simply need to set a foundation of prayer. Some take more time than others to prepare, so just be sure that you have the time and energy to fully offer whatever experience you choose.

If you can set aside another time and day to be in person with the teens, that is ideal. If you can't actually commit to more in-person time, you could offer something remote or on a social media live stream that still provides the opportunity with less commitment from everyone. You could also oversee the group or groups but allow other core members or teen leaders to execute the event for you.

Once you have pulled together all your ideas for what your prayer group will look like, you need to get the teens involved. One surefire way of drawing teens to an event is free food. Depending on the time frame you chose for your group to meet, consider enticing teens with a snack, treat, or even a meal if that is within your budget and flows well with your plans. As mentioned before, ask the teens what they want. Allowing the teens to have a say in what you do often engenders a sense of commitment to whatever the event entails.

Another impactful way to get teens involved is a personal invitation. If you hear two teens talking about how they wish they knew more about the Bible, offer to start a small group with them. If you see a need to expose your teens to more Adoration, pull aside the teens who are your "regulars" and brainstorm the

idea with them. Invite them to come with you to a time of Adoration at your parish, and then ask them to invite their friends. Most of the time, these types of prayer groups start small. Be intentional with the teens, and they, in turn, will pass that intentionality on to others, allowing what started as just a small group to become a vibrant opportunity for the whole program.

Prayer Group Options

Here are some examples of prayer groups you could offer. Adjust them to the needs of your program or use them as starting points to create your own opportunities.

Adoration and Fellowship: If your parish has a set time for Adoration, especially if it happens on a weeknight, invite the teens to come and pray. Either provide them with a brief reflection or some Scripture verses to pray with, or just allow them to sit with the Blessed Sacrament quietly. Set a time frame that is appropriate for your teens. Start with around 15 minutes each meeting, and then extend it by five minutes throughout the year.

During Adoration, it may be helpful for you to pray toward the front of the chapel. This has two advantages. First, the teens can see you. This may encourage them to enter into prayer and will, at the least, assure them they are in the right place and the event is happening. Second, when you walk out, the teens know it is time to leave.

After the time of prayer, enjoy a time of fellowship together. This could look different from week to week, but you could play games, talk about your time of prayer, go out for ice cream, etc. — whatever you find is appealing to your teens.

Bible Study: The Word of God remains one of the most powerful encounters between God and his people. Hosting a Bible study is a great way to introduce new prayer techniques and get your teens familiar with Scripture. *Lectio Divina* is a common, accessible way to pray with Scripture and lends easily to group discussion afterward. Gather your teens for a time of prayer that engages Scripture, offers discussion, and can be done regardless of group size. This could be anything from a formal gathering at the church to a small “lectio and lattes” group that sips coffee and prays with Scripture on Saturday mornings at the local coffee shop. For more information about Bible studies, see Chapter 3. For a sample Bible study, see the “Unashamed Summit Session” in the Toolbox.

Teen Prayer Chain: Much like a parish prayer chain, offering teens an opportunity to share their intentions and to pray with and for one another creates a sense of community and support. This can unfold in various ways. The basic idea is that you first offer them a way to share prayer intentions, such as a prayer intentions wall, box, or text group. Then, set aside a specific time to pray for these intentions. This could be an in-person meeting or just a known discipline that the youth group shares.

For example, create a wall in the youth room where teens can place sticky notes or clip slips of paper that contain written prayer intentions. Invite the teens to come to the youth room and pray for the intentions on the wall at a set time each week. You could divvy up the intentions between the group members and pray for them silently in the chapel, or you could read all the intentions aloud and pray the Rosary together.

As an alternative, select a specific time and invite the teens to set an alarm on their phones to pray three Hail Marys for the written intentions in the box or on the wall. To help teens remember, choose a time they can apply a special meaning to, such as 4:06 p.m., to recall the Scripture: “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Ensure the time is also realistic for the teens’ schedules. **(Philippians 4:6)**

Liturgy of the Hours: The highest form of prayer is the Holy Mass, and the Liturgy of the Hours is a beautiful extension of the Eucharistic celebration. This Divine Office is highly recommended for all the faithful. It is a great opportunity to offer to your teens and can be provided in various ways.

