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The
**PRAYING
CHURCH**

**IDEA
BOOK**

Douglas A. Kamstra

With Foreword by
Alvin J. Vander Griend

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To those who have taught me to pray:
my father and mother,
William and Adrianna Kamstra

To those at the top of my prayer list:
my wife Marilyn,
and my children, Brian, Joel, and Eric

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FOREWORD

There is a mounting prayer movement in America today, and pastors are increasingly aware of it. Both the quantity and quality of prayer are increasing. As a result, more and more pastors are wondering how to revive prayer ministries in their churches and are looking for resources to facilitate new and fruitful prayer ministries. Doug Kamstra's *Praying Church Idea Book* meets this need and answers all kinds of questions that pastors and church leaders have about prayer formats.

Prayer is important to the church. The great leaders of the church have always been men and women of prayer. The truly effective churches throughout the centuries have been churches of prayer. It is by prayer that the power of God is directed and activated in every dimension of the church's life. Without prayer churches are powerless and fruitless. But restoring prayer to the place of priority in the church will take more than correcting the church's thinking and improving its teaching about prayer. It will take improving its practice of prayer as well. That's where *The Praying Church Idea Book* comes in. It's designed to provide practical helps to church leaders who want to build praying churches.

Many new books on prayer are being published today. Many of them are useful, elucidating Bible prayer themes and answering questions today's Christians have about prayer. However, there is a void. Very few of these books speak to the pressing practical prayer questions the church is facing today.

That's why *The Praying Church Idea Book* is such an important contribution to the field of prayer. It deals with these practical issues thoroughly and thoughtfully.

This is not a book that anyone is going to sit down and read from beginning to end. Instead it will serve as a reference tool that pastors and other church leaders will turn to again and again. Prayer leaders will want to peruse the forty prayer methods in the "Prayer Formats" section. Pastors will be challenged and encouraged by the section on the "Leader's Personal Prayer Life." Ministry leaders will find help among the fifty-five items under the heading "Prayer Ministry Ideas." There are even sections for small group leaders, for worship leaders, and for evangelism/mission leaders. So wide is the potential use of this book within a local congregation that churches may want to own several copies.

The Praying Church Idea Book will serve in many churches as a companion to the widely used *Praying Church Sourcebook* (published by CRC Publications). It adds to the basic concepts and strategies, so well laid out in the *Sourcebook*, the kind of detail that will give confidence to those who are launching into these strategies and using prayer formats with which they are unfamiliar.

I enthusiastically recommend *The Praying Church Idea Book*. My friend Doug Kamstra has done a masterful job of researching and organizing prayer strategies and formats. Regular use of this book will save the average church leader many hours

of time and will help prevent mistakes when launching new prayer ministries. As you use this immensely helpful tool you'll thank God for Doug Kamstra, as I do, and you'll turn to it often as you search for fruitful prayer ideas to help make your church a "house of prayer."

Alvin J. Vander Griend
National Lighthouse Facilitator

PREFACE

Prayer has been a fundamental component of the Christian's life and worship since the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." Many believers give daily thanks at meals, confess their sins and ask for forgiveness, intercede for family members, pray for the sick, ask for the protection of missionaries, raise up the needs of the world, pray for their pastor and church, and "stand in the gap" for the lost. Of all the activities to which a Christian is called, prayer is the most important (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116). Yet statistics continue to indicate that many church members spend little time in prayer.

Of all the activities to which the church is called, prayer is the most important (see Isa. 56:7; Matt. 20:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). Individual churches frequently build reputations. Some are recognized for dynamic pastoral leadership, others for strong lay leadership. Some make an impression by being *avant-garde*; others experience growth by pursuing denomination guidelines. Some are known for their care-giving; others are characterized as "warm and friendly." Some are evangelistic; some are concerned with justice and social issues; some focus on personal spiritual growth. Some pride themselves on ministering to singles; some emphasize the family. While these churches help to meet a variety of spiritual and physical needs, many churches tend to overlook the obvious—that is, the centrality of prayer.

