

creative prayer idea

For celebrating the whole church family tree

We're really excited about sharing this resource with you! It's primarily designed for groups, or congregations, to use together. But it can also be very powerful to pray with individually.

The length of time you need will obviously vary depending on how many people are praying together. But this resource is designed to fuel more in-depth celebration of, and intercession for, the whole church family. So giving an hour to all three parts together would help you do it justice, and some groups might enjoy spending longer than this.



Why we've created it:

When Jesus established the first generation of his church family, he began by choosing twelve very different disciples. They came from all walks of life – privileged and poor; educated and not; from wholesome professions and... not so much. Yes, there were some similarities between them – initially they were all men from one nationality and religion. But they couldn't have been more diverse in temperament and talent. No wonder there was plenty of disagreement and competition between them! And thank goodness they weren't all the same. Can you imagine twelve Peter's at play?

The early church followed suit – as it spread organically, there were of course some natural connections and commonalities between some of its members. But it was always a motley bunch with a fair share of larger than life characters and passionate disagreements and divisions alongside beautiful testimonies of radical, loving community and extraordinary growth and sacrifice. But differences brought strength too – they widened the church's reach.

Ever since – throughout church history, and certainly today – this same mixed bag of family traits continue on! Jesus is perfect, but in his grace, he involves us while we're still works in progress. Although he can and does ultimately work our every mistake for good, he is surely even more heartbroken than we are with the levels of disunity and division in the church, and the way in which this gets in the way of his body being known for their love.

But, more than equally, we're all made in his image, with (some of the time at least) a desire to follow the prompts and power of His Holy Spirit to sanctify and send us – separately and together. And we're all differently gifted, called and positioned to build the kingdom in different places and ways. In short, there's always some truly beautiful fruit coming from each and every part of our church family tree!

The Sanctuary has produced plenty of resources focused on interceding for unity, including calling each and all of us to repentance for our attitudes, judgements and actions towards other individuals in, or parts of, our church family. But this one is designed to come at things from the other direction – helping us celebrate the huge variety and diversity of who and what within the church (past and present, global and local, public and personal) blesses, inspires and shapes us. It's not designed to paper over significant differences, or the importance of agreeing central orthodoxy an truth. But it is intended to grow our love and appreciation for our whole church family, to increase our heart to give thanks and pray for other parts of it, and – perhaps – to even inspire hunger to learn from, and reconcile with, some of what currently feel like more distant or less familiar branches.

Part 1 – Exploring and celebrating the church’s huge, family tree

In advance, you will need to gather together:

- enough copies of the **input sheet: *Exploring and celebrating the church family tree***, included at the end of this resource for each person taking part to have sight of one
- plenty of **leaves** for each person to write on* – these could be ‘real’ leaves or paper ones (find a possible template for the latter at the end of this resource); and you could choose to use all one colour and shape, or a whole variety to symbolise the variety, as well as the unity, we are seeking to celebrate
- enough suitable **pens** for writing on whatever kinds of leaves you are using for everyone participating to have one.

** If you’re using this resource individually: you can follow the same approach. Or if you’d prefer, instead of writing on separate leaves, you could join up parts 1 and 2 of this resource, and simply find a large sheet of paper; draw a ‘cross’ shaped trunk, and then begin to grow your tree as you go by drawing and labelling leaves as the input sheet causes you to think of them.*

During your prayer time:

- If it’s helpful, play some worship music in the background. Or, if you’re on your own, or with a quieter group, consider spending the time in silence instead.
- Spend a good amount of time working through the sheet individually, and following its inspirational prompts to each label as many leaves as you can with different individuals, traditions, denominations, streams etc .

Some things to bear in mind:

- *How long people will need may well depend on the length, or breadth, of their Christian experience, and their knowledge of the wider church, as well as their personality – but something in the region of 20-30 minutes is a good ball-park estimate to allow.*
- *If you think people in your group might actually need quite radically different amounts of time on this first part, you could suggest they begin going through the pile of leaves they have created individually once they’ve finished. Encourage them to give thanks – and when they are contemporary, pray – for the different individuals and groups they have named. Or, you could invite them to spend time reading, and praying in response to key unity passages from the Bible, such as Psalm 133, John 15:1-17 and John 17:20-23.*

Part 2 – Growing your tree in prayer

You will need:

- the leaves you each labelled in part 1
- a cross to form the ‘trunk’ of the tree – this can be a large wooden cross, if you have one, or you could make a simple cross shape out of a large sheet of brown paper; equally, if you’re using a cross that can stand up, it’s up to you whether you want to work in 3D, and how you want to go about attaching the leaves if so
- (if you are growing your tree in 2D) a large area of clear floor space to lay out your tree and all it’s leaves.

During your prayer time:

- Bring everyone back together and gather them round your cross ‘trunk’.

- Invite people to begin bringing up their leaves and use them to have an open, and extended, time of prayer together – thanking God, and interceding for (when not in the past) – all the different individuals and parts of the church you each introduce as you do.

