



## **PRAYER STRATEGIES**

## INTRODUCTION

A past church I served, *Fellowship Bible Church* in ATL, GA, held its' first annual *Day of Hope* (DOH) event in April, 2009. DOH was a city-wide initiative where local churches, nonprofits, city government, schools, and others came together in a one-day venue to serve the poor/marginalized in the city. Free services such as medical care, community services, groceries & tennis shoes, haircuts, a Kid's Zone, a prayer tent, and so forth were all freely given to the under-resourced and marginalized in the community.

Part of my role as the event leader was to build a leadership team who would pull off the outreach. Every one of the team leaders I recruited were experts in their given areas: for instance, there was a contractor who led the site plan and logistics. There was a children's minister who planned the kid's zone. We had worship leaders who led the site entertainment. And so on down the list. In the months and weeks leading up to the event, this leadership team met on a regular basis to plan and prepare.

As we began to meet and plan our event, the Lord brought to my attention that something was amiss with our leadership: we (myself included) were relying on our own expertise and experience in planning the event! So, we quickly made a shift. We intentionally made prayer the foundation of everything that we did. Before each team meeting, we had a prayer walk at the location where the event was to be held. We made a prayer guide that participating churches could use to encourage their people to pray. Our leadership team made a commitment to pray two-three times/week for the outreach and the people that would attend.

What was the result? God responded and greatly blessed our first two DOH events. Through those first two events and years, we saw close to 400 folks pray to receive Christ. Many of those 400 were connected to local congregations after the events were over. How arrogant it was of us to think that we could do the event on our own, separate from prayer and a deep dependence on the Lord!

In this training, we will talk about prayer. Specifically, we will take a short examination of how many churches / ministries handle prayer, we will look at a needed shift in prayer, and we will look at some prayer strategies that you can implement as you help provide leadership to your school or nonprofit.

## IMPACT OF PRAYER

How have you seen God work through prayer? In your own life? In or through the local church? In your own ministry?

I just provided an example of how I have seen the Lord work in a ministry setting. What about you? Go ahead and take some time (now) to write down times when you have seen the Lord work through prayer.

Times when I saw God work through prayer:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Okay, how did that exercise go for you? As I did this exercise, it was an incredible reminder of not only God's faithfulness, but it was a reminder to me that I am totally dependent on Him. Think John chapter 15...that he is the vine, and without Him, I can do nothing.

Now, let me ask you another question: we all have experienced the power of prayer. We have seen God at work. So, why aren't we more intentional with prayer? I know there are many reasons: busyness, complacency, a reliance on ourselves, a desire to "get on" to other things, an over-programming of ministry, or maybe we have not seen God show up in a while and so we think, "why bother?"

### **A SHORT EXAMINATION**

Unfortunately, I think this can happen in ministry as well, not just in our personal lives. Check out a quote from David Platt:

"We Christians...have convinced ourselves that if we can position our resources and organize our strategies, then in church as in every other sphere of life, we can accomplish anything we set our minds to...but what is strangely lacking...is desperation for the power of God...I am frightened by the reality that the church I lead can carry on most of our activities smoothly, efficiently, even successfully, never realizing that the Holy Spirit of God is virtually absent from the picture."

As I look over the church world landscape, I think this scenario is more common than we like to admit. Church services, church events, and so forth are programmed like crazy. Staff groups and lay volunteers spend tons of time in planning, leadership development, and in strategic sessions. These things are not bad within themselves...they are actually necessary...the risk of this, however, is that we can quickly rely on ourselves, our skill sets, and our strategies instead of going to the Lord in prayer, with an absolute dependence on Him. And, that includes outreach ministries.

It's not that we don't pray, because we do. It is "normal" to have prayers that accompany our time in ministry. But sometimes, these prayers are offered out of ritual. Most often I think they are truly offered out of sincerity. My concern, however, is that we often don't hold prayer as the engine and fuel behind every spiritual advancement.

In his book *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, Thom Rainer found that the most evangelistic churches placed a strong emphasis on corporate prayer. Those churches did not simply depend on outreach programs to reach their communities. These churches prayed in earnest for the salvation of individuals.

When I first read this book, my initial question was: "does that mean that when churches are in decline or have plateaued (which describes the overwhelming majority of American churches), does that mean that these churches are not praying churches?" That is highly probable! In a later article by Thom Rainer, he stated that "I also noticed in my research that the decline in churches across America has been commensurate with the decline in corporate prayers. For many churches, a time of prayer is limited to one or two people voicing a public prayer in the worship services. There is no intent to involve all the people in prayers. Other churches have declared that they will have a prayer meeting one evening a week, with many churches choosing Wednesday evening as that time of corporate prayer. Sadly, most of those churches only have list of those with physical needs and perhaps the name of a few missionaries. The list is hurriedly prayed over so the

small number of people at the meeting can get to “more important” activities.” Ouch! The prayer that Dr. Rainer describes here can be characterized as nothing less than “casual.”