The early church had no large buildings, well-financed budgets, or long-range plans. While these things may all be helpful in growing the church in the twenty-first century, none of them are indispensable; prayer is. When the disciples realized they were neglecting prayer, they reminded the church of their first priority and called the church to elect deacons so they could return to praying (see Acts 6).

Today's church, especially in North America, is deeply in need of a new prayer theology. Traditionally, we have relied on theologians to build the framework for our religious practices. It is the intent of this book, however, to promote a practice of prayer that will ultimately result in a prayer theology. As long as we have so little prayer in our personal lives and our churches lack the power prayer brings, any theology of prayer will remain incomplete. Once we begin to pray, seeking the presence of God on our knees for an extended time, our theology (that is, our understanding of God) can only grow. And the best way to learn to pray is to pray.

Over the past decade, there has been a visible increase in prayer throughout the world. Prayer is moving out of the privacy of our prayer closets into businesses (small group prayer meetings and Prayer Boxes), into schools (Moms in Touch and See You at the Pole), into politics (National Day of Prayer and Pray at the Polls), and onto the streets (prayerwalking and Lighthouses of prayer). Some believe this increased interest

in prayer is a reaction to the moral melt-down in many nations. Others cite increased secularism, coupled with an increase in persecution of Christians, as the force driving believers to their knees. Still others point to the growing interest worldwide in the supernatural or the recent passage from one millennium to the next. Whatever the reason, there is an increased passion among Christian leaders for revival. Many prayer initiatives have declared this century as the time to fulfill the Great Commission (unachieved in the twentieth century) so every person on earth will have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result, many prayer initiatives have an evangelistic, rather than a pietistic, focus. After centuries of evangelism and missions, Christians increasingly realize that prayer—and only prayer—will usher in the gospel to every nation.

The result must be that churches get serious about prayer. They need to proclaim a passionate call to prayer; they need to make a conscious and conscientious effort to teach believers to pray. Churches need to get out in front of the growing prayer movement and take the lead. Without prayer, our churches will lose their focus and influence.

But let's be clear. Prayer is not the latest fad, the current church-growth technique, or a last-ditch effort to combat an increasingly secular society. Prayer is the expression of our hunger for divine companionship, of our desire for intimacy with our Creator, of our need to build a deeper relationship with our Lord. Prayer is seeking God: surrendering ourselves to God's will, receiving God's gifts and blessings, welcoming God's presence in our lives, expressing our gratitude to God, and interceding on behalf of others in need. Unfortunately, too many Christians view prayer as a dreary obligation, a shopping list of needs, or a meaningless religious ritual. As the disciples realized, we need to be taught to pray. We need to pray.

This book is not a theology of prayer, a study of the effectiveness and power of prayer, or a statement of the struggles and pain of prayer. Rather it is designed solely to challenge, encourage, and direct the local

church to become a "house of prayer." The goal is not to add programs or simply to add prayer services, but to build a praying church. Prayer is not a means to an end. Prayer is not primarily a duty. It is the nourishment of a relationship—between heaven and earth, between God and people, between a Savior and sinners, between the Lord and his servants, between a Father and his children, between the head of the church and its members. God calls us into relationship. God calls us to pray.

In compiling this book, every attempt has been made to seek permission and give proper credit to the appropriate source. Unfortunately, in some instances, because some of this information has been used so much, so often, and by so many people, the original source may have been lost. Upon appropriate notification, these items will be properly credited in a subsequent edition.

In order to make this book as useful as possible, consider purchasing *The Praying Church Sourcebook* by Dr. Alvin J. Vander Griend (1996, CRC Publications). It is available at your local Christian bookstore, by calling 1-800-333-8300, or on-line at www.FaithAliveResources.org.

I offer my special appreciation and deep gratitude to those who have mentored my prayer life—my father and mother; to those who have supported my passion for growing praying churches—Dirk Hart, Lori Worst, the Christian Reformed Home Missions staff, and the Calvary staff and congregation; and to those who assisted and encouraged me in the writing of this book—Dan Ackerman, Emily Brink, Jack Dik, Brad Long, Don McCrory, Betty Veldman, and John Witvliet. A special thank you to Al Vander Griend, who has been a mentor, an encourager, and an editor.