Liturgy of the Hours is not as accessible as other forms of prayer. It requires the use of a breviary as well as an understanding of how to pray it. Since it can be complicated to use a breviary, encourage teens who want to pray the Divine Office but don’t want to master the breviary to use the iBreviary app or access the prayers online at DivineOffice.org. Praying the Divine Office can be confusing, but it is also very rewarding. There is a reason the Church has guarded this form of prayer in her heart for millennia. It is well worth the effort to introduce your teens to this ancient and beautiful practice. Choose one “hour” of the day, such as morning, evening, or night prayer, and gather together to pray or host a live stream so teens can pray along with you.

An example of this would be a youth minister offering this daily practice for their teens during the Lenten season. Together, the group would commit to praying morning prayer together at 7:30 a.m. The youth minister would “go live” on Instagram or set up a Zoom meeting for the teens to join. The youth minister would also record or post the time of prayer afterward so that those who missed it could pray at another time during the morning.

Rosary or Divine Mercy Chaplet: Teaching the teens a prayer devotion such as the Rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet and giving them the opportunity to engage with it is a great way to lay a foundation of prayer in their lives. Often, teens just need someone to hold them accountable or do the prayer alongside them in order for them to see it through. Offering an in-person or Zoom group to get together once a week for a Rosary or Chaplet could set in motion a lifelong discipline for teens. It will also be a source of comfort and peace for the teens in the midst of everyday stress. Creating this weekly connection with God and their community will go far in fostering the seeds of a deep prayer life.

Novena: Does your group or parish have a patron saint? Or perhaps there is a specific event or situation taking place in your community, and you want to bring your teens together to pray? Consider setting a time over a period of nine days to lead a novena for a specific intention. You could ask a teen to host the live stream or lead the prayers.

Prayer Exploration: Prayer groups don't necessarily need to be built around one set form of prayer. Consider inviting teens weekly or bi-weekly to explore different types of prayer. Each week, select a different form of prayer to teach the teens. Alternatively, engage in a different prayer each week of the month, such as the Rosary in the first week, Ignatian meditation in the second, *Lectio Divina* in the third, etc. This sampling of different types of prayer will expose your teens to the breadth of prayer opportunities within the Church, increasing the likelihood that each teen will find something that resonates with them.

TEEN TO YOUTH MINISTER

"Faith and Fellowship nights are every Wednesday evening. It starts off with Adoration for about 15 minutes or more. After Adoration, we play games such as gaga ball, frisbee, or flicker ball. I personally enjoy faith and fellowship because I love meeting new people, and this allows me to achieve that. Plus, having Adoration first is a great way to start. By having this time of prayer, you are letting Jesus into whatever you do next and inviting him to be part of your week. Faith and Fellowship nights really helped me grow my spiritual life by starting off my night with prayer, letting me know God is there for me and wants to help me. I don't usually sit in Adoration outside of this time, so it's cool to know I have this built into my week. The prayer I usually pray is, "Lord, please help me to be patient and kind. You know how competitive I can be. Amen." **Zachary S. (9th grade)**

"Having a weeknight Adoration group has been a chance for me to learn more about God while having fun. It's provided a welcoming space for me to talk about my faith and learn to pray without feeling judged. Growing in my prayer and gaining a deeper understanding of God has helped me apply my faith in real-world situations. These nights have allowed me to find myself. I have also found a group of people who are on the same path as me, and it has become a source of encouragement for me, always lifting me up." **Abigail W. (10th grade)**

The What and Why of XLT

XLT — or "Exalt" — is a time of prayer in Adoration that is accompanied by praise and worship and a talk or spiritual reflection. It can also include the opportunity for participants to go to confession. Usually, this time of prayer lasts an hour, but it can be longer. Due to the nature of the event, it is not recommended to try to cram everything into a shorter time period.

