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# “The Family That Prays Together . . .”: Relational Processes Associated With Regular Family Prayer

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In the present article we explored how family prayer reportedly influenced family relationships. We conceptualized family prayer as a family ritual in religious families and used a qualitative methodology to interview a religiously, ethnically, and geographically diverse sample of 198 families ( $N = 476$ ). Analysis of data revealed 7 related themes. Family prayer served important functions and influenced relationships in various ways including (a) as a time of family togetherness and interaction; (b) as a space for social support; and (c) as a means for intergenerational transmission of religion. Further, family prayer (d) involved issues and concerns of individuals and the family; (e) helped reduce relational tensions; (f) provided feelings of connectedness, unity, and bonding. Finally, (g) families struggled to pray together when there was disunity. Implications, applications, and future directions are addressed.

*Keywords:* family ritual, family prayer, relational processes, qualitative research, parenting, religion

“The family that prays together, stays together” is an oft-repeated adage in describing families that participate in religious practices. Although this cliché is ubiquitous, there has been relatively little research on the potential relational aspects of regular family prayer, though individual and couple prayer has become an increasingly popular topic of social science research (Marks & Dollahite, 2017). Does family prayer affect relational outcomes beyond worship of and connection with God? What do families experience as they pray together? Does family prayer influence family processes? If so, how? What does prayer mean to individuals and families who pray? Are there any downsides to regular family prayer, and are there times when religious families struggle to pray? With growing acknowledgment of the need to understand clients’ religious practices in therapy (Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013) and the place of prayer in relationship maintenance (Ogolsky, Monk, Rice, Theisen, & Maniotes, 2017), it is important to understand relational processes associated with regular family prayer. In the present article, from a family studies perspective, we were not interested in examining merely what families believe or practice; rather, we carefully explored how regular family prayer influences family relationships (Marks, Hatch, & Dollahite, 2017).

## Family Prayer as a Family Ritual

As a starting point, we conceptualized family prayer as a family ritual, which then offered a wide scope for exploration. Family rituals range from highly stylized religious observances to less articulated daily interaction patterns, such as at dinnertime (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2000), organized around three phases: anticipation, performance, and reminiscence (Fiese, 2006). Traditionally, family religious practices such as praying together or other religious rituals have been considered as “joint religious activities” (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001, p. 576). However, viewing family religious practices including family prayer as a regularly occurring family ritual can help identify contexts, processes, and outcomes (Dollahite & Marks, 2009) and thereby provide a more holistic overview of relational and religious processes in the family.

Drawing from research on family rituals (Fiese et al., 2002), we proposed that family prayer might facilitate similar individual-, couple-, and family-level processes and outcomes. In children, family rituals have been associated with social support (Fulkerson et al., 2006) and connectedness (Malaquias, Crespo, & Francisco, 2015). In couples, meaningful family rituals were related with more marital satisfaction (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), and in families, rituals have been associated with a stronger sense of family cohesion (Santos, Crespo, Canavarró, & Kazak, 2015). Additionally, family rituals have been found to influence family life by interweaving affective and symbolic meaning with patterned interaction and providing opportunities to reach family togetherness (Fiese, 1992).

## Prayer and Relationships

Researchers have acknowledged the multidimensional nature of prayer in individual and couple relationships and have provided taxonomies classifying different forms of prayer. Ladd and Spilka (2002) classified prayer as inward (self-examination and personal

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evaluation), upward (human–divine relationship) and outward (human–human connection). Inward prayers are often aimed at self-evaluation. Upward prayers involve adoration and gratitude, as well as obligatory prayers. Outward prayers include intercessory and petitionary forms of prayers. Additionally, these prayers may occur individually (praying alone) or jointly (praying together).

In a relationship context, outward prayers such as partner-focused petitionary prayer have been associated with relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008), satisfaction with sacrifice (Lambert, Fincham, & Stanley, 2012), increase in forgiveness (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010), and commitment (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). Likewise, praying together has been found to be associated with trust and unity (Lambert, Fincham, LaVallee, & Brantley, 2012).

In marital relationships, in-home practice of prayer was reportedly related with positive relationship quality (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010), helped in conflict resolution (Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998), and buffered against marital stress (Olson, Marshall, Goddard, & Schramm, 2015), whereas in family relationships prayer has been found impactful in providing a salient foundation for family life and parent–child relationships (Hatch et al., 2017). From these studies, it is evident that prayer is a religious and relational practice in which the primary focus is directed toward deity but also simultaneously influences family relationships (Mahoney, 2013).

### How Does Prayer Achieve Relational Outcomes?

Scholars have found several processes that seem to facilitate relational outcomes that prayer reportedly offers. Partner-focused prayer was found to be associated with decreasing self-concern, being a reminder of couple identity, and focusing on long-term goals (Lambert et al., 2010). In conflictual situations, individual and couple prayer reportedly deescalated hostile emotions, facilitated empathy, and encouraged couple responsibility for reconciliation and problem solving (Butler et al., 1998). Similarly, prayer appeared to facilitate humility and positivity in individuals and improving communication and understanding among couples (Hatch et al., 2016, 2017). Inward prayers, including confession, enabled individuals to introspect, become less defensive, and have empathy toward family members and also seemed to have a bonding effect by facilitating family togetherness (Marsh & Dallos, 2001). In summary, these studies have suggested multiple explanations for how prayer may help couples and families achieve positive relational outcomes.