Something to bear in mind

- *You will know the best way to help all the people gathered to celebrate and pray in response to the individual leaves as you ‘grow’ your family tree together.*
- *You might want to get everyone to take turns, laying down a leaf at a time; invite each person to put all their leaves down in turn; or allow everything to flow much more spontaneously.*
- *Similarly, you might want to get people to briefly share with the group why they are thankful for each ‘leaf’ they are contributing, and then – when all the leaves are on the tree – invite anyone who wants to give thanks, and pray where relevant, for some of the individual leaves. Or you might want to do the whole thing in prayer, inviting people to speak out their thanks and, where relevant prayer, for each leaf’s contribution to them, and the wider church, as you go along.*
- *Remember to gently steer things back on track if anyone starts getting too caught up in church history etc. The aim of this is not to provide comprehensive teaching, but to enlarge hearts’ perspectives and inspire thanksgiving and prayer for the whole church family! If it feels as if it’s raising some questions, or people are hungry to understand more, you can always do some follow up study or research together, or deliver some input teaching to respond to this.*

Part 3 – Blessing the church, and sharing your tree

You will need:

- the tree you grew together in part 2
- a camera or other device you can take some pictures of it with, especially if it’s going to need to be disassembled after your prayer time.

During your prayer time:

- Now spend some time praying for the tree as a whole – thanking Jesus for the variety and diversity of leaves, but also praying for greater love, unity and witness from the whole – both together, and as a sum of its parts.
- However you decide to close your prayer time together, remember to take some pictures of your tree so you can share them with the group afterwards for further, and ongoing, prayer.

Something to bear in mind:

- *If there seems to be a real hunger among some or all the members of the group to find out more about some of the individuals and parts of the church featured on your family tree, or even to explore using some new styles of worship or looking at some of what others have written or produced, find some ways to follow up on this!*
- *For example, you might find it interesting to look at, or share with your group, some of the diagrams that have been created which show the denominational and churchmanship aspects of how the church family tree has developed. And then, do some research into the parts of the church you know less about. You can find some great examples simply by typing ‘church family tree’ in to Google Images, or a similar search engine.*

Exploring & celebrating the church's huge, family tree

1. Use the different categories and prompts in the table below to help you think through some of the individual believers and wider groups and traditions you'd like to give thanks for from within the whole church family tree.
2. Every time you think of an example you are thankful for, transfer the names of the relevant specific individual or part of the church family onto a separate leaf.

Biblical figures in the early church	Peter, Paul, Mary, Martha, Mary and Mary again, John, Lydia... there's a long list of New Testament heroes and heroines in our family's earliest generations. Who's example or legacy are you particularly thankful for, and why?
Christians in history	<p>Whether it's stories of ancient Celtic saints, or Christians who have particularly impacted the church, or the world, through their example or work, we have more than 2000 years worth of 'ancestors' in the faith to give thanks for, and be inspired by...</p> <p>This one might take you a while to think through, because there are so many sub-categories and you won't be able to think through them all. But here are just a few ideas to get you remembering. There's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • missionaries, movement founders, church reformers and leaders • activists and agents of change in the public sphere • writers of teaching, fiction or poetry; lyricists of hymns and other worship content • Artists, musicians, film-makers, scientists and thinkers • sporting heroes who used their platform for the kingdom.
Individuals personally known to you	Who – in your past and your present – has closely walked ahead, beside, or behind you and made a big difference to finding or keeping faith; growing in character, obedience or mission; learning more about who God is etc?
Influential, contemporary Christians	Look back again at that list of sub-categories under 'Christians in history' – what about the Christians – or Christian organisations – who particularly inspire, influence or lead and equip you, or others in the church, in these areas today?
Denominations and traditions	<p>Think back through your Christian journey so far...</p> <p>Which church's and traditions have inputted into you in some way so far and why are you grateful for them, even if they're not perfect? (These might be the family groupings of congregations you've been a part of, or groups you've been touched by the teaching, worship, architecture, history or example of.)</p> <p>How about styles and emphases? Sometimes we benefit from things in our own churches without realising which part of the church they might have originated in. Other times we know we're focusing too much on one aspect and could learn from brothers and sisters who have a very different emphasis! So which parts of the church do you want to particularly celebrate today for their rich understanding of any of the following (or other) aspects of relating to, and serving, Christ:</p> <p>freedom, intimacy, reverence and mystery, symbolism, faith and testimonies, emphasis on scripture, use of liturgy, commitment to deep theological thinking or apologetics, cultivating a life of prayer, prophetic emphasis, influence in public life, commitment to mission, pastoral work, justice work, creation care etc...</p>
The global church	Think about Christians and churches today from other nations, continents and cultures... Who do you particularly want to give thanks for because they inspire, equip or challenge you through their commitment, perseverance in persecution or challenge, exuberance in worship, commitment to prayer, the resources they share with the global church, or anything else?
Any others?	Even all the above is still only scratching the surface of the way each of us – and the church as a whole – is enriched and further grown by other parts of our family... Are there any other individuals or groups you'd love to give thanks for who haven't come up already?

Leaf template outlines

