

***Pray Without Ceasing!* ADULT BIBLE STUDY**

EveryWhere and EveryWay! Calling One Another To Prayer! BIBLE STUDY INTRODUCTION

This Bible study is going to depend on one thing being true – your church cannot be a “past tense church” and make this Bible study work. Now I know what you are saying – you’ve never heard of a “past tense church” have you? And maybe you are one of the fortunate people who have never been a part of a past tense church. But many of our congregations are dying. And one reason is they have become past tense churches – places where they remember that “Once upon a time God DID something...

All across North America, people attending “past tense churches” are discovering an amazing truth – the God they worship and often think of God’s work in the past tense is alive and working **IN THE PRESENT!** It is in these congregations that we are seeing vitality and life and amazing ministry. Lives are changed. People are sent out energized. The world they live in is different. All of this because their faith has taken on a new present tense – **GOD IS ALIVE!**

The current ELCA Evangelism Strategy begins with a call to prayer. Everyone seemed to agree – starting anywhere but with God was a waste of time. But starting with God is not just a stale intellectual exercise. It is starting with a living God who has come to us in Jesus and promises to “be with you always to the end of the age.” Isn’t that amazing? The last words from Jesus in Matthew’s gospel are a promise from Jesus that we will never be alone – a living God is always at our side.

This changes everything. Prayer is not a special skill to get access to God. Prayer is first about believing that where you live **GOD IS PRESENT.** One reason many have trouble praying is because we have spent too much time in past tense churches. Why talk to someone who used to be here? Prayer requires a present tense understanding of God. Then, if God is with you always, you can “pray without ceasing.”

THE GOAL OF THIS CHRISTIAN EDUCATION PLANNER IS TO EQUIP YOU TO HELP PEOPLE OF ALL AGES IN YOUR CONGREGATION:

- ⊙ Reclaim that God is present in their lives and in their world and always available to us in prayer

- ⊙ Be shaped by God to care for the same things God cares about. As they look at their world, if God is smiling about something does it make them smile too? If God is weeping about something, does it break their heart too?

- ⊙ Discover ways to bring prayer into their daily lives 7 days a week in caring and invitational ways

BIBLE STUDY OVERVIEW

Pray without ceasing!

I Thessalonians 5:17

Theme:

Jesus and the early church believed that God was working all the time. This Bible study explores prayer in the early church looking at how Jesus prayed, how he taught his disciples to pray, and how the early church prayed. Here we will find a living God who is present, listening and involved here and now. And we'll focus on how prayer connects and focuses people today as they act as God's agents in the world.

Purpose:

The goal of this Bible study is to expand the imagination of the people who lead Christian Education in congregations. Leaders will be encouraged to do more than teach about praying. This study will also encourage the participants to pray – together – out loud! People will discover that prayer is easier than they thought as long as they remember that God is with them all the time – not just “in church” but out there in the world!

Main Ideas:

- ⊙ Key players in the New Testament include Jesus, his first disciples, and the early church. We'll see how Jesus prayed and how he shaped the lives of his followers.
- ⊙ Prayer can happen any time and any place. A vibrant faith is a praying faith, seeing God present and working all the time.
- ⊙ Prayer isn't only about my needs. It is a way we love our neighbors. Faithful prayer will enter into conversation with God on behalf of others.

Three Main Components:

1. For Jesus, prayer was a way to stay focused on his purpose as he went to the cross. It is a way for us to stay centered on how we can be useful to God.
2. Although prayer is “easy,” it helps to be taught and practiced. We'll explore how Jesus taught his disciples to pray when they asked for instruction.
3. Prayer is directed at an active and living God but is also chance to express our love for our neighbor(s). Prayer is one way that we express care and encouragement for others.

All three components can be part of one long leaders' event or retreat. But more likely you'll want to do each one on its own as a part of a series on prayer. Anyone can lead – these need no professionals to get started. So dig in and see what happens!

Each component contains:

- ⊙ A discussion starter

- ⊙ A Bible reading

- ⊙ A place for reflection

- ⊙ Questions for you to ponder. Talk these over together!

- ⊙ A time to pray (out loud) together.

