

# Sharing Prayer Concerns

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In recent months, I have received numerous questions regarding the sharing and publishing of prayer concerns by churches. I have urged church leaders to be very cautious about the kind of information that is shared during worship or in print. On a regular basis, our office receives printed matter from churches, disclosing confidential information about members and friends, with the best of intentions yet shared without expressed permission by the member or friend. While attending worship I hear persons asking for prayer for family and friends, sharing intimate details about their situations with full names disclosed. My guess is that many friends and family members would be upset about some of these disclosures.

I know that to some people this may appear to be taking confidentiality a bit too far but recognize that sharing personal information of members, friends, or relatives, without their express permission can be seen as a serious breach and increasingly has ended up in the courts.

Many states recognize "invasion of privacy" as a basis for liability. Invasion of privacy may consist of any one or more of the following: (1) public disclosure of private facts; (2) use of another person's name or likeness; (3) placing someone in a "false light" in the public eye; or (4) intruding upon another's seclusion.

These state laws and resulting lawsuits suggest that a church may be liable on the basis of invasion of privacy to publishing a "prayer list" in a church bulletin, newsletter, website, or some other resource that contains the names and medical conditions of persons who are either hospitalized or ill.

A best practice suggested to me upon entering ministry was to: always ask if persons wanted a prayer concern shared. By asking the question, I was surprised to learn that many persons welcomed their pastor's prayers but did not wish their concerns shared with others.

It might be best for us all to seek the permission from friends and family members before sharing their concerns during prayer time in worship or before publishing them in church bulletins or newsletters. In that many church bulletins and newsletters are now available on websites or in social media, there is even more reason to be cautious.

**The most important reason for this caution; however, is not to avoid lawsuits but to honor and respect persons' rights to privacy.** A dear friend or family member may have asked you to be in prayer, but she/he has not given you permission to share his/her story with others. The biblical understanding of sharing someone else's story or personal information without permission is that it is gossip. The biblical witness identifies gossip as ungodly.

Suggested best practices:

1. Pastors and church members – ask if members, friends, relatives would like others to pray for them
2. Ask them what the person would like said or not said about their situation and whether or not their full name may be disclosed
3. Ask if they wish to be on a printed prayer list
4. Never put prayer concerns on anything which goes to social media or internet publication without written permission