Douglas A. Kamstra

INTRODUCTION



TOWARD A PRAYING CHURCH

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. (Isa. 56:7)

I would love to see our churches become houses of prayer. I know you would, too. All too often, however, they are places for everything and anything except prayer. I say this with sorrow, for I believe it saddens the heart of God. True, we need to have our business meetings and our committee meetings and our Bible studies and our self-help groups and our worship services, but if the fire is not hot at the center, these things are only ashes in our hands. (Richard Foster, *Prayer*, 1992, pp. 197-198)

In Isaiah 56:7, God says that his “house” shall be known as a “house of prayer.” Following his triumphal entry, Jesus entered the temple, tossed out the money changers, and reiterated his Father’s imperative: “My house will be called a house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13). Being a house of prayer is more than simply believing in prayer. (Statistics say that almost all Christians and a majority of non-Christians believe in prayer.) Being a house of prayer involves more than having an interest in prayer, more than periodically praying in church, and more than having a number of active prayer ministries. Being a house of prayer means that the church’s primary identifying mark is prayer. Richard Foster sadly, but accurately, underscores the fact that very few local churches are houses of

prayer and that the church as a whole has failed miserably to live up to this biblical command.

There are, however, some encouraging factors. Consider:

- City-wide prayer rallies are sweeping communities across the United States, drawing the participation of tens of thousands of Christians.
- According to George Barna, even 63 percent of those who do not attend church still pray regularly.
- In Houston, 150 high school students gather twice a week to pray for revival.
- A multilingual prayer rally in Boston’s historic Park Street Church brought together 800 Christians from 75 center-city churches.
- The divorce rate among couples who profess to be Christians is 28 percent. The divorce rate among couples who pray together daily is less than one-tenth of one percent.
- Promise Keepers has brought men to pray together across denominational, ethnic, and generational lines. In 1998, more than one million men gathered on the Washington Mall in a solemn assembly to pray.
- Pastor’s Prayer Summits have brought pastors together across denominational and ethnic lines in more

than 100 regions in the United States and Canada and thirty other countries.

- The Assemblies of God is enlisting over one million people to regularly offer up intercessory prayer.
- John Maxwell and his VIP prayer ministry have set out to raise up one million men who will commit to pray for their pastors.
- The Denominational Prayer Leaders Network annually brings together more than thirty denominations representing more than 150,000 churches in North America to talk about prayer.
- The National Day of Prayer broadcast is viewed by tens of thousands of worshippers.
- Books on prayer and prayer ministries have multiplied. There are more than 2,500 titles in print focusing on prayer.
- *Pray!* magazine, the first periodical entirely devoted to prayer, became self-supporting after only three years.
- Churches are hiring prayer coordinators, encouraging intercessors, and training believers.
- More than three million students participate annually in See You at the Pole.
- Small multiracial prayer groups are meeting in South Africa.
- In Korea, tens of thousands of high school and university leaders gather for prayer.
- Significant prayer ministries have emerged from crusades led by Billy Graham, Luis Palau, John Guest, Ed Silvano, and others.
- The All-Japan prayer movement is seeking the evangelization of the country's one hundred million people.

- Up to 250,000 people pray through the night in Seoul, Korea, every Friday. It is no coincidence that nine of the world's twenty largest churches are in Korea.

C. Peter Wagner summarizes what is happening around the world when he says, "Prayer is out of control. Not since Pentecost itself, has history recorded a level of prayer on six continents comparable to what is happening today" (*Confronting the Powers*, 1996, p. 11).

the call to pray

But what, really, is so important about being a house of prayer? Why should this particular command stand above any other?

Prayer is, first of all, about spending time with God. Simply being together is a necessary part of any growing relationship. Our relationship with God will become stronger as we share our dreams and joys, our burdens and our pain, our frustrations and our celebrations. Our dependence on God will become a reality as we express that continuing dependence in prayer.

Second, it is through prayer in concert with our study of Scripture that God makes his will known to us. God is at work in the world and invites us to join him in that work. Because we discover God's will through prayer, prayer is the primary, or initial, work of believers. The power of prayer is that the Holy Spirit enables us to do the work of God when we, through prayer, discover God's will and join him in that work.