### Can Certain Approaches to Prayer Harm Family Relationships?

Although prayer in relationships has been shown to have mostly positive transformational effects (Goodman, Dollahite, Marks, & Layton, 2013; Hatch et al., 2016, 2017), like other aspects of religion, it also has the potential to be damaging, when misunderstood or misapplied (Dollahite, Marks, & Dalton, 2018). As a corollary to findings that suggest different types of prayers have different individual subjective well-being outcomes (Ai, Tice, Huang, Rodgers, & Bolling, 2008), certain approaches to prayer in relationships can also have negative outcomes. For instance, ap-

proaching prayer as a platform for criticism or manipulation (Lambert, Fincham, LaVallee, et al., 2012) and attempting to entirely displace marital responsibility from the individual(s) to God can be damaging (Marks, 2008). Furthermore, this approach when used to establish and maintain a dysfunctional triangulated relationship with God (Butler & Harper, 1994), such as a “God and me against you scenario” (Hatch et al., 2016, p. 30), can strain the relationship even further. In summary, negatively triangulating, accusatory, and manipulative approaches to prayers can all be harmful to marital and familial relationships.

## Present Study

Family scholars have called for relationally focused research on prayer at the family level (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012; Butler et al., 1998), and for research on family rituals using diverse samples (Fiese et al., 2002). The purpose of the present study was to explore the family ritual of regular family prayer and its influence in relational and family processes. This study thereby integrates two domains of research—family rituals and family prayer. In addition to having a religiously, ethnically, and geographically diverse sample, we utilized a qualitative methodology to explore the following research questions: What do families experience as they pray together? How does family prayer influence family processes? What does prayer mean to these individuals and families?

## Method

### Participants

This study included 476 participants from 198 families headed by heterosexual couples (*M* mothers' age = 45, *M* fathers' age = 47) with 80 adolescents (41 female; *M* age = 15.1, range = 10–17) who lived in 17 states in all eight major regions of the United States (based on geographic–religious diversity; see Silk & Walsh, 2011), including New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut), the Northwest (Oregon, Washington), the Pacific (California), the Mountain West (Idaho, Utah), the Midatlantic (Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania), the Midwest (Ohio, Wisconsin), the Southern Crossroads (Kansas, Oklahoma), and the South (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana). Families consisted of two-parent households in which the couples had been married for an average of about 20 years and had from one to 11 children. Families were from Christian (143), Jewish (30), and Muslim (25) religions, including 20 different denominations of Christianity and different branches of Judaism and Islam. Over half of the families (51%) were racial, ethnic, national, and/or cultural minorities (e.g., African American, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Asian American, Native American, East Indian, and Pacific Islander), and 49% were Caucasian (see Table 1). We intentionally employed a heterogeneous sample with the consideration that previous research on religious families has lacked both racial and religious diversity (Mahoney, 2013). The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), and family members provided informed consent before the in-depth interview commenced.

### Procedure

To explore in-depth processes, we obtained a purposive sample of participants by contacting religious leaders for referrals of

Table 1  
Number and Percentage of Families by Ethnicity Among Major Religious Groups in the Present Study

Religious–ethnic community	<i>n</i>	%
Black Christian	26	13
African American	26	13
Catholic and Orthodox Christian	21	10
African American	1	1
Hispanic	7	4
Native American	3	2
Caucasian	10	5
Evangelical Christian	48	24
African American	1	1
Asian American	24	12
Hispanic	1	1
Native American	6	3
Caucasian	16	8
Jewish	30	15
Caucasian	30	15
Latter-day Saint Christian	28	14
African American	2	1
Hispanic	3	2
Pacific Islander	1	1
Caucasian	22	11
Mainline Christian	20	10
Asian Christian	1	1
Native American	1	1
Caucasian	18	9
Muslim	25	13
African American	2	1
East Asian	6	3
Middle Eastern	17	9
Total	198	100

Note. These religious–ethnic communities include over 20 Christian, three Jewish, and two Muslim denominations.

exemplary members of their faith communities. In addition, 11 of the 198 families (6%) were recruited through participant referral. The second and third author (and eight of their graduate students) conducted semistructured interviews, typically in participants' homes (with a mean duration of about 2 hr). More than 20 families (11%) were interviewed (in part or in whole) in their native language by a bilingual team member (or with the help of a faith community member) fluent in that same language (e.g., Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish). Married couples were interviewed together first (wife and husband without children present) and then, in the 55 families where IRB approval was obtained for

adolescent children to be interviewed, the children joined the parents for the remaining questions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated, and checked. Participants discussed religion and family life by reflecting and providing illustrations in response to the following questions: (a) Does your relationship with God influence your family relationships? (b) Does your relationship with family members influence your relationship with God? (c) Do faith practices and traditions influence your family life? (d) What challenges do you face in practicing your religion? (e) How does your family overcome major stresses and problems? (f) How do you share faith with your children? (for parents), and (g) How do your parents share their faith with you (for children)? To avoid leading the discussion and thus biasing the findings, we asked no specific questions about prayer.