## THE NEEDED SHIFT

“All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...” – Acts 1:14

Immediately following Jesus’ ascension, the disciples went back to the upper room, where they had spent time with Jesus. **The first thing they did was pray.** After Pentecost, they did the same thing: “and they **devoted** themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

The early church emphasized corporate prayer in their gatherings! Although we don’t know what their corporate prayer time looked like, we do know that it was a time of “devoted prayer.” The word devotion has many connotations: “dedicated,” “strong affection,” “set apart,” or “zealous.” In these verses, I believe that Luke was going for exactly those meanings. Jesus had been with his followers for 40 days, He had ascended into heaven, the promise of the Holy Spirit had been received, and now the early Church was living out Christ in/thru them. These early Christians had devoted themselves exclusively to Jesus and His purposes, and their life was characterized by these very things! They prayed with zeal!

As I read, prayed and thought through Acts chapters 1 and 2, my question was and is: “can the prayer for the ministry that God has called me to, be characterized as a time of zeal, as a time of devoted prayer?”

Pay attention to the words of Dr. Rainer: “In one of my early research projects on American churches, I discovered that the most evangelistic churches placed a strong emphasis on corporate prayer. Those churches did not simply depend on the latest evangelistic program to reach their communities; they prayed in earnest for the salvation of persons, as well as offering many other intercessory needs.” I would add to what Dr. Rainer said by stating that that is true for community outreach ministries as well! The community outreach ministries that I have experienced as the most successful have been steeped in prayer.

What I have seen in my own experience, as well as my own research, is that churches who are effective in outreach and evangelism emphasize prayer as a vital part of those ministries. Like the early church at Jerusalem, these churches and ministries devote themselves to prayer!

### What about you?

1. When was the last time you experienced a time of devoted prayer...a time that would be characterized with zeal? Describe that experience.

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2. Which describes your outreach ministry: casual prayer or devoted prayer? How can you tell?

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3. If your team and its' volunteers pray casually, what do you think would happen:
- a. To your team if your volunteers began to pray with zeal...if they became devoted to prayer?

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- b. To your volunteers?

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- c. To your community and the lost around you?

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### PRAYER STRATEGIES

So, we know we should pray for the ministry to which God has called us. But, how do we do it? What does it look like? How do we engage others to join us in prayer as well? Let's take a look at several different strategies. This list is by no means comprehensive. These are strategies that I have utilized over the years, and I have seen them to be effective. Please consider them, but feel free to brainstorm and implement other methods for your ministry.

1. **Prayer Leader / Coordinator** - the coordinator is an essential element for a praying ministry. He or she helps integrate prayer into every aspect of the ministry. This strategy, to recruit a prayer champion, is perhaps the most important strategy to consider. Not only do you gain someone who will pray over the ministry, you also gain someone who will think through and implement prayer strategies and systems.
2. **Prayer Guides** – teams can make a paper or online list of its' prayer needs and can circulate the list on a weekly or monthly basis. Although the list itself might not bring a sense of “renewed commitment” to prayer, it will help guide those who have committed themselves to pray
3. **Prayer Emphasis Week or Day** - this week or day(s) elevates prayer and lifts up the ministry's attention on its' primary connection with God. It can elevate self-examination, the need for repentance, and so on.
4. **Prayer requests as a part of a Monthly Newsletter** – this is closely related to the prayer guide. The difference is that mini prayer guides can be a part of a monthly newsletter and can highlight other elements of the newsletter, such as a God story, serve opportunities, and so on.
5. **Prayer Meetings** - we all know about prayer meetings. Prayer meetings are not (or at least should not be) primarily Bible studies, fellowship times, or teaching times. They are prayer times. It is ok to incorporate these things, but prayer should be primary. Prayer is more vital than any of these things. To perform mission and evangelism, we are desperate for God's power.

6. **Prayer sent out weekly via text** – like the above prayer guide but an opt-in text method is used to send out weekly prayer requests. Millennials and the younger crowds tend to love the weekly prayer text.
7. **Prayer Calendar** – set up a monthly or yearly prayer calendar, ahead of time, that can be sent out to others who commit to pray. This can be done online or through a hard copy format.
8. **Prayer Retreat** - take extended time alone with God. This is especially crucial for leaders. It helps us be alone with God, spend time with Him, and helps us to know Him. Out of these times is when ministry is most effective. It also gives us a time for personal reflection and renewal.
9. **Prayer Walking** - this one is one of my favorites. Prayer walking is simply that: praying and walking. As we walk around our communities, and the geography around where we serve, we are able to intercede for everything and everyone we pass.
10. **Teaching on Prayer** - have seasons throughout the year where we teach on prayer. As folks hear the truth from God’s Word on prayer, they can catch the vision of prayer and are more likely to join in this spiritual habit.

#### **DISCIPLESHIP**

After examination comes discipleship. It’s not enough to have a knowledge of strategies. We must help our ministry develop devoted prayer. This means intentional planning and action.

1. After reading the above prayer strategy section, what strategies come to mind that might be a good fit for your ministry? Which one or two would be the most likely to see success? What one prayer strategy can you implement immediately?

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2. Who could join you in exploring and implementing these strategies?

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3. What other prayer strategies might you add over the next 12-18 months?

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4. How can you teach and equip others on your team to pray?

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