An XLT event bears fruit for its participants in many ways. Oftentimes, teens are not exposed to this way of praying, so simply giving them the opportunity to experience praise and worship with Adoration in an intentional atmosphere has a positive impact on them. Additionally, although an XLT can be hosted for small groups, it is intended for a large group of people to experience together, which can also be impactful for teenagers. They are surprised and inspired by the emotions that they feel when they are surrounded by their peers, the lights are down, incense is rising, the praises of God are echoing, and the presence of Jesus is within arm's reach.

Some people find that XLT is perhaps too showy or concert-esque and, therefore, inappropriate for Adoration and prayer. While this can be true in certain situations, thousands of youth would advocate that their lives were changed through this particular experience. When done for the glory of God, with the guidance of the Spirit, and by the grace of Jesus Christ, this event can be a profound encounter with the Triune God.

Options for XLTs

An XLT event can be implemented in a variety of ways. Here are some ideas.

Multi-Parish XLT for High School Teens

Work with neighboring parishes to host an XLT for high school students. This relieves the burden from falling on any single ministry and provides the teens a chance to meet and pray with more teens than usual.

Select the day for the XLT. This can be a one-time or recurring event. If it is recurring, try to keep the day consistent, such as the first Tuesday of every month.

One parish will need to serve as the host. Ideally, select the parish with the best facility or the one that is most central to all of the parishes involved. The host parish should use the same building, such as the parish gymnasium, for each event.

Consider selling food such as Chick-fil-A sandwiches or pizza before the event begins. An emcee should host the event and engage the participants throughout the evening. This emcee introduces the live band, who leads the group in praise. After a couple of songs, the emcee returns to the stage to introduce the speaker, who gives a 10-20 minute presentation on a theme relevant to teens. Adoration follows. During Adoration, the band should lead the group in worship. A priest or deacon closes the time of Adoration with benediction.

Parish Wide XLT

Work with the music director and pastor to plan a few XLT events for your whole parish. Select a handful of dates each semester, along with a spiritual theme for each event (keeping in mind that this event is for all ages). The music director should select praise and worship songs that reflect the theme. Work with the pastor to invite a speaker who will offer a spiritual invitation, challenge, or witness regarding the selected theme. On the night of the event, the pastor should be available for confessions before Adoration begins.

Start the event with the speaker's presentation and invitation to prayer. Have the music director lead the group in praise and worship during the time of Adoration and include some time for silent reflection. If desired, the priest could process around the room with the monstrance, bringing Jesus face to face with each person. After the time of Adoration, the pastor ends with benediction.

Consider incorporating this event into your Confirmation program. It is a great opportunity to invite teens for a time of prayer. After the event, the teens could meet in the youth room for a brief ice cream social.

Youth Group XLT

If the previous two options are unfeasible, consider intentionally setting aside a weekend or two each semester for a "mini XLT."

Do your best to make this time of Adoration impactful and memorable. Place floor lights around the room and dim the ceiling lights to foster a peaceful and intimate environment. If possible, utilize a worship leader. Otherwise, use Spotify to play a few songs through a speaker. Invite your parish priest to be part of the event, handling all of the logistics for Adoration and hearing confessions.

Logistics for an XLT Event

Bringing an XLT event to your youth takes some work, but it is absolutely worth the time, energy, and resources. The event itself can be extravagant or simple based on your purpose, needs, resources, and budget.

To begin, decide who your target audience is. You have the opportunity to serve the teens with this particular event, but you could always invite their parents to participate as well or make it a parish-wide or multi-parish experience. Discerning who the event is for will set the tone for the rest of the decisions.