## Analysis

We used a combination of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and analytic induction techniques to guide the stages of analysis. Through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis using NVivo qualitative data analysis Software (2015; Version 11), we systematically approached the coding process in four stages as detailed in the next sections:

**Broad-brush coding.** Using *text search*, *word frequency*, and *word tree* functions in NVivo 11, the first author conducted systematic text queries to determine the frequency of words used for prayer (e.g., *pray*, *prayer*, *salat* [Arabic], *siddur* [Hebrew]). The results returned a total of 3,868 occurrences of these words, which included descriptions of individual, couple, and family prayer, from 191 out of 198 families (96%). Then, closely occurring terms exclusively related to family prayer were coded broadly into 248 passages from 127 families (64%).

**Initial coding.** During this stage, the first author open-coded these passages into codes such as *prayer around mealtime*, *bedtime*, *support*, *praying for others*, and *conflict* (see Table 2), which were driven from the data. Codes that were similar to each other were grouped into broader categories, and only categories that referred to relational aspects of family prayer were retained.

**Axial coding.** In this stage, the first and second author discussed and reorganized categories and themes. We noticed that, due to multidimensionality, four codes (*challenges*, *parenting*, *praying for others*, and *support*) fit into two or three resultant categories. To minimize bias, we conducted a bracketing exercise and searched for counterexamples. This exercise resulted in the

Table 2  
Themes, Categories, and Associated Codes of Family Prayer

Theme	Category	Associated codes
1. Family prayer as a time of family togetherness and interaction	Time	Family time, mealtime, bedtime
2. Family prayer as a space for social support	Space	Parenting, support, challenges, praying for others
3. Family prayer as a means for intergenerational transmission of religion	Teaching and learning	Parenting, teaching to pray, praying with children, being an example
4. Family prayer involves issues and concerns of individuals and the family	Content	Support, challenges, direction, decisions, praying for others
5. Family prayer helps reduce relational tensions	Conflict	Conflict, couple prayer
6. Family prayer provides feelings of connectedness, unity, and bonding	Affective outcomes	Comfort, support, answers to prayers
7. Families struggle to pray together when there is disunity	Struggles	Conflict, stress, disagreements, challenges



collection and organization of quotes that were grouped into a separate category, now presented in Theme 7.

**Selective coding.** In this stage, the resultant categories, consisting of a total of 125 quotes, were grouped under seven emergent themes. We observed that each category was uniquely suited to be a distinct theme. For instance, codes in the *time* category, namely *family time*, *mealtime*, and *bedtime*, were broadly related with relational processes such as togetherness and interaction, thereby constituting an exclusive theme. Finally, the first author identified 44 quotes, as presented in the Results section, to illustrate the seven themes to focus on participants' voices (Marks, 2015).

## Results

Participant responses involving prayer often occurred in response to questions such as "Which faith practices hold special meaning to you as a family?" "How do you share your faith with your children?" or "How does your family overcome major stresses or problems?" Many participants mentioned that praying together as a family was one of the more meaningful religious practices in their lives. Thus, even though our questions did not specifically ask about prayer, many participants reported that prayer was important and meaningful to them, indicating that prayer occupied a special place in family life.

Families mentioned that, as a regular practice, they prayed during mealtime, bedtime, leaving home for the day, and as part of religious traditions. During religious seasons and holidays, prayer was mentioned even more frequently. Families mentioned other important occasions such as (a) when there was a crisis either within or outside the family, (b) during times of major decisions and transitions, and (c) when family members faced difficult challenges. There was much variation in the types of prayers, due to religious differences, ranging from spontaneous to set prayers, special blessings, and even moments of silence. Through follow-up questions, we explored deeper meanings and reasons related to prayer.

In the following section, we present our themes, categories, and associated codes (see Table 2). To illustrate our themes, we present selected quotes and offer minimal to moderate commentary to focus on the participants' voices. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

### Theme 1: Family Prayer as a Time of Family Togetherness and Interaction

Families reported that those moments around prayer time provided a time of togetherness and opportunities for interaction.

It's a lot like family time, like when you say grace with everybody . . . That time is time that you set aside to spend with your family . . . It's the time when we just kind of sit back and really take a break from what you are doing in your busy schedule. (James, 18-year-old Catholic son)

We are all at home, and we are able to stop and do prayer together. It is something we do as a family. You are worshipping as a family and [it] gives everybody times to stop and at least interact with each other afterward . . . To me it is heart-warming because we are all there, we are worshipping God . . . After prayer, everybody still sit[s] for a little

bit and talk[s] to each other and play[s] and everything. So, to me it is good. It seems like a family time. (Pakeezah, Muslim mother)

Family practices . . . one of the most important [is family prayer]. I have discovered this as the kids got older: that family prayer was not just a prayer. It was because you all come together and they all have something to say, and sometimes you'd end up talking and laughing so much that you would have to [say], "Okay let's have prayer." I think it was just a very communicative time. (Irene, Latter-day Saint mother)

We [pray] as a family. Especially after prayer . . . the whole house settle[s] down. There is no TV, there is no Internet . . . There is pureness of communication there, and it comes straight from the heart. You know, you just cannot get that any other way and especially close with the children. (Yameen, Muslim father)