As if these reasons alone were not sufficient, God gives us additional reasons to pray:

- **God commands us to pray.**

Be faithful in prayer (Rom. 12:12).

Pray continually (1 Thess. 5:17).

- **Jesus modeled prayer.**

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed (Mark 1:35).

Prayer characterized the ministry of Christ, who is the head of the church. He prayed when choosing his disciples (Luke 6:12), on the mountain of transfiguration (Luke 9:29), on retreat (Mark 6:46), at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:27), in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46), and on the cross (Luke 23:46). Luke emphasizes that prayer was a regular part of Jesus' life (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:32, 40-45).

- **Scripture emphasizes the importance of prayer.**

I urge, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone (1 Tim. 2:1).

Throughout Scripture we are reminded of the importance of prayer through calls to prayer, models of praying people, and the recorded prayers of specific people. In all, the Bible contains 667 verses that deal with prayer.

- **Prayer is one of the church's most valuable resources.**

Prayer is always available to the church—no matter the church's location, the size of its membership, or its available resources. Prayer provides the church with strength, guidance, and power. When churches, pastors, church leaders, intercessors, and members pray, things happen: relationships with God deepen, community grows, and people come to salvation. W. Stanley Mooneyham said, "Let us stop complaining that we don't have enough people, enough money, enough tools. That is simply not true. There is no shortage of anything we need—except vision, prayer, and will. Prayer is the one resource immediately available to each of us."

- **Prayer works.**

Scripture is full of accounts of answered prayer. Consider Exodus 17:8-16—the account of the famous

battle when Moses prayed, hands raised, while Joshua and the Israelites fought the Amalekites in the valley below. The passage clearly illustrates that the difference between victory and defeat was prayer. Other accounts involve Elijah, who called upon God and received fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:36); Daniel, who by praying defied King Darius's order (Dan. 6); Peter, who was freed from prison by the prayers of believers (Acts 12:1-18); and Paul and Silas, who offered up praise to God in prison and led the jailor and his family to Christ (Acts 16:25-34).

History also is full of examples of answered prayer. Martin Luther's prayers fanned the fire of the Reformation. Revival swept England when John Wesley prayed. European intercessors prayed, and the Berlin wall crumbled. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others led the Civil Rights Movement by their example of prayer. God answers prayer.

- **Prayer pleases Jesus.**

This [requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving] is good, and pleases our Savior (1 Tim. 2:3).

- **Prayer reminds us that God is in control.**

"Ah, sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:16-17).

- **Through prayer we receive God's gifts.**

Ask and it will be given to you (Matt. 7:7).

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him (1 John 5:14-15).

- **God uses our prayers to change the normal course of events.**

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops (James 5:17-18).

- **Prayer provides a foundation for sharing the gospel.**

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should (Col. 4:2-4, 12).

- **Prayer plays a significant role in bringing people to salvation.**

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.... This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

- **Prayer is how we receive strength to endure trials.**

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7).

- **Prayer prevents us from falling into temptation.**

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak (Matt. 26:41).

- **Prayer gives power over demons.**

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29).

- **Prayer brings healing to nations.**

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and seek

my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14).

- **Prayer brings healing to people.**

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:13-16).

- **Prayer enhances our fellowship.**

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 20).

the trouble with praying

If God commands it, why isn't prayer the central focus of our churches? We can cite several reasons. Some are merely excuses we offer to save ourselves the embarrassment of admitting we have been preoccupied and disobedient. Others, however, are valid, and we ought to urgently deal with them.

1. Alvin Vander Griend, Mission America's national Lighthouse facilitator, suggests that we lack a proper theology of prayer. Not that we have no theology; on the contrary, numerous pieces of a prayer theology are floating around. Some pieces are biblical; some are not. Some resonate experientially; some do not. Unfortunately, the pieces are all mixed together and need to be sorted out. A biblical theology of prayer would help us better understand the priority and role of prayer. However, developing a proper theology of prayer must begin with prayer!

