

second edition

*The*  
PRAYING  
CHURCH  
SOURCEBOOK

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PRAYING  
CHURCH  
SOURCEBOOK

by Alvin J. Vander Griend  
with Edith Bajema

Church Development Resources  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

We thank Dr. Alvin J. Vander Griend, director of Houses of Prayer Everywhere (HOPE), Grand Rapids, Michigan, for coordinating the revision of *The Praying Church Sourcebook*. Edith Bajema, a freelance writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan, contributed to several new chapters on strategy.

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# INTRODUCTION

Why emphasize prayer in the church? Because the church is at the center of God's plan for the world. The church has the utterly important task of helping to build God's kingdom and bring salvation.

However, the church will only be strong in its task if God's power and grace are unleashed within the church. And that power is unleashed only through prayer. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, "God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually . . ." (Q&A 116).

Some of us might look at the church's prayer habits and despair. But it takes only a minority of members who are strong in prayer to release God's power and grace. Be encouraged when God's "faithful few" in your church have seen the need for prayer and are responding to that vision.

Also, any efforts of one local church are linked to a broader prayer movement within the community and across the nation. God's Spirit is weaving the efforts of individual congregations into a movement of prayer that transcends denominational and geographical boundaries.

The vision behind this broader prayer movement is a burden for revival. People in different countries and communities have begun to pray for spiritual

awakening and for the evangelization of the world. The vision, quite simply, is that God's kingdom will continue to come with power and grace, offering salvation and healing to the nations of the world. It is a vision of mission.

Essential to this prayer movement is leadership. We cannot do enough to highlight how important it is for leaders to lead the way in prayer. All those who have been given positions of influence, authority, and oversight in the body of Christ are called to set the example in prayer. They need not be prayer warriors, but they must be willing to set the pace in prayer for the people they lead.

With this objective in mind, *The Praying Church Sourcebook* contains four sections to help leaders stimulate the prayer life of their congregations:

- **Essays on Prayer** examines the biblical principles and teachings undergirding effective prayer.
- **Strategies for Praying Churches** offers dozens of practical ideas for making prayer a more vital part of your church's life.
- **Stories of Praying Christians** provides inspirational anecdotes from many sources that leaders can use in preaching and teaching to interest

and encourage people in faithful prayer.

- **Resources for Praying Churches** combines a listing of recommended prayer ministries, resources, and books to inform and challenge your prayer life.

## thoughts on the second edition

The church continues to grow in its interest and practice of prayer. In my visits to congregations throughout North America in the past seven years, I have seen a steady increase in the desire of believers to develop strong, effective prayer lives. This greatly encourages me.

In addition, new prayer ministries, resources, newsletters, prayer guides and magazines, and scores of books have been published to nurture the church's prayer life.

This second edition of *The Praying Church Sourcebook* reflects some of the excitement of the prayer movement as it has grown since this book was first published. This edition also provides us an opportunity to include new material on important strategies such as prayerwalking, houses of prayer, solemn assemblies, and preaching on prayer. We have included these and other new chapters in the "Strategies" section of this book.

Much prayer and thought has gone into the development of this book and its revision. May it inspire you, provide concrete suggestions, and lead you and your church into a life of fervent, fruitful prayer. Please let us know what happens in your church as a result!

—Alvin J. Vander Griend

# PRAYING LEADERS

A pastor began a new charge in a large, conservative church. He noted that prayer in the council meetings had become routine, almost mechanical. His predecessor had traditionally opened with Scripture reading and a short prayer and had asked an elder to close with prayer at the end. The rest of the meeting was “business as usual.”

The new pastor noticed that the monthly elders’ meeting had the same flavor. In fact, the elders’ discussion of problems within the church family often took on a tone of gossip rather than pastoral care.

When the pastor considered how to bring his council into a more effective prayer life, he knew that change would have to be introduced gradually. He began with the opening-prayer time in council meetings. After the Scripture reading, he assigned each council member a specific concern to pray for: a hospitalized child, a man who had lost his job, a couple filing for divorce.

If the pastor needed more items, he moved to broader denominational concerns: missionaries supported by the church, prayer items from the various church agencies, and so on. Then, if requests were still needed, he included world concerns: earthquake victims, nations at war, and so on. After these

requests, there was a time of silence in which council members could offer additional concerns or simply meditate. Then the pastor closed with a prayer.

As a result, the council prayer time stretched from five minutes to fifteen or twenty. Though at first reluctant, the council members soon came to appreciate and enjoy this time. One elder said to the pastor, “When this started, I was very uncomfortable with it. But as the year progressed, I grew to like it more and more. It really added to the whole tone of the meeting. I hope you do this with the next council as well.”

The pastor found that the tone of the elders’ meetings also changed when the elders began to stop and pray for each of the family concerns mentioned. The gossip lessened as they began to see the church’s problems as part of a spiritual war in which they played a vital role—with prayer as their most effective weapon.

## leadership is a spiritual task

Praying leaders see their leadership as primarily spiritual: helping others to grow more and more in the knowledge and love of God. For this they set aside regular times of prayer, individually and as

a group. They live under the banner of the leaders of the early church who gave “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

How vital is prayer to spiritual leadership? We need only look at the powerful role prayer played in the lives and ministries of Jesus and Paul to find the answer. Jesus taught his followers that prayer was his vital link with the Father. He often withdrew to solitary places to pray, often when he was struggling with great weariness or tough decisions. He taught his disciples to pray—through his parables, his example, and his teaching. He often reminded his followers that prayer was an essential gift from God; he assured them that God would certainly hear and answer prayers spoken in his name—that is, in line with God’s will.