We pray five times a day, so, this is a, I call it, *the* central activity for our daily life. We start our day in the morning with a prayer, we pray all during the day, and there's one in the evening time. So, this is it. This gets us out of the usual norm. With the kids, "Let's quit the TV and pray, and you go back to the TV later." (Hakim, Muslim father)

It is a chance to breathe, to relax . . . We've had a busy week and here's our time to be together, and we always take a deep breath before we do this and let all the thoughts, craziness, and worries, and everything slip away, and we say the blessing. (Gabriella, Jewish mother)

**Summary.** These families indicated that family prayer was a time of worship as well as a time of interaction. By removing distractions, getting "out of the usual norm," and setting aside time, family members disconnect from the rest of the world and connect with God and each other. These intentional efforts to prioritize and be available reportedly makes this a special time of family togetherness that stands out from the rest of the day. Furthermore, from our associated codes (see Table 2), we inferred that family prayer occurred naturally in the context of other family rituals ranging from regularly occurring rituals such as at meal-times and bedtime to special occasions and religious holidays, as well as in times of special need.

### Theme 2: Family Prayer as a Space for Social Support

From the reports in the previous theme, it seemed that the stage was intentionally set for a unique time of togetherness and interaction. In this theme, we present how individual members processed their personal challenges and how family prayer offered a space for providing and receiving social support. To illustrate, two Lutheran siblings, Mindy (15) and Natalie (20), reported how they received support through family prayer.

I mean, anytime we have a problem, siblings or just a problem outside [in] the world, we come home and we [are] like, "I can't take it anymore, this is too hard" . . . and always be ending up with, "Well what does the Bible say about it?" . . . then it goes to prayer. We always go back to prayer . . . and it's always been that way . . . I mean it is just like a . . . security blanket knowing that you have your family behind you and God behind you and you can go back and you can have your parents and your siblings be able to sit down and pray for you, ask for help. It's an awesome experience. (Mindy)

It's a serenity thing. Like she said, a security blanket. A comfort to know that I can always come home and pray about things. And I know

that there's lots of times I call home, too, from school, [and I'm] like, "Okay just pray for me today." And just knowing they're supporting to me and going to God, it's kind of a cool connection. (Natalie)

Mark, an 18-year-old Baptist son, gave a similar account when talking about his father praying with him and his other siblings before they left for school.

Dad still gets up early and prays with them, and prays with me, often before I go off . . . That, it's meant a lot . . . I know that my dad cares for me, but also that he's investing himself in my spiritual well-being, in my well-being in general. (Mark)

An Asian Christian couple shared these experiences in helping their teenage son through prayer:

There were several times this year, he said he felt bad when he came back home from school. He wanted me to pray with him hand in hand in his room, and then he felt better and went to sleep. Prayer has become his practice . . . It seems that he found answer[s] through prayer. (Mei-Fen, wife)

We have prayer time. This practice helps our family and helps our children to walk in the right way. If something happens to our family, we pray together to comfort each other, and to draw strength from God. (Meng, husband)

From these accounts, it appears that family prayer was an indirect but conscious effort to convey individual and familial needs and to seek and offer social support. Families also used prayer to comfort and encourage each other, as illustrated by the following examples:

My eldest daughter was very nervous and afraid when she was in medical school. Our whole family would kneel down and pray for her whenever she had an exam. She felt great peace in her heart. (Shing, Asian Christian father)

We believe in the power of prayer in our family, and we pray every day together as a family . . . We encourage one another with prayer. Issues come up, and we pray together. (Jayla, African American Baptist mother)

**Summary.** Family members reported they "go to God" to "draw strength" and "comfort and encourage each other" through prayer. Personal and familial challenges were mitigated with affective responses. Parents and siblings responded by being there, praying for, and praying with those who needed support and encouragement. As a result of this joint pursuit, children and parents reported they requested, received, and gave support. This highlights that family prayer (particularly relationally focused outward prayer) had influence in offering a space for seeking, expressing, and receiving social support.

### Theme 3: Family Prayer as a Means for Intergenerational Transmission of Religion

Many families suggested that family prayer, in addition to being currently operative, was also a means to teach and learn about religion and faith. To illustrate, we present narratives from multiple members within the same family. An Irish American Catholic mother and son shared the following:

We try to do something with faith . . . a lot of times. We say prayers every night and before meals . . . They really try to teach us. (Scott, 14-year-old Catholic son)

And certainly, religion and how we made decisions and who we were was a huge part of our lives, but I'd like to think that [my husband] Brian and I . . . the way that we're raising our children is a little bit . . . wider in terms of how we're teaching them to pray. Not just rote prayer but spontaneous prayer. [On September 11, 2001], the first thing when the kids came home from school, we did watch a little bit of TV, and then I turned it off, and then we just knelt down in the TV room and prayed, 'cause it was like, what else can you do at a time like this? . . . I feel like [prayer] is infused in our lives. I'm hoping that that's coming through, so when my kids have a moment of crisis or a moment of beauty that they know who to thank or who to ask. (Angela, Catholic mother)

A Christian Scientist family shared these insights into their prayers:

Whenever something goes wrong, then they'll just give us good ideas to start praying with. (Jacob, 12-year-old son)