2. Prayer is, by design, a silent ministry. Innumerable believers quietly—yet fervently—pray behind the scenes and in their prayer closets. In fact, prayer warriors tend to shun publicity. So while much prayer is occurring, the “model” warriors often remain hidden. Much of a parent’s prayer life takes place behind closed doors—hidden from their children’s eyes. Most of the prayer warriors in a church remain anonymous. These are the models. We need to coax them out of hiding to teach the rest of us to pray.
3. Prayer ministry in a local church is both a “public” (visible) and “private” (behind the scenes) ministry. But few churches have an intentional prayer ministry—one that has a stated purpose and a plan for continued growth and development. Few churches are houses of prayer. As a result, there are few models to observe, few references to check, and few people to resource.
4. While most pastors recognize the importance of a strong prayer ministry, their personal involvement in prayer is often deferred by their already overloaded schedules. So pastors often ignore or delegate the prayer ministry. Since prayer lacks priority in their own lives, it seldom becomes a priority in their ministry. John Maxwell, in his book *21 Laws of Leadership*, notes that a leader cannot lead where he or she has not been. Unfortunately, if the pastor is not visibly involved in the ministry of prayer, few others in the congregation will sense its importance.
5. Discouragement is one of Satan’s most effective weapons. He tries to discourage us on many fronts: we find it too difficult to pray for three hours every morning, as Martin Luther did; we are frustrated by the feeling that we are praying alone or to no one; we waver when our prayer team shows little sign of progress. And when a congregation becomes intentional about becoming a praying church, Satan penalizes it through increased spiritual warfare. Cheryl Sacks, writing in

Bridgebuilder newsletter, notes that things will go well for a while and then—WHAM!—Satan retaliates and the warfare intensifies.

6. Impatience is a twenty-first-century vice. We are accustomed to instant pudding, ten-minute oil changes, fast food, and the resolution of major life crises in thirty-minute sitcoms. Influenced by our culture, we take our impatient nature to God in prayer only to be placed in his “waiting room.” While sometimes we wait only for days, it is not uncommon to wait for years, even decades. Our impatience leads to frustration; our frustration leads to discouragement.
7. Jonathan Graf, editor of *Pray!* magazine, suggests that our lack of prayer is a reflection of an independent and self-sufficient spirit (*Pray!*, July/August 1998, p. 13). We feel prayer is unnecessary—even a waste of time. We forget we need God’s help because we think we can handle things ourselves. So we have developed a lifestyle in which God is only tangentially involved.
8. In addition to our impatience and independence, there are other cultural factors that influence our prayer life. In an affluent society—when our freezers are full and our checkbook is handy—it is difficult to pray with any real passion for “our daily bread.” When doctors can treat most every illness at the local hospital, it seems less imperative to “call the elders of the church to pray over [you] and anoint [you] with oil.” When we have extravagant homes, extended vacations, and plans for the future, it is hard to pray, “May your kingdom come.”

the marks of a house of prayer

While we might expect all Bible-believing churches to recognize the importance of prayer, many churches don’t understand what it means to be a house of prayer. Jesus never said, “My house shall be called a

house of preaching” or “a house of music” or even “a house of worship.” Jesus said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer.” Yet when people talk about churches the dynamic of prayer is seldom mentioned.

Jesus said, “The gates of Hades shall not prevail against [the church]” (Matt. 16:18). This is a call to arms—to take up and use the weapons God has given us. This call emphasizes the primary purpose of the church: not to impact political life, nor to build monumental facilities, nor even to provide safe havens for fellowship, but to be active in the spiritual battle. And one of our primary weapons is prayer. Brad Long writes:

Jesus addressed his words about the gates of hell not to individual Christians, but to the church. He wants Christians to pray as a church. He wants to form us into an army, subdivided into cohorts who are learning to pray in one accord. The effective army is the army that learns to communicate well, to trust its leaders, to reconnaissance regularly—in short, to function together in one accord. The evil one, Luther noted, does everything he can to prevent this from happening, because he wants to keep his gates intact. (*Prayer that Shapes the Future*, p. 191)

So what exactly does it mean to be a house of prayer? The Bible doesn’t say exactly. But we can fairly assume that a house of prayer is a church where

- prayer is understood as the primary work.
- prayer is the most identifiable ministry.
- prayer is at the heart of every facet of the church’s mission and ministry.

