As I slid into a pew, I overheard a fragment of conversation in front of me. "Good for you," said one man to another. "It's not easy to come here the week after her funeral." An arm extended around a friend's shoulder for comfort. Moments later I cringed at the first line of the opening prayer: "Thank you, God, for another joy-filled day...." Long after the prayer finished, the man sat still, frozen, visibly upset. Haunted by that experience, I later turned to a dictionary and found the definitions there a helpful starting point for thinking about prayer in public worship.

Public adjective. 1. of or concerning the people as a whole (a public holiday; the public interest). 2. open to or shared by all the people (public library; public meeting). 3. done or existing openly (made her views public; a public protest). 4. provided by, or owned by the people (public money; public institution).

of or concerning the people as a whole
Public prayer is not private prayer. Public prayer is liturgical ("the work of the people") rather than devotional (reflecting merely personal devotion), corporate rather than individual. That is not to say that individual style is not present in one's leadership of prayer, but personal gifts and interests need to be put at the service of the community's prayer.

open to or shared by all the people
Scripture is our primary resource for taking seriously the breadth of human experience in public prayer. Instead of focusing on our narrow experience with "Thank you God, for another joy-filled day...." we can broaden it to a more inclusive affirmation of God's promises: "We thank you, God, that you promise to be with us always, in joy-filled days and dark despairing nights...." (see Mat. 28:20). Similarly, truly public prayer will avoid using labels and stereotypes which divide people into categories of "us" and "them." Instead of "...we pray for the oppressed..." try something like "...we pray for all people who are oppressed..." Prayers of confession are particularly challenging. Putting words into the mouths of others needs to be approached with great care and humility. The model of the "General Prayer of Confession" provides wise counsel: be general enough to include all (and use the plural), but concrete enough to be real. Not "I ignored my neighbour's need...," but "We often ignore the needs of our neighbours...."

done or existing openly
It is no coincidence that Protestant reformers spoke consistently of public worship. Luther railed against mumbled priestly prayers and private baptisms. Later notions of "common prayer" and "common order" were rooted in similar convictions. Our 1969 Service Book spoke helpfully of worship as "social action."

provided by or owned by the people
In preparation for leadership in public prayer and worship we do well to ask: Is this material public enough? In this sense, all public prayer strives to be the "prayers of the people."

William S. Kervin is Assistant Professor of Public Worship at Emmanuel College in Toronto, a position to which he brings his Maritime roots and pastoral experience in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Toronto.