Sometimes when we're saying prayers with the kids at night, Jacob may say to me, "Dad would you pray for me? Such and such a thing is bothering me." So we'll stop and do that. (David, father)

Mommy and Dad would pick us up together and share their ideas for praying. We learned to pray like they did, like my Mom did, and that's really cool because she's awesome at praying. (Jana, 14-year-old daughter)

One Muslim mother expressed this about her younger children:

You're teaching them . . . we could be in prayer, [and] they'll climb on all of us, they'll jump on us and do things . . . but it's still good . . . That's what young children do . . . They learn . . . by seeing that . . . this is not bad for me to be here during this prayer. So, then they begin to love to come home for prayer, because even though . . . it's something serious, they still can enjoy themselves. (Aisha, African American Muslim mother)

One of her elder daughters then shared these insights into how their family prays together:

Even the youngest one, she likes to pray. She's one and a half. She'll come and she'll try new positions with us. She doesn't understand exactly what we're doing, but she sees us doing it every day. And that's part of her everyday life, so she'll come and she'll join us, and she'll look at us, see if she's doing it right. And from an early age it becomes part of your life, so when you're older and you have to do it, then it becomes just easy for you, and it's not a burden. (Khadija, 18-year-old daughter)

A Conservative Jewish couple talked about this special addition to their mealtime blessing:

We say prayers before dinner every night, and that was actually a decision we made when my grandfather died. One of the memories I had of him was that he wouldn't sit down to a meal without saying a blessing: "Thanks for this bread." When he died, we decided, "Let's do that before each meal, that we'll remember him for eternity." And it really stuck. We started doing it right away, and we have been doing it every day since his passing. (Boaz, father)

It's a chance for everyone to sit down and to breathe and think about these things before we get to eating, and I think that is healthy for one thing, and it's nice that everyone isn't running off in their own direction. We all sit down and calm down and say the blessing and then start together. I mean there's so many benefits. There's a sense of ritual that I think kids love and we still love as adults, things that we do that have been done for generations and generations. (Gabriella, mother)

Finally, a Latina Latter-day Saint mother reflected on her feelings toward prayer:

It feels right. It feels good. It feels like this is what every family should be doing. I'm grateful . . . to be able to do that. If my family that I grew up with ever would have done that . . . it would have been a fond memory that I would have held, but we never did. [Our family now] should pray more, but when we kneel together and hold hands as a family, it brings the spirit in [our home] and makes the children feel right and lets them know that this is what is right and that this is what they need to do with their families—and I'm sure they'll remember it. It's special. (Cristi)

**Summary.** Families provided examples of how family prayer was a meaningful relational practice. Parents indicated their eagerness to instill meaning and “a sense of ritual” to this practice and pass it on to their children. Likewise, children reported their presence was acknowledged and that they learned to pray through their parents' examples. It was therefore evident that a flow of religious direction and communication was occurring during this time. In this regard, family prayer, as a practice, was also a means to transmit faith.

#### Theme 4: Family Prayer Involves Issues and Concerns of Individuals and the Family

The previous themes provided a description of the context of family prayer. In this theme we present *content* that was included when families prayed together.

In prayer . . . we are not only talking to God, we're [also] kind of explaining to each other how our day went. (Natalie, 20-year-old Lutheran daughter)

We pray for one another and pray for family issues, family unity, being kind to each other. I think that's a great strength as they hear each other praying for their brothers and sisters, or for their parents and for different things, or for other people. (Arianna, Latter-day Saint mother)

You know, we bring out concerns, whatever the concerns are of the family. (Brent, Evangelical Christian father)

[Family prayer is] a tradition I've come to really love because it helps our faith, and when we hear each other pray it helps to understand maybe how that person's day was that we didn't quite get when we were just conversing. When you pray it's truly what's coming from your heart and what you need help with and what you're maybe struggling with and what you're really thankful for. I think it helps us to understand the other person a little bit better. It gives us a little bit more insight to what's going on with them. (Makayla, Latter-day Saint mother)

**Summary.** These families indicated that they were not only praying to God but also disclosing details of their day. “Bringing out concerns” in front of family members and “hear[ing] each

other pray” on behalf of the family and others seemed to suggest that this time and space facilitated an involved disclosure of feelings and thoughts. Although the religious nature of prayer was directed toward God and worship, the content of family prayers included individual as well as family issues. This deep information exchange involved a form of parallel and indirect communication that occurred between family members during family prayer.

#### Theme 5: Family Prayer Helps Reduce Relational Tensions

Family members reported that during times of relational tensions and stress, prayer was a way to reduce or even alleviate tensions as well as to help maintain harmonious relationships.

