



Ramona L. Hyman

# The Prayer Project:

**T**he African American poet Langston Hughes signals the importance of language to the discipline of prayer in the poem “Feet o’ Jesus.” In the pungent expression concerning the need for Jesus, the persona of the poem petitions Jesus, saying:

*At the feet o’ Jesus,  
... Lordy, let yo’ mercy  
Come driftin’ down on me.*

*At the feet o’ Jesus  
At yo’ feet I stand.  
O, ma little Jesus,  
Please reach out yo’ hand.<sup>1</sup>*

Veiled in Hughes’ folksy petition is the presence of language as a vehicle in which prayers can be ushered forth to, as Ellen G. White says, “. . . open . . . the heart to God as to a friend . . . Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”<sup>2</sup>

Prayer as a celestial communication tool in the life of the human being seeking to live with a heavenly conscience is also explored in the movie *War Room*. The movie examines the challenges in human relationships related to marriage and business and offers a practical examination of prayer’s transformative and restorative power in a person’s life. The essentiality of prayer is expressed by a central character, Miss Clara, who represents the church mother in the film. Miss Clara has a “war [prayer] room.” She begs the Lord (in prayer) to “raise up a generation of believers who are not ashamed of the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> That generation of believers must be encouraged to establish a systematic prayer life.

Conceptually, the relation of prayer (broadly) to positive brain activity is supported by researchers such as Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, who suggest that the brain needs prayer. According to Newberg and Waldman, “Faith is embedded in our neurons and in our genes, and it is one of the most important principles to honor in our lives.”<sup>4</sup> This principle, I believe, can be integrated into the educational setting and, more specifically, in literature classes in Adventist schools be-

## Prayer as Theory and Practice in a Literature Class

cause language and the human beings’ need for God (and all that is related to God) is the theme of many literary works. The Prayer Project, therefore, is offered as one pedagogical model that can be used to encourage students to engage in an intellectual and spiritual discussion centered around the subject of prayer.

### A Biblical Foundation

The Prayer Project is grounded in a familiar biblical text: 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where Christians are explicitly called to “pray continually” (NIV)<sup>5</sup> or without ceasing. Therefore, if one is to live an eternally prayerful life, prayer must be conceived as a Christian duty, and every aspect of the being is called to an active life of prayer. This suggests that language, as a modality for prayer, is essential to a productive prayer life. Because this is true, the Christian English professor must include prayer as theory *and* practice in the literature and composition class to encourage students to critically create a system of prayer and to practice a systematic prayer life.

## The Prayer Project

The Prayer Project utilizes research on prayer, the prayer journal, and a conceptual “war room” of prayer to engage an interdisciplinary dialogue around the subject of prayer. The goal of the project is to encourage prayer strategies as a means of communicating and further developing a creative, critically engaged relationship with God. This is a critical aspect of the integration of faith with learning.

Students are provided with a physical space and a supportive environment to create a prayer lab in the literature classroom. They work collectively to stock the prayer lab with literature, film, music, and academic articles on prayer to help them develop their projects and stimulate class discussions. Additionally, using these resources, students then create their own individual prayer projects. Examples of individual projects include the following:

1. A semester-long prayer journal comprised of reflections, observations, original poetry, and responses to experiences with prayer.

2. A research-based memoir essay (a first-person essay based on the author’s life and experience) in which students develop a theoretical position on prayer (see Malya Prather’s essay on page 36). Students may use the movie *War Room* as the foundational text to ground their point of view. In addition to the movie *War Room*, teachers may want to add other texts for the students to explore, such as poetry with prayer as the theme, hymns, gospel music, Ellen G. White’s writings on prayer (see *Prayer* [Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2002] or similar compilations), and music from contemporary culture.

3. A PowerPoint presentation or movie trailer about their memoirs. This assignment allows students to use technical skills and experience an interdisciplinary component of the writing process.

