

# Spiritual Practices for Families

As Christians, we believe that what we believe about God and how Jesus lived among people has an impact on how we live in the world. We believe that we learn about God by singing our faith, practising our faith, praying in faith, being part of a faith community, and being faithful in our daily lives—in our work and our play.

Living up to the promises of baptism means being open to spiritual growth and life transformation. A parent is one of the primary sources of a child's learning and growing in Christian life. A parent's faith begins this journey. A parent's openness to the wonder of God's Spirit in yourself, in your child, and all people creates mutuality in a shared venture. Everyone has something to learn and to teach!

Engaging in a regular practice helps to nurture and deepen your relationship and your child's relationship with God. Spiritual practices can help to develop intimacy both with God and within the family. If a spiritual practice is not part of the normal routine of your family's life, you might consider slowly introducing a practice into your daily routine. You might start by saying a grace (a prayer giving thanks for the food you are about to eat) at mealtimes, or having a bedtime prayer at the end of the day.

Be gentle with yourself—this is intended to enrich your life, not add another burden.

Listed below are some spiritual practices or disciplines to consider engaging in. Each of these practices could be engaged in by your whole family or by individual members. If you decide to use one of these ideas as a family encourage all members to choose the practice that works in your family reality.

## 1. Prayer

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, encouraging them to enter into an intimate relationship with one they could address as Our Father, or Abba, which means Daddy. Jesus introduced the disciples to prayer as a form of conversation with God. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer that models prayer as including thankfulness, affirmation, and hope, requests for self, and prayers on behalf of others.

Prayer is one of the ways we nurture our relationship with God. It provides us with a few moments to be still in God's presence, to share with God our thanks, our concerns, our struggles, and our joys. To ground our lives in prayer is to ground our lives in God, who is the source of life.

One of the gifts our faith community and members of a family can offer one another is the ability to hold one another in our prayers. It is a precious gift to hold and be held in this way.

## As a family you might consider

- *saying a grace at mealtimes*—a grace is a form of prayer that gives thanks to God for the food about to be eaten. It is a way of taking time to thank God for the blessings that touch our lives—food and people—that nurture us in body, mind, and spirit. Invite children to think about what they want to tell God they are thankful for about this day, the food they are about to eat, and those gathered around the table.
- *saying bedtime prayers*—these provide a way of ending the day centred on the One who gives us life. Invite your child to think about what he or she would like to tell God as this day comes to an end. It is a time to give thanks to God for the day, to share with God any concerns or areas where you may need special help, to remember before God people in special need, and to name before God those you would like to remember—teachers, coaches, family members, or friends. Bedtime prayers also provide us with an opportunity to claim and affirm God’s presence with us as we sleep.
- *giving each child a prayer pillow*—a prayer pillow is a pillow with a pocket on the front, which can hold written and drawn prayers, and remind us even as we sleep that God is with us, surrounding us with loving comfort.
- *offering a blessing as you prepare to leave one another*—blessings are words of comfort and encouragement and speak of confidence in the God who goes with us into each moment of each day. As children of God, we can offer blessings to one another and in doing so share God’s love. Instead of saying “goodbye,” consider saying “God be with you.”
- *praying when you hear a siren* or pass an accident, remembering the person in need and those responding
- *learning one of the classic prayers* of our faith, such as the Lord’s Prayer or The Prayer of St. Francis, and taking time to let each phrase resonate in our heart and mind
- *focusing some quiet time* on being in God’s presence, as the psalmist reminds us to “be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:10a)
- *learning a breath prayer* or a series of breath prayers that focus on one thought on the in-breath and another thought on the out-breath, such as “Loving God” (in-breath); “hear my thoughts” (out-breath). Or “Jesus”; “my teacher, guide and friend.”
- *using the words of a favourite hymn* as the focus for the prayer
- *opening yourself* (either as individuals or as a family) to free flowing thoughts, concerns, joys, and challenges that you share with God. Share your daily “highs” and “lows” with each other and with God.

For more on family prayers, visit the Family Ministries section of the United Church website ([www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)) or see Jackie Harper, *Faithful Moments: Prayers, Graces and Seasonal Celebration for Families* (United Church Publishing House, 2002).