Liu was naughty when he was younger. It was painful. . . . I led [a children's fellowship]. I told them stories, and Liu was very naughty. I was so angry that I wanted to hit him. Later [at home], I kneeled and prayed to God with tears, and Liu cried too. The next day he was very good. (Qiao, Asian Christian father)

You're balancing yourself through your worship with each other. . . . You are doing this as a family unit, you are doing it as a community unit, and it's really balancing. . . . That is really the key. (Aisha, African American Muslim mother)

When we're in a moment of conflict, it might just be that, the little stuff, like sometimes the whining of the younger children or the demands. That's when I'm feeling really angry, when I pray the most, 'cause I just feel like I really, really need it. I need something to grab onto. It's like, “Please . . . restrain me. I just want to hit someone right now. Calm me down, give me perspective, [give me something] to say to the little ones . . . And it's very real . . . it's not just like I'm reciting some poem or something; it's a conversation . . . It always helps! (Angela, Irish American Catholic mother)

Anne and Charles, an Orthodox Christian couple, shared this experience about praying after conflict:

If we're mad at each other, that can kind of go on for a couple hours, but when it's getting to be bedtime and we want to go to sleep and we want to say prayers, it's pretty hard to stand in front of the icon corner and say prayers together and keep being mad at each other. So, I actually do not really remember having gone to bed mad at each other after saying prayers. (Anne)

[There] was one night in our marriage . . . when we went to bed mad at each other . . . and we hadn't said prayers together. And we asked each other's forgiveness in the morning, but those prayers, of course, want to resolve the conflict . . . Set prayers are done together. Afterward we might within ourselves pray [individually] . . . It will not be spoken, but it can often be understood that that's what's taking place. (Charles)

Right. (Anne)

**Summary.** Family members indicated how praying together reduced tensions and had a “balancing” effect. Through prayer, Qiao displaced anger by praying with his son, Angela prayed for help to deal with her frustration with her children, and Anne and Charles reported that praying helped resolve their conflicts. However, we caution that this particular finding is preliminary and hence requires further research to understand the dynamics of

conflict resolution through prayer in families. In resolving conflict, many participants reported that rather than praying together, they prayed individually to “center” or “restrain” themselves or “calm down” before interacting directly with the family member(s) to relieve tensions or reconcile. This suggests that conflict among family members can shift the expression of prayer to an individual practice in the form of inward prayers that seem to foster self-examination.

### Theme 6: Family Prayer Provides Feelings of Connectedness, Unity, and Bonding

We now share families’ reports of how they felt connected when they prayed together. The ritual nature of family prayer sometimes involved holding hands or being in a closed circle.

I love the fact that when we sit down as a family . . . [we] say the *HaMotzi*, which is our blessing over the bread. And that [we] hold hands, and that we look at each other. (Abigail, Jewish mother)

I think the part that is important is that we join hands around the table, so we’re touching each other. And the blessing is a simple one. (Matilda, Methodist mother)

We hold hands while we pray. I really like that. I feel connected; it helps me feel connected. (Abby, Evangelical Christian mother)

These responses indicate that holding hands reportedly generated a sense of both physical and spiritual connectedness between family members.

Before we leave home, we pray. Before we encounter or go through anything, we pray as one, being connected as a whole and being on the same spiritual plane to come together in prayer. (Wyatt, African American Evangelical Christian father)

Going to church together and praying as a family unit is spiritually important to me, and I think that’s a very good bonding thing for a family. (Anthony, Catholic father)

Right before everybody goes off and goes to bed . . . that’s like the main thing in our family. [Family prayer] kind of brings us together . . . It’s like that whole family unity thing. (Megan, 13-year-old Latter-day Saint daughter)

As far as an experience with God . . . I’m sure there’ve been times in prayer where we’ve had a sense of God’s spirit binding us together. (Shawn, Baptist father)

**Summary.** The physical and spiritual aspects of family prayer seemed to facilitate connectedness within these families. The holding of hands symbolized a vivid and tangible circle of physical connection. Indeed, the very action of “pray[ing] as one” and “being on the same spiritual plane” represented a spiritual connection among family members. Taken together, these symbolic actions facilitated, conveyed, and represented connectedness, unity, and bonding.

However, not all respondents had positive experiences or satisfaction with family prayer. We next present data that convey challenges and struggles associated with praying together.

### Theme 7: Families Struggle to Pray Together When There Is Disunity

Despite largely positive reports from most of our participants, a few families also expressed struggles in praying together, as illustrated in the following examples:

We have difficulty with prayer among three of us. We have a son who is a nonbeliever. We pray for him all the time. (Zhou, Asian Christian mother)

Thelma and Elder, an African American couple who went to different churches had the following argument:

Thelma: And you can see that we’re not in the same church. I’m a Catholic, and him and my daughters are Baptist, and it’s just, I go to church every Sunday by myself, and he goes to his church. Your church is every what, first Sunday?

Elder: It’s every Sunday, but I been trying to get her for years to understand, she can go to her church, and I can go to my church, but as far as the marriage is concerned, there’s nothing in the Bible that says that. Her thing is you’ve got to go to church together to be a family. That’s not the truth, that is not what the Bible says.

Thelma: Really?

Elder: No, the Bible says you honor God yourself.

Thelma: Well, we’re not going to get into that. It says a family that prays together.

Elder: I believe that. I believe that part, but I do not have to go to your church to pray together.

Thelma: We ain’t going to get into that part.

