

## **Imaginative Prayer for Justice and Peace: Practices for use with committees and congregations**

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One of the strengths of congregations is that they tend to respond more passionately to the personal and the particular. People also tend to respond more actively when more than one sense is engaged. These practices all build on both of those strengths by beginning with the particular in the form of visual images or imagined images.

These practices are listed in approximate order of difficulty for members of congregations who are used to prayer primarily as speaking to God. Each practice assists persons to pay attention – to what God has done through others, to what God is already doing in a situation, to what God might want us to notice or hear at the moment. The practices do not presume in advance what it is that God is doing, but they are built upon the conviction that God is already at work and our task is to join the work that the Spirit is already engaged in.

### **1. Put yourselves in the presence of the faith of persons who have worked hard for justice.**

This can be done with a photo of the person or an icon. Place the image in the midst of the group and offer a brief sentence prayer inviting God to speak to you through your memories of this person's faith. Ask the group to name what they know about the faith of the person. Be prepared to tell a brief story that captures their faith in your mind. Then ask, what might this person invite us to do and be if s/he were here in our church and neighborhood today? What might s/he notice that we have not noticed? Allow times of silence for thinking and listening as you talk together. Close by thanking God for the gift of the person's life and for the insight that you have been given – name the insights themselves if they have been articulated clearly.

**2. Use a picture to help perceive what God is already doing in your neighborhood.** The key to this prayer is to be looking for what the Spirit is *already* at work doing in that place with an eye to joining what God is doing. Select a photo of a location or a person that is focal for your neighborhood – a school, an empty lot, a corner where folks gather, a location that makes parishioners nervous or angry, a person or group of persons from the neighborhood who are considered a “problem” by the committee/congregation. Place the image in the midst of the group and offer a brief prayer inviting God to show you how God is already at work in this place or these person's lives and how you can join with God in that work. Ask the group to look at the photo and to imagine the love that God has for the people and the place. Invite them to see the people and place with the eyes of God's love and to notice the possibilities and the strengths that the Spirit is nurturing in them. Allow times of silence for thinking and listening as you talk together. Wonder with them whether the Spirit is doing this or that and how they might discover the answer to their wondering. Close by thanking God for the gifts of grace that come even before we know to ask for them and for the signs of that grace in your neighborhood. Ask for the wisdom to notice the gifts that you have to offer to the work the Spirit is engaged in and for the will to offer them at this time.

**3. Praying for enemies – those with whom you disagree, who thwart your goals, whose way of functioning in the congregation/neighborhood/political realm interferes with where you see God calling us to go.** A picture of the person is often a helpful focus here also, it invites us beyond our own feelings to see the other person as something more than or distinct from what they are in relation to us. Just as in the previous practice, the question here is key: what is the Spirit already at work doing in and through this person? In what ways can you join, in love, with what God is already doing in this person?

**4. Imagine a familiar Jesus story taking place in your neighborhood.** This practice uses the Ignatian practice of placing oneself into a biblical story in order to have a direct conversation

with the living Christ. In the Ignatian practice the person praying uses a familiar place in order to help them move into the imaginative world of the story. The goal is to come to a point of directly engaging in conversation with the living Christ – to say what we are feeling and to listen for Christ’s response to us in the emotional place we are currently located. Engaging in this practice in one’s own neighborhood invites the dimensions of feelings about that neighborhood to come into the conversation with Christ. Stories that work easily: the Samaritan woman at the well; Mary and Martha; Christ walking on water through the storm; Christ welcoming children; the feeding of the 5,000. Name the story, perhaps reading it aloud from the text. Then invite persons to imagine a very familiar place in their neighborhood similar to the location of the biblical story – for instance the woman coming to the well would be similar to going to the grocery store, the storm might be a tempestuous committee in the neighborhood or a dark corner of the neighborhood, the 5,000 might be unemployed persons or children after school or whatever the large group in need is in your neighborhood. You may want to suggest this setting so that folks don’t get stuck at this point in the prayer. Invite them to imagine the familiar location, building it visually, hearing the sounds, smelling it, sensing their feelings about the place. Give them a minute to do this. With it well in mind then invite them to see the people, familiar people, as the other people in the story. Specifically invite them to choose someone they know well to be the face/presence of Christ, someone’s whose expressions they can imagine, whose laugh they know. Now invite them to run through the story in their mind. They arrive in the place they have imagined and Christ arrives and they begin a conversation with Christ – what do they say? What does Christ say in response? Then what do they say or do? Give them several minutes to run the story and to simply be in the presence of Christ. Close by inviting them to return to where they are now when they are ready, saying whatever last things they want Christ to know. When most everyone has returned, speak the Lord’s prayer together. Most people can then use a couple of minutes to write down what they especially want to remember from their conversation with Christ. Only then invite them to share what they would like to with each other.

**5. “Iconic” use of a photo of a person.** One of the ways that icons can be used as a prayer tool treats them as windows – the icon focuses our attention on God or Christ looking at us, just as we are, and loving us. Through the window of the icon we can “see” the gaze of God and be aware of how it feels. In theory, we know that God sees all, but in everyday life we ignore this reality. An icon helps us to look through the window to see the eyes watching us. Icons are designed specifically for this purpose, but other photographs can be used in the same way and can enlarge our awareness of God’s presence in others. Here’s what makes a photo work well for this prayer: one individual, with little or no background that attracts the eye; the gaze of the individual is out of the photo and directly at the viewer; the individual is not someone known by name with whom we have other associations. Select a photo and share individual copies of it (photocopies work fine) with each person praying. Invite them to use the photo as an opportunity to notice that God is looking at them and loving them at this very moment through the eyes of this photo. Begin with a brief prayer inviting God to show them what God sees in them and to help them to respond. Then invite them simply to gaze into the eyes of the photo, to notice when they have turned their gaze away, and simply to return again to the gaze of God’s love each time they turn away. Let them know they can say whatever they like or be silent in the presence. Invite them to spend more time simply being and feeling and listening than speaking – God already knows whatever you might be inclined to say. Most folks can begin with 5 minutes of silent prayer of this kind. Close by thanking God for the love we have felt and the love that is greater than our ability to notice. Then invite folks to share with one another what they would like to share of what they experienced.