Paul’s letters are interwoven with his prayers for the early church and with his pleas that church members pray for his ministry. He knew where the true power was, and he constantly urged the young churches to lay hold of God’s power through prayer. The book of Acts records the marvelous—and often unexpected—answers that came in response to the apostles’ prayers.

## the value of praying leaders

Prayer is the primary way in which leaders accomplish their tasks. In prayer they admit that things happen on God’s initiative, that the work is primarily his, not ours. Since this idea goes against our society’s preference for independence and self-reliance, church leaders who are serious about prayer are a strong testimony that God’s kingdom is not of this world. Their effectiveness depends on prayer.

A congregation will follow the example of its praying leaders. Leaders strongly committed to prayer will convey

more to their congregation about the power and reality of prayer than sermons, articles, or special speakers will. Regular and devoted prayer is one very specific way to carry out the elders’ and deacons’ mandate to “set an example of godliness” for the congregation.

Your leaders’ prayers are also a ministry of caring that communicates love and concern to the people they shepherd. What can be more affirming than to hear, “I think of you regularly in my prayers. What can I pray about for you?”

People respond warmly to this concern.

A high priority on prayer also benefits the church leadership itself. It gives leaders the opportunity to bear each other’s burdens and to find encouragement and support in the struggles of leadership. The pastor needs to hear the council members praying for him; and they need to hear his prayers for them.

Commitment to pray for each other brings protection from Satan’s attack. In a vital, growing church, the leaders are often the devil’s first target. Prayer will keep your leaders aware of the reality of spiritual warfare. It reminds them of who protects them and against whom they are fighting. Prayer is the most powerful weapon God has given us against the evil one.

Will an emphasis on prayer make for longer council meetings? Not necessarily. Some councils are committed to spending one-third of their meeting time in prayer. They have found that an hour of prayer at the beginning of the meeting actually shortens the overall meeting time—by bringing a greater spirit of unity, by emphasizing spiritual priorities, and by opening people’s hearts to the Spirit’s guidance.

**Praying leaders see their leadership as primarily spiritual: helping others to grow more and more in the knowledge and love of God.**

## practical ideas

Faced with these examples and the compelling blessings that God has promised in response to believing prayer, how can the leaders of the church not make prayer a vital part of their ministry? Below are some ways to bring the freshness and power of prayer to your church's life—through praying leaders.

Obviously you can't change your leaders' prayer habits and patterns immediately. Your enthusiasm for prayer power in church ministry may put off some who are not used to change. Be prepared to move slowly at first.

A good place to start may be with the prayer time in the church council or the elders' meeting. There are many ways to help the church council get out of the routine and into the power of prayer. Schedule a definite time slot during your council meetings—longer than simply the perfunctory opening or closing prayer time. Encourage council members to pray

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about the church's concerns—financial, ministry, family, or whatever—as they are brought up in the meeting. Ask council members to bring their family or personal requests in prayer—and keep track of the answers God gives.

If your council members are not used to praying for each other, you might try the following idea as described by the woman who introduced it to her church council:

*I had served as a deacon on our church's council for a number of years, and before my term was up, I told the council I wanted to leave them with a gift. Before the council meeting got under way, I placed*

*members into groups of three. I asked them to share with each other what was the hardest thing about being an elder or deacon. After the sharing, they were to pray for each other, based on what they had talked about. At the end of the prayer time, people were crying, holding hands, hugging each other.*

*At the next meeting, I asked everyone to divide again into the same groups of three. This time the sharing question was "When did the word 'God' first have meaning for you?" After that, they prayed for each other in small groups again.*

*At the third meeting, the sharing question was "What comes between you and the Lord?" After the time of sharing and prayer, one of the most conservative members of the council came up to me and said, "Ann, that was wonderful!"*

*During our last meeting, it was obvious from the conversations that council members had been praying for each other during the weeks between meetings. I asked the groups of three to use a list of descriptive words to express how they felt about each other. They spent about forty-five minutes on this exercise—and the meeting still ended on time!*

Another way to encourage more prayer among your church leaders is to schedule a weekend retreat on prayer and leadership for all church leaders. Invite not only your council members but also the leaders in your ministries of music, church education (including all teachers), neighborhood Bible studies, outreach ministries, worship planning, and so on. Plan to take at least one full day to focus on the subject of prayer and leadership.

You may want to ask participants to read Bill Hybels's book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, or R. C. Sproul's book *Effective Prayer*. Set aside time to discuss what you've learned from your reading. Pray together about what the Spirit may be urging you to do as a result of your reading and discussion.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do is help your council members see their God-given role as the church's spiritual leaders. Most council meetings are so bogged down with business details that members easily lose sight of the larger spiritual ministry of the church—of which prayer is a vital part. Elders and deacons alike are called to be people of prayer. Note that the early church leaders took steps to cut down the administrative load in order to pray (Acts 6:4)!

Prayer and spiritual renewal go hand in hand. And this begins with the congregation's leaders. A vital prayer life in your church leadership is one of the most important indications of your congregation's spiritual health.