As reflected in Thelma and Elder’s exchange, faith can both unify and divide couples and families. A few participants mentioned that they were dissatisfied with their frequency of prayer and wished they prayed more often together. For example,

Grace . . . we do that together. But . . . one area that I know we should improve on . . . is praying together as a family. We do not do that yet. (Grant, African American Christian father)

I care more about making sure we’re doing those day-to-day things like family prayers and our personal prayers. I tend to be the one more often who says, “Let’s have our scriptures together. Let’s have our prayer together.” I know that the principles of the gospel, when you live them, they help you to have that kind of relationship, so I’m more adamant about doing it. And sometimes I get impatient if we’re not doing it. (Charlene, Latter-day Saint mother)

**Summary.** These accounts highlight the disunity and discontent that sometimes occurred when individual family members approached religious practices differently. These data also illustrate how multiple aspects of religiosity, including religious affiliation, church attendance, shared beliefs, and perhaps even similar levels of participation, may be prerequisite for more optimal experiences with family prayer. Prolonged discontent and divisions due to religious beliefs may have been a source of disappointments and a potentially harmful dimension in these families. However, even in the presence of religious homogeneity, some participants



mentioned that they were dissatisfied with the lack of frequency of shared prayer, highlighting the complex nature of involvement required from individual members, such as religious faith, commitment, prioritization, and meaning.

### Discussion

Conceptualizing family prayer as a family ritual, we qualitatively examined how 198 religious families experienced regular family prayer and how such experiences influenced family relationships. Our findings fit into the context, process, and outcome framework of family and religious processes (Dollahite & Marks, 2009) and indicate that, for these families, family prayer was a regularly occurring family ritual that had special meaning and importance. Family prayer often occurred in concert with family routines and rituals, such as mealtimes, bedtimes, special occasions, and religious holidays. Families prioritized and organized themselves to be available for prayer, and during this special time of family togetherness they expressed needs, conveyed support, and shared insights of happenings in their daily lives, as well as important challenges or decisions. Though these diverse religious families prayed in different ways, most families shared common relational processes in praying together. Most families also reported beneficial outcomes, including feelings of connectedness, unity, and support—although some expressed discontent and disunity.

We observed that, consistent with Daly's (2001) findings on family time, families reportedly valued this as a time of togetherness. For our participants, this was also a time of interaction between family members that required an intentional disconnect from mundane pursuits and focused on reverently connecting with God and each other through prayer, thereby creating sacred ground and sacred space away from other activities (Marks & Dollahite, 2012). Our categories and themes regarding time and space were consonant with Myerhoff's (1977) definition of *rituals* as occurring in a sacred time and space that is outside of mundane reality. Furthermore, in this reverent and sacred setting, family prayer provided a space for seeking and expressing social support. Engaged in what can be a deeply affective setting (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), family members also expressed social support through petitionary and intercessory prayers that involved each other's issues and concerns. These expressions reportedly influenced relationships by building trust and unity (Lambert, Fincham, LaVallee, et al., 2012) and seemed to foster family identity and belonging (Fiese et al., 2002).

Family rituals involve affective and symbolic communication (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) featured with supportive (and disruptive) elements (Fiese, 2006). For instance, in family prayer, the symbolic action of holding hands or the symbolic nature of coming together as a family generated a degree of family connectedness and cohesion. Our findings are consistent with those of studies that have found family rituals to be bidirectionally related with family cohesion (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Pryor, & Jose, 2011). Moreover, our participants' comments involving adolescent perspectives exemplify how family prayer was associated with family connectedness, which can be a powerful protective factor (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). In this regard, this sacred family ritual may explain how religious support and family connectedness are overlapping support systems (Cole-Lewis, Gipson, Opperman, Arango,

& King, 2016). It is interesting that, in addition to feeling relationally connected as a family, our participants also expressed the need to be spiritually connected, signifying a potentially unique dimension to family connectedness in religious families.

Our findings add to previous literature on intergenerational transmission of religion (Spilman, Neppel, Donnellan, Schofield, & Conger, 2013). Not surprisingly, highly religious parents sought to share their beliefs and pass them down to their children, which is like passing on values, attitudes, and goals through family traditions and rituals, as found in previous studies on family rituals (Bossard & Boll, 1949). Recognizing such family rituals as strengths, counselors have acknowledged the role of family religious practices in understanding how to help religious families in different faith communities foster togetherness (Christian: Hook, Worthington, Davis, & Atkins, 2014, Jewish: Davey, Fish, & Robila, 2001; Krieger, 2010, Muslim: Hodge & Nadir, 2008).

In conflict situations, family members were able to displace and reduce relational tensions through praying together, suggesting that it was one of many important relationship-maintenance processes (Ogolsky et al., 2017). On the other hand, we observed that sometimes individuals resorted to private prayers to calm down and steady themselves to reduce relational tensions. In this regard, we note that praying together for conflict resolution may depend on several dynamics, particularly in the presence of prolonged distress in marital and parent-child relationships. By acknowledging and identifying clients' relationship with God in these contexts, counselors may be able to find ways to help these families (Butler & Harper, 1994).

Our participants also mentioned struggles and disunity regarding prayer in the absence of religious homogeneity, level of importance, or meaning and prioritization among participants. In the absence of such essential aspects, these rituals can become "hollow" rituals (Van der Hart, 1983), which may be disruptive rather than supportive (Fiese, 2006). For instance, Fiese et al. (1993) found that in couples, rituals that were hollow in meaning were associated with marital dissatisfaction. In a related study, differences in the level of meaning between parents and children were negatively related to children's feelings of love, support, and identity (Fiese, 1992). Furthermore, we note that based on these findings (including the present study), individuals who were highly invested in ritual practices became disheartened in the presence of such imbalance in ritual meaning, which may sustain further discontent and dissonance. On the other hand, for the families in our study, when family prayer was observed as a naturally occurring family ritual with the harmonious participation and involvement of family members, it reportedly facilitated positive relational processes and affective outcomes that had transcendent meaning—greater than the actual event (Newell, 1999).