## The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
the kingdom come,  
the will be done,  
on earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory  
forever and ever. Amen.

## The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace,  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much  
seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

## 2. Gratitude

One rabbi said that every day we should offer to God thanks for 100 things, people, or abilities that touch our lives. A spiritual practice you might consider is at the end of each day to take time to think of five things, people, or events that have touched your life that day and for which you are thankful. Name these before God and give thanks. Or if you are engaging this practice as a family and eat supper together, you might wish to each name the five things to each other at the dinner table. This is a great way to end a day giving thanks for what has been, grounding our days in gratitude.

### 3. Scripture Reading/Bible Stories

A wonderful resource for reading the Bible as a family is *The Family Story Bible* by Ralph Milton (Northstone Publishing, 1996. ISBN 1-55145-092-5). Other Bible storybooks are referred to in Part 4, Annotated Bibliography.

As a family, make a practice of reading a story from the Bible on a nightly or weekly basis. Take time as you read the stories to provide time for questions and reflection. Encourage everyone to listen to the story and to consider who they most relate to, or whose story leaves them with questions or concerns, or whose story isn't told.

Make connections between the scriptures that are read in worship and explored in church school. Help family members find the stories in the Bible and read them together.

Depending on the ages of the members of your family, you might consider choosing a book of the Bible and reading a chapter every day. Or using a children's Bible storybook, together as a family read a different story every night at bedtime. Or focus on one of the gospels and read part of the Jesus story every day.

Or if your congregation offers an intergenerational Bible or book study program you might consider joining in as a family.

Or you might consider adapting the African Bible Study method, which encourages people to listen to a scripture passage being read three times with a pause between each reading, paying special attention to what phrases, actions, people speak to you from the words read. (A congregation might consider offering tapes or CDs of scripture passages read three times for individual and family use, or in a family you might take turns reading the scripture.)

### 4. Meditation

Meditation is a practice of focusing on a thought, phrase, or image and letting go of all other thoughts so that a person can open up to God's presence. For some, learning a special position or finding a quiet space in which to be silent is essential. For others meditation works best in a group gathering with a leader guiding the group in a meditation. *The Healing Oasis* and *Returning to the Healing Oasis* by Sharon Moon (United Church Publishing House, 1998 and 2006) offer a variety of meditations for individual or group reflection. CDs of the meditations are also available. Check the online catalogue at [www.united-church.ca/catalogue](http://www.united-church.ca/catalogue) for further meditation resources

## 5. Service and Justice Seeking

Seek out ways to live out your faith by being involved in acts of service and working with others to seek justice—either through volunteering in a program, or writing letters on behalf of an issue or cause, or contributing financially as a family.

Engaging in acts of service is one way to share God's love with others. As faithful people we have a mandate to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, share with those in need (Matthew 25:35–37), and love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). In our church tradition we do this in partnership, honouring mutuality.

The opportunities for service projects are endless. An individual or family could

- consider making a contribution to World Development and Relief of the Mission and Service Fund
- help serve food at a shelter
- make a welcome card for each person baptized in the church
- fill a hamper for a family in need
- think of a group that provides a service to the community, such as firefighters, and surprise them with a basket of goodies to say thanks
- support the Mission and Service (M&S) Fund and use the *Mandate* Special Edition on the M&S Fund to discover more about the ministries supported by the United Church
- study the United Church mission theme, described in the *May Mandate* Special Edition on the mission theme
- write letters in response to urgent actions from local and global partners; actions are posted regularly on The United Church of Canada's website ([www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca))
- become involved in KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives campaigns; for more information, see [www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org)
- become a member and write letters for Amnesty International
- give and share for the community and wider world through the example of church offerings and stewardship and through family projects for caring, peace, and justice-making

## 6. Hospitality

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me’” (Matthew 25:34–36).

Acts of kindness, challenges to our nation’s immigration and refugee policies, churches offering sanctuary—these are faithful acts in response to God’s hospitality freely offered to us. Working to insure shelter, employment, education, and health care for all God’s people is part of the work of hospitality. Offering hospitality is a moral imperative. The expectation is that God’s people are people who will welcome strangers and treat them justly.

