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"WHO'S PRAYING NOW?"



*How many
Christians
pray these days?
Surprisingly,
perhaps, more
than you
might think.
Sarah Sheppard
talks to some
Australians who
still put their
faith in it.*



Who's Praying Now?

IN A WORLD AWASH WITH ALTERNATIVE spiritual solutions, an age-old remedy for life's ills is still in favour. Prayer. Varieties of gurus, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, herbalists and rebirthing agents may attract audiences, but in Australia the prayer is still in the game. And it's still free.

Ron Nichols, editor ABC religious programs, says that while church attendances are down, he sees no such decline in praying. "My observations are that many people do pray, whether they have religious affiliations or not. And prayer can take many forms: a Jesus prayer, mantras, prayer of silence, or a formally written prayer that is read out loud. All these prayers are widely practised here."

Predictably, the statistics about praying in Australia are a little woolly. Though figures in the last published census (1991) show that 77 per cent of the population follows some form of religion, it doesn't necessarily mean they go to church, pray or engage in any other type of "religious activity", as officialdom calls it. But according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in its first report on the subject, released last year, 5 per cent, or 150 people from a national sample of 3000 households, acknowledge religious activity which in this instance includes prayer, church services, meditation and religious administration. According to the survey, women spend 93 minutes a day on such activities and men, 126 minutes.

People pray to experience feelings of spirituality, which derive from the act of praying. The prayers themselves can range

from the make-it-up-as-you-go-along kind to structured soliloquys such as the widely used Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr, the 19th century American churchman: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Intercessory prayer is an interesting one. Praying for the homeless, the sick and the suffering is a fine thing to do, but if they are already in God's hands, does He need to be called upon to sit up and take notice? Yes and no, say clerics. Apparently the fact that God already knows everything is not the point. It's important to clarify what we want. Whether we get it or not is a different matter.

And you don't necessarily have to call Him God. Nichols recalls a television program in which a South African nun said she had great difficulty addressing God as God because it belittled Him. So she referred to Him as the Ultimate Reality. The power of prayer, though, is in belief, as this sample of praying Australians demonstrates.



Bruce Baird

Managing Director, Tourism Council Australia

I started the habit when I was a child. My father would have an extended prayer time after the meal. I became more serious as a Christian when I was a teenager and I further ignited the flame after attending a weekend retreat in Connecticut.

I pray mainly at home but also in the car, on planes, walking down the street, in my hotel, wherever. Depending on who is around I can pray out loud or silently. I go through a time of praise for the Lord, for His

creation and His involvement in my life. Then I move on to confession, then thanks for the good things that have happened in my life, requests for my family and others and then myself.

Prayer is different to meditation. Meditation is thinking about yourself. Prayer is not. It's thinking about your Father.

I see tangible results and I find this interesting, although Christ is there both in the problem and the solution. I prayed for Sydney to win the Olympics. I was in the hotel room with my wife and we spoke about our prayers. I asked her who she thought would win. She said she had a feeling of peace from God and that Sydney would win. So did I.

There was a time when I was under enormous

Melissa Jaffer, opposite: 'Life is prayer ... Every breath I take is a prayer.'

media pressure from the Olympic bid. The media were chasing me about the State Rail incident. [Baird was accused of exercising his influence in relation to the appointment of an International Olympics Committee delegate's son-in-law to State Rail]. I rang my wife from the airport and asked her if it had been on the evening news. It was on all three channels and had been the lead story. On the plane I read Psalms 60-75 which spoke about David being under pressure. He too was wrestling with issues but even so, finished the psalms with a celebration. He had turned to God. It was very encouraging.

Steve Bastoni
Actor who played Angel in *Police Rescue*

I pray. I only call it God because that is conditioning. I believe there are a lot of good things in Buddhism, Christianity, Zen, such as the spirit as eternal. When you die the life force inside you goes on and on. It is connected to something bigger than ourselves.

I wasn't influenced to pray as a child. My family wasn't religious. The first time I discovered praying I was sitting in a cafe in Miami when I was in my early twenties. A guy started talking to me and asked if I believed in God. I said not really, I didn't believe in all the fire and brimstone rubbish. We started talking and he was intelligent. We spoke of sport, humanity and the nature of love, among other things. He then said "Can you do me a favour? Can you pray with me?" I said no way. He told me I didn't have to say it out loud, just lower my head and it would make me feel good. I didn't need to feel embarrassed. I said I didn't know how to pray. He told me to follow him. We repeated *The Lord's Prayer*. It was amazing. I felt connected to God. That guy in Miami opened my eyes to something. I guess

it was that force I talked about ... The most interesting thing was that it was in Miami; a city full of drugs, supermodels and, as I discovered, God in between.

You don't need to go to church to pray, but it is good. It's a great meditative place ... Praying as a mass in church builds the collective consciousness. If enough people think one thought, then that thought gathers momentum and force. When I pray I can talk out loud or just think. And then there are times I drop to my knees and do it the old-fashioned way.

Melissa Jaffer
Actor who played Dr Maureen Riordan in the ABC's *GP*



As a Catholic I have prayed ever since childhood. On my way home from school I would drop in to the church to say a little prayer, although I later realised you can pray anywhere. I use the union of the divinity and humanity Christian prayer model [one of the widely used prayer structures], but you can't draw the line on praying. God is all things to all men. (And women I hope.)

Prayer is life, life is prayer. Every breath I take is a prayer. Sure I ask for things. Jesus says ask and you shall receive. He also says we should pray in secret because it is a one-to-one relationship. I think praying as a mass too is important.