### How Can Counselors Help Religious Families That Struggle to Pray Together?

Based on our findings, we offer some practical implications. First, counselors and families may assess the overall level of family ritualization and the frequency and importance of in-home religious practices using measures such as the Family Rituals Questionnaire (Fiese et al., 1993; Fiese & Kline, 1993) and the Faith Activities in the Home Scale (Lambert & Dollahite, 2010). Our participants frequently mentioned family routines and rituals,

such as mealtimes and bedtimes in concert with regular family prayer, suggesting that the place of prayer in family life was interwoven in the context of other naturally occurring rituals. Perhaps, families may begin by considering family prayer as a family ritual that can become as naturally embedded in family life as are these other rituals. Instead of exclusively focusing on praying together, they may consider improving other family rituals and then extend the family's ability to come together to naturally participate in family prayer.

Second, we suggest that counselors assess levels of individual religiosity among family members to examine the intersection of faith and family to better understand disunity and disharmony with family prayer (e.g., the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire; Lewis, Shevlin, McGuckin, & Navrátil, 2001). From a religiosity and family-strengths framework, previous research has indicated that stronger religious beliefs of couples were associated with higher frequency of participation in family religious practices (Jorgensen, Mancini, Yorgason, & Day, 2016). Likewise, from our study, we inferred that participation in family prayer required an adequate level of individual faith as well as "matched-faith" (i.e., same level of commitment to the shared faith; Lu, Marks, & Baumgartner, 2011, p. 135). However, family members may also benefit when they harmonize and complement their faith with each other. Furthermore, by interdependently strengthening both faith and family (Newell, 1999), families may improve the meaning associated with family prayer, which can further increase involvement and subsequent participation.

Third, we suggest that counselors and others seeking to strengthen families through family rituals such as family prayer operate from holistic and systemic perspectives, being aware that a "ritual is not just the ceremony, but the whole process of preparing for it, experiencing it, and reintegration into everyday life" (Roberts, 1988, p. 8). Many of our participants *anticipated* such a family time; *experienced* meaningful participation; and *remembered* those moments as a time of joy, togetherness, interaction, love, support, and tranquility. Moreover, the power of such a family ritual was manifest in reminiscences carried over as emotional residue (Fiese, 2006), which further sustained outcomes. In this regard, we suggest that families be cognizant of this affective setting, which has anticipative and reminiscent properties and could perpetuate both positive and negative feelings toward family rituals. Families may choose to positively embrace the time and space offered by family rituals to consistently strengthen family relationships.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Our study is not without limitations. Although we had a diverse religious-ethnic group of participants, we limited our sample to families that were active and highly involved in their religion, which subsequently limited our scope for generalization. Moreover, our study was based on participants' descriptions rather than natural observations. However, to our knowledge, this study is one of the first to provide in-depth exploration of processes in family relationships associated with regular family prayer.

We note that regular family prayer is a unique family ritual with dimensions that reach beyond the scope of family relationships and extend to an individual's and family's relationship with God. We acknowledge that this is a delicate line to tread. However, we hope

that future research will carefully explore integrative processes of religiosity and religious practices, especially in families where religion-family interaction is a high priority. We invite scholars to examine religious practices in a wider spectrum of religiosity, through rigorous mixed-method designs, tracing trajectories of family religious rituals and their influences in and upon family relationships. We also hope future research will explore religiosity as a dimension of family connectedness, which appeared to be important for these families.

### Conclusion

For the 198 diverse families in our national study, we found that "the family that prays together" seems to benefit in more ways than just "staying together." Family prayer also reportedly provided unique and salient opportunities for family togetherness, interaction, social support, and connectedness. It is evident that family prayer was associated with important relational processes and, for most of these families, represented a family ritual that was a "potentially unique pathway to family [cohesion]" (Mahoney et al., 2001, p. 590), whereas some expressed relational and religious struggles. We suggest that families struggling to pray together and those seeking to improve family relationships through prayer may (a) examine overall level of family ritualization; (b) improve shared meaning, commitment, and prioritization; and (c) embrace the anticipation, experience, and reminiscence associated with regular family prayer.

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### Call for Papers: Coordinated Special Issues on Practice, Education, and Training in Substance Use Disorders and Addictions

*Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (PPRP) and *Training and Education in Professional Psychology* (TEPP) have planned coordinated special issues on substance use disorders and addictions. All manuscripts should be submitted electronically by November 1, 2018. Details can be found on each journal's website or through the dedicated links below.

PPRP seeks manuscripts on professional work of psychologists that addresses the problems of substance use disorders or addictions. The call for papers can be found here: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/pro/call-for-papers-education-training.aspx>

TEPP seeks manuscripts on education and training of psychologists to work with problems of substance use disorders or addictions. The call for papers can be found here: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/tep/call-for-papers-education-training.aspx>