4. A personal, physical “war room.” Teachers may design this as a student-centered assignment. Students can decide how they will set up the room and how many times during the semester they will visit the room. Students may also have the opportunity to co-

## Prayer Room Rubric<sup>®</sup> Course: Theory and Practice in Literary Criticism

Criteria	Level 1: Excellent 20 points	Level 2: Good 16 points	Level 3: Fair 14 points	Level 4: Needs Improvement 12 points	Level 5: Below Expectation 5 points	Criterion Score / 20
20 Logged Sessions (10 minimum)	20 sessions logged	15 sessions logged	10 sessions logged	5 sessions logged	No essay submitted	/ 20
20 Scriptures	20 sessions logged	15 sessions logged	10 sessions logged	5 sessions logged		/ 20
20 Testimonies	20 sessions logged	15 sessions logged	10 sessions logged	5 sessions logged		/ 20
20 Prayer Requests	20 prayer requests logged	15 prayer requests logged	10 prayer requests logged	5 prayer requests logged		/ 20
Prayer Room Essay A written piece about the 22-session prayer journey/experience.	Appropriate to the assignment. The written piece is well thought-out and clearly describes the prayer journey. Error-free document.	The written piece was vague about the author’s journey, but the page requirement was met. Errors in development and grammar.	The written piece gave a minimum view of the author’s journey, but the page requirement was met. Various sentence structure and grammar errors.	The written piece does not meet the assignment requirement. Provides no substantial insight into the prayer journey. The essay is inadequate in length and needs development.		
<b>Total</b>						<b>/100</b>

design the rubric for this assignment. A copy of the rubric I co-created with my students that semester is included in the sidebar (see Prayer Room Rubric).

5. A prayer blog. Using one of the many free blog platforms available, students can develop a prayer blog. This blog will help them to build ideas for the memoir, as it will feature their thoughts on prayer, prayer-poems, or their own prayers. This assignment also supports the idea that writing is a process. These blog entries can also be used to help students generate ideas for the research-based memoir. Some free blog platforms include WordPress, Blogspot, Blogger, Weebly, and Wix.

These examples work well for in-person classes that meet in physical space. However, they can be adapted to the online environment with careful attention to how students will engage online and what types of assessment alternatives can be used.<sup>6</sup> Also, attention should be given to finding ways to differentiate how students demonstrate engagement. A visually impaired student, for example, might have challenges maintaining a prayer blog or systematically maintaining a written prayer journal. Adaptations could include utilizing different forms of media (e.g., audio recordings) or utilizing a small-group model, which will allow group members to assist one another.

## Conclusion

The Prayer Project is designed to give students a physical space where they can reflect on prayer as theory and practice. This example shows how it was implemented in a literary criticism course and provides suggestions for how this can be done in a literature class where language, thought, and expression are essential to the writing process. During this course, students studied and practiced their writing and composition skills. They engaged with research, writing as a process, and critical thinking. Also, the project provided an opportunity to integrate schoolwide themes as expressed by the institution's spiritual master plan. For example, at the university where I teach, the biblical concepts of restoration and transformation, as outlined by the Office of Spiritual Life, are integrated throughout the semester as students work on their Prayer Projects. This pedagogical approach offers teachers and students an opportunity to journey together not only with the intended content but also through an intentional process of integrating faith with learning. 🍃

The article that follows is an example of the memoir essay completed by one of the students in the course. It shares her engagement in reflecting on and discussing her spiritual journey through experience, poetry, and journaling. (See essay by Malya Prather.)

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Langston Hughes, “Feet o’ Jesus”: <https://allpoetry.com/poem/11284583-Feet-o--Jesus-by-Langston-Hughes>. This source is in the public domain. The citation is taken from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, page 78.
2. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1892), 93.
3. *War Room*, directed by Alex Kendrick (TriStar Pictures, 2015), 1:50:40, <https://www.sonypictures.com/movies/warroom>.
4. Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings From a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 20.
5. Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
6. For more on creating online spaces that can facilitate experiences such as the Prayer Project, see Leni T. Casimiro, “Faith Presence: Creating Online Environments That Nurture Faith,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 80:1 (January–March 2018): 16-21: [https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae\\_201880011606.pdf](https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae_201880011606.pdf); \_\_\_\_\_, “Creative Online Devotionals,” *ibid.* 80:1 (January–March 2018): 35-39: <https://circle.adventistlearningcommunity.com/files/jae/en/jae201880013505.pdf>.