One of the central symbols of our faith is the table, a table where all are welcomed—from the child who shares his or her few fish and loaves, to the wedding banquet table, to shared bread with friends, to the welcome of strangers, to food shared in remembrance at the communion table in worship.

At the heart of hospitality is mutuality—learning to give and receive. When sharing together there is opportunity to engage others, to hear their stories, their life experiences, to discover the holiness of the other, to know ourselves gifted by God’s presence in the sharing.

In what ways might you share hospitality?

- Might it be to invite someone to share a meal or a cup of coffee whom you’ve never asked before?
- Do you live in a college or university town—could there be a student far from home who might welcome some time with a family?
- Do you have a neighbour who has no immediate family—might you invite them to join you for a family celebration?
- Might it be learning more as a family about the United Church’s policies around immigration and refugees?
- Might it be holding in prayer the faith communities offering sanctuary?
- Might it be volunteering as a family to help either initiate or serve in a community supper, soup kitchen, or community kitchen sponsored by your congregation?

## 7. Honouring the Sabbath

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” Exodus 20:8.

As a family you might consider developing some Sabbath rituals that nurture the soul. In the Christian tradition, we celebrate the Sabbath on Sundays—a reminder of Jesus’ resurrection. It is a day of celebration. Each Sunday (or Sabbath) is a recounting of the new life God offers us in Jesus.

As you move into the Sabbath, take a moment to breathe in God’s presence in this time and place. In your Sabbath time, take in long and slow cleansing, refreshing breaths: breathe in—and in the breathing, know God’s presence with you; breathe out—and in the breathing, know God’s presence with you.

Breathe in and know God’s presence always with us as the giver of life, and in gratitude give thanks for ...

- the wondrous created world
- the laughter of a loved one
- the familiar words of a love song
- the feel of a pet nestled close to our body
- the touch of a child
- the trust of a friend
- the beauty of the day...

Give thanks to God for this moment.

Take time on the Sabbath for rest, renewal, and re-creation.

*Rest:* To rest in the spiritual sense means to spend time with God—opening ourselves to know and experience the presence of God. Create a “Sabbath box” in which you place all those things that you do not want to use. Wayne Muller in *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* (Bantam, 1999) suggests that we use the Sabbath box to hold all the things we need to leave behind when we enter “sacred rest.” These might include cell phones, computer discs, homework, a list of things left undone, TV guide and remote, credit cards, office keys, and so on.

Physical rest is also important. Our bodies need time to rest. Take time on Sunday to nap, eat leisurely, walk, exercise, play games, visit friends and relatives, read and tell stories, gaze at the stars, snuggle.

*Renewal:* Regular participation in worship and spending time with the church community can be renewing and nurture our relationships with God and with each other.

When we embrace time as God's time, people as God's unique creations, ourselves as loved ones with a unique calling to be Jesus' hands, heart, and feet in our families, workplaces, community, and world, we are embracing God's shalom, seeking wholeness and abundant life for ourselves and for the world.

*Re-creation:* Discover what energizes you. Spend some time each Sabbath engaging in this activity. Participate in some form of re-creation either as individuals or as a family group. Consider a "rainbow walk" or a "senses walk"—plan the walk to include not only the physical movement but also to focus your awareness on items of God's created world that capture the colours of the rainbow. Or use all your senses—what can you see, taste, touch, smell, hear?

Engage your whole body and discover the re-creation that happens when you are fully present in the moment.

## **8. Singing**

Augustine said when you sing you pray twice. Consider learning a new hymn that might form a part of a family gathering—it may be a grace or a song to help you centre your thoughts. Or you might want to learn some of the spirituals that arose out of a time of confrontation and adversity in which people affirmed their trust in a God who would walk with them through the injustice and lead them to abundant life. Or discover some of the stories behind favourite hymns to enrich their meaning.

Sing the songs that nurture your life. Don't worry if you are flat or off-key, God rejoices in our singing!