Then, there are a number of things to consider:

- **Choosing the space.** Is the church available? Is it too big or too small? Does your pastor support music during Adoration? Would he allow you to have Adoration in the youth room? Is the youth room large enough and conducive to a prayerful atmosphere? Decide what works best for the size and needs of your group, and lock in that location.
- **Creating an atmosphere.** If you have the budget, consider investing in floor lights or a few lamps that can be placed around the room. If your ceiling lights are not dimmable, using other lighting can help enhance the prayer space. Consider using candles to light the space around the altar and shining a spotlight on the monstrance.
- **Offering music.** Live worship music can be very impactful, though it is not always practical. If your parish doesn't have a music minister or they aren't available, look for others who could fulfill the need. Although it can be costly, there are many musicians who are witnesses to a beautiful reverence for the Eucharist, who know how to lead others in prayer, and who allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit in a way that elevates the whole experience. If it is not in your budget to bring someone in, invite a core member, parent, or parishioner who has musical talents. As a last option, use a device to play music through a sound system. See the "XLT Song Suggestions" document in the Toolbox for a collection of suggested songs to play during an XLT.
- **Liturgical elements.** Prepare all necessary liturgical elements such as candles, corporals, the monstrance, the altar cloth, etc. Talk with your priest about optional elements such as incense, altar servers, and bells during benediction. Ensure participants have access to the benediction prayers via handouts or projected lyrics.
- **Inviting a speaker.** It can be refreshing to bring someone new in for an XLT talk. Especially for teens who hear from their youth minister or core team almost weekly, a new voice could bring a new perspective. If your budget allows, invite well-known Catholics to speak at your event. If you can't afford to bring someone in, look around the neighborhood — perhaps there is a fellow youth minister nearby who might be willing to be a guest, an alumni teen who would come share their story, or a member of the clergy you could pull in from another local parish.

Sample Outline

TEEN TO YOUTH MINISTER

"Being with God in Adoration, simply put, was reviving. I knew I could be more intimate with God if I actually gave him a chance to speak, but I didn't know how to do that. Experiencing Adoration with music and having a priest talk to us beforehand forced me into a new routine of prayer. During this time, I felt God inviting me into deeper conversation. I was able to sit next to him in a neglected corner of my mind. Though I wasn't simply sitting with him the whole time, actually being able to meditate with him was glorious, and the songs really helped guide that. I felt close to him and tried my best to listen to the cries of his heart. This holy hour refreshed my soul and called me into a deeper, more disciplined relationship with God. I believe that Adoration was one of the times I had felt most filled with his joy." **Mary R. (12th grade)**

The exact details of each XLT will vary from parish to parish and event to event. As you plan, be mindful of determining factors like the size of your group, transition times, and any added elements of the event not included in this sample outline.

6:40	Doors Open
7:00	Emcee Welcome
7:10	Praise (two to three upbeat songs)
7:25	Talk
7:40	Invitation to Prayer and Transition to Adoration
7:45	Entrance Procession (O Salutaris)
	Worship and Adoration
	Optional: confession, silent prayer, prayer teams, Eucharistic procession
8:45	Benediction Begins (Tantum Ergo)
	Divine Praises
	Recession
9:00	Closing Song and Final Remarks

Sample Topics

The topic for an XLT should be decided based on the expected audience. If it is a parish-wide event, consider broader themes that are applicable to different seasons of life and different levels of discipleship. For an event geared toward teens, be sure to choose a topic that will be relevant, accessible, engaging, and impactful for them. Consider what the audience needs, not necessarily what you or the planning team would like to hear at an XLT. If needed, consult a few leadership teens to get a pulse on what topics would be meaningful for the teens to hear at the moment. Here are some sample topics:

- John 6: The True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist
- Something aligned with the Liturgical Calendar (Divine Mercy, Advent or Lent reflections, Parish Patron)
- One of the Cardinal Virtues (Fortitude, Justice, Prudence, Temperance)
- The Our Father
- Trust in God in Every Circumstance
- The Holy Name of Jesus
- Meditation on Mary's *Fiat*

- Love: 1 Corinthians 13
- Being known by God: “I have called you by name” (Isaiah 43:1)

Prayer is the lifeblood of our relationship with God. As youth ministers, we need to provide opportunities for our teens to engage in prayer in meaningful ways. As great as all our efforts at effective catechesis are, they are insufficient if our teens never form a living, breathing relationship with God. Implementing prayer groups and hosting XLTs are practical ways we can introduce our teens to prayer and sustain their efforts at dialogue with God. When coupled with a deep personal prayer life, these opportunities ensure teens have a vital connection with God for years to come.