BIBLE STUDY

Jesus Under Pressure (COMPONENT #1)

Discussion Starter:

Where do you find pressure builds up most in your life's work? What do you do with that stress?

Bible Reading:

Matthew 26:36-46. Jesus is getting ready to do the most difficult thing he would ever do. As you read from this portion of the last night of Jesus' life, what is your first response to the reading? Talk and listen to each other.

Reflection:

What is God up to in this story?

What can you hear God saying *to you* personally as you listen to this story?

What do you hear God saying *to us* (small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

Jesus is getting ready to do the hardest part of his life's work. Judas has already left to get the troops who will arrest him. Jesus knows he will soon die as a sign of God's unstoppable love and commitment to bless and save a broken world. But rather than just jumping in, Jesus spends time in prayer, both to make sure he has all his signals right (even open to the possibility that there might still be a "plan B") and to be focused enough to get the job done. Oddly enough, this seems to point to the fact that when we have something important to do we should pray first – then act. Staying connected to God keeps us centered and more clear about what God is doing and gives energy and strength to answer God's call. Effective leaders pray first and then get to work!

To Ponder Together:

When have you found strength and focus through prayer?

Are you finding that you are often too busy to pray? How could you change that so by praying first you were better at what makes you busy?

Close out loud with prayer for whoever and whatever you each feel need your prayers now. Go ahead – just do it!

Teach Us to Pray (COMPONENT #2)

Discussion Starter:

Thinking back over your life – who taught you to pray and how did they do it?

Bible Reading:

Luke 11:1-4. The need to learn from a master teacher leads naturally to a desire by followers to be taught. As you read this short passage, make time to reflect on your first thoughts and feelings and share them with each other as a first step into the text.

Reflection:

What is God up to in this story?

What can you hear God saying *to you* personally as you listen to this story?

What do you hear God saying *to us* (small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

It was common for rabbis in Jesus' time to teach their followers to pray. The disciples refer to John the Baptist's teaching on prayer to encourage Jesus to teach them to pray. And as the disciples watch Jesus, they often see him go off alone to pray. They want to know how Jesus – the most amazing person they have ever known – finds strength and talks to God in prayer. In this version from Luke we see a shorter Lord's Prayer than the one from Matthew that many of us know. Jesus gets right to the point: Give honor to God and start with the big picture – pray for God's kingdom to come – for the world to be made whole. After all, if what you ask for isn't part of God's dream it isn't worth much anyway, right? Keep the rest simple. Ask for there to be enough (of the basics like food, shelter, etc.). Ask for people to forgive each other, live in love and be reconciled with each other. In the end if God's dream came true: if everyone had enough and everyone got along, wouldn't the rest pale in comparison?

To Ponder Together:

What do you tend to pray for? When are you most likely to pray? When do you forget?

If what God wants us to pray for most is God's dream (the kingdom), what do you think that looks like when it comes?

How might people in your group help each other stay focused on praying for the "kingdom" that Jesus teaches us to pray for?

Close out loud with prayer for whoever and whatever you each feel need your prayers now. Go ahead – just do it!

Praying for Others (COMPONENT #3)

Discussion Starter:

Who do you pray for most often? Do they know it?

Bible Reading:

Colossians 1:1-11. Early in this letter prayer is lifted up as a source of strength and a sign of commitment to their common work in Christ's reign. What are your first reactions?

Reflection:

What is God up to in this story?

What can you hear God saying *to you* personally as you listen to this story?

What do you hear God saying *to us* (small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

The early church wrote letters for communicating between churches or to share a word from missionaries back to the churches they had helped start. In many of these letters, the opening or the closing words were about prayers. Missionaries would share that they continued to pray for people far away. They would ask for the prayers of their friends as a source of strength for their work as they moved about in the world that God loves. Often they would encourage people in the church to keep praying for each other. To pray for someone is to announce to God, to us and to them that we care. Is your prayer life big enough to share your love for the world that God loves?

To Ponder Together:

Who are the people you or your congregations support in their work in the world? Are you praying regularly for them?

If it is everyone's job to be praying for each other, how does your congregation's current practice teach and model that in Christian education? In worship? At congregational events?

Close out loud with prayer for whoever and whatever you each feel need your prayers now.