You can't really talk in terms of experiences. There is evidence of supernatural experiences but if you were to concentrate on those then you will put your faith in the experience, not the truth.

I wouldn't have a problem acting the part of the atheist. If I were a man I would love to

play *Richard III*. Although it is very rare that I am asked to play the role of a believer.

We always think we have to go to God but we only have to be still and let God enter us. Prayer is not our desire, it always comes from Him. He pushes and pushes and says, "I love me, love me. Please I am here." He's also a sucker. An absolute sucker for us. He always forgets when we have sinned.

Normally I don't talk publicly about prayer but I trust God to make sure this interview turns out OK.

Brendan Nelson
Federal MP

I was raised a Catholic, spent some time with the Christian Brothers, then the Jesuits, and have now joined the Christian Parliamentary Fellowship.

I occasionally pray. You don't have to go to church to pray. I pray when I am in trouble or need help. I pray to myself - it is a formalised introspective analysis - about what problems I am facing, a way of helping others when I feel powerless.

They have prayers at the opening of Parliament and a couple of times I have looked around to see who else was praying. More Liberals than Labor members pray. Perhaps it has something to do with our conservative nature.

When I am praying, be it for myself or someone else, the result is not so much that they live or that I get the result I want, it is rather how I am able to cope. I draw strength from prayer because it means I have spent time thinking about the problem and how to deal with it.

There is a sense of great humility in prayer. You recognise there are a set of beliefs that are more important than you.



BRAIN GAMES

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					

CRYPTOSQUARE

Answers read the same down as across.

1. Concentrated hard over post office communist.
2. Circle vile, vile fruit.
3. Come up with firsts for Roger, Ian, Sally - even Neville!
4. No odds for *Polar Opposites* with *First Lady* in front.
5. Denis lost me before the first exit. That was thick!

Answers on page 37.

WINTER BREW

Find a word that will finish the first and start the second. Then read the new words to find out what Alaskans say about winter.

Ad ... Em
Billy ... Did
Lo ... Fore
Me ... Me
Em ... Gress

WHO SAID THAT?

Condoms aren't completely safe. A friend of mine was wearing one and got run over by a bus.

Willie Ofahengaue

Rugby international

I was brought up with the Methodist religion and learnt a lot about it from a young age. I prayed every day when I was little and went to Sunday school in Tonga.

Religion has given me a lot, especially a strong belief in myself to do whatever I want to do. And I still pray today. I go to church and pray there but not too loud. Most of the time I pray in my head. I pray to say thank you for me being around and giving me the opportunity to be alive. I pray about my game, to give me energy and strength, but not so I can hurt the other team. Praying helps my game. I don't pray to win, just for the spirit of the game. And winning doesn't mean my prayers were answered.

I think success has a lot to do with praying. Just as I walk onto the field I say a little one. It encourages me because there is someone there helping me and the other players.

You don't have to go to church to pray. I go on Sunday but it's more for the service than to pray. If I have a game on Sunday I will play instead of going to church. God wouldn't want me to waste my talents.

I don't really tell anyone I am praying. If the boys ask me what motivated me for the game I tell them, "If you are scared or nervous, just say a little prayer. It will help."

In church I pray for everyone, but before the game for energy and motivation.



Justice Michael Kirby

High Court judge



I have prayed since I was a small boy. My communication by prayer is private and their length is a secret between me and the Almighty. I'm not going to reveal my secrets. Because I travel a lot, aeroplanes provide a time for prayer. Prayer is a time for quietness and meditation; reflection upon one's blessings and problems. I don't think it is necessary to be religious to pray. One can engage most usefully in meditation.

Fortunately the courts in Sydney are close to some beautiful churches like St James where I go to from time to time.

A lot of Australians are turning to medi-

tation for relief; it is an organised way of seeking to find solitude and reflection. Prayer is available to everyone, all you have to do is shut your eyes. I didn't kneel as a child, physical posture isn't important. Although it doesn't hurt to see yourself in such a light.

While I have a direct hotline to the Almighty that is always in use, I don't expect a cash order outcome. Prayer is simply a means of sorting out your own mind and above all thinking of those people you love. And in a general way, I also pray for those people who come before me.

Gabrielle Carey

Author

A friend was telling me she was doing a meditation course. I think it is an excuse for prayer. She says it has changed her lifestyle, meaning it is the same sort of results you get from prayer.

Time out to reflect avails another level you can go to. You realise the peripherals of life are just that, peripherals.

Prayer is a moment for centering yourself. I'm a bit more traditional than meditation. Meditation doesn't talk about giving thanks. I don't know who I am giving thanks to, I just feel thankful. It's a time to feel lucky.

I use the traditional words which are God and Lord. I can't say what that is. It's not a particular person in a white gown. To be able to pray you need to personalise it. I use an old Catholic prayer which is a mantra which I say before I go to bed when I am feeling completely stressed out. *Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.* The music, the sound of it is important and its old-fashioned notions appeal to me. It's nice and consoling. I've done it since my early 20s when I became interested in Catholicism. This came about by reading St Theresa of Avila. She's the only woman who's been made a doctor of the church. She has written three volumes and one is *Interior Castle*. It's almost a "how to" - how to develop spirituality. She describes all different doors that lead to the centre and she says how to get through each one.

I don't go to church, only because there isn't one close by and I have a small baby. I used to go when I was single and I was going through my intense stage. It's a nice atmosphere to pray in a church.

You can just talk in your head. St Theresa suggests certain things you can reflect on and uses metaphors, like a fountain inside your body. I mostly reflect on metaphorical images of the soul. You have to give your soul attention to thrive.



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