Based on these assumptions, a house of prayer would normally include these factors:

1. **The pastor is committed to prayer.** In a house of prayer, the pastor and pastoral leadership are deeply committed

to and passionate about prayer. Pastors realize that the primary work of the church is prayer. This is clearly visible in their personal prayer lives, in their leading of worship and prayer, and in the frequency that they teach on prayer. The “praying church” pastor believes prayer is critical, essential, and imperative.

2. **Leaders lead by prayer.** The governing board, staff, and ministry leaders are people of prayer. Praying leaders pray for the members of the congregation; they pray before, during, and after making decisions; they pray daily for the pastoral leadership in the church. When church leaders pray, not only do they model prayer but God’s Spirit moves in the church.

3. **Members are serious about prayer in their personal and corporate lives.** A noted prayer leader has said, “If personal and family prayer is neglected, other attempts at prayer are like sprinkling a plant with water while leaving the roots dry.” The ministry of prayer in the church is not limited to those with the spiritual gift of intercession; it is designed for all the members of the body of Christ. In a house of prayer, members

- make prayer for their pastor, leaders, other members, and community a daily priority.
- practice regular (and extended) personal and corporate prayer.
- consider prayer a major factor in making their daily decisions and in problem solving.
- prioritize their personal time with the Lord and participate in family devotions.
- are growing spiritually.

4. **Prayer is integral, intentional, and integrated into the church.** In addition to being a priority for pastors, leaders, and individual members, prayer must

be a primary factor in the ministry of the congregation. However, simply adding a prayer ministry to a church's list of ministries and programs does not make it a praying church. Prayer is not a program. It must be the lifeblood of the church—written into the DNA of the congregation. This means that prayer must be a priority (integral), a deliberate strategy (intentional), and a significant factor in every area of ministry (integrated).

In Acts 1:14, we read that the church “all joined together in constant prayer.” After Pentecost, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). In a praying church, prayer is visible throughout the life of the congregation:

- The importance of prayer is reflected in the church’s core values and mission statement.
- The prayer ministry has a defined (and written) prayer strategy that includes a purpose statement, goals, and objectives.
- Prayer focuses the direction of the church, guides the ministry teams, empowers the ministries, and unites the church.
- Prayer is a priority in every meeting, a prerequisite to every decision, and a key factor in every ministry. The strength of the church is found in prayer.
- Prayer is emphasized in worship through corporate prayer times, lay participation, and regular teaching on prayer.
- Prayer is visible in the lives of its members. A praying church holds high expectations for its people in the area of prayer, and its members are held accountable to pray. A praying church recognizes the need

to offer various opportunities for prayer; scheduled opportunities are offered throughout the week, and people are encouraged to pray on their own.

- Prayer is an integral part of every worship experience.
 - The church has a place specifically designated for prayer that is easily accessible and regularly used.
 - The prayer ministry, like the education, worship, and evangelism ministries, is included in the church’s budget.
5. **The emphasis on prayer is both internal and external.** A praying church prays for its members and for the lost with equal passion. So in addition to interceding for the church’s members and ministries, a praying church regularly “stands in the gap” for its neighbors, community, nation, other nations, and the world. A praying church regularly intercedes for the “harvesters” and for a rich harvest.

Any church without a well-organized and systematic prayer program is simply operating on a religious treadmill.
—Paul Billheimer,
Destined for the Throne
 6. **The church is visibly united in prayer with other churches in the community.** A praying church realizes that God’s church is one body. Unity is both a prerequisite for and a result of effective prayer. A praying church comes together regularly with other churches—across denominational, ethnic, and cultural lines—to pray. Having broken down the walls that tend to separate fellow believers, we can more effectively break down the walls that separate people from God.
 7. **There is regular training in prayer.** A praying church intentionally develops intercessors. Training in prayer comes in Sunday school classes and educa-

tional offerings, through teaching and preaching in worship, and from experiences in prayer meetings and praying together. Training is offered for children, youth, adults, and seniors. People are regularly encouraged to “raise the bar” in their prayer life.

8. **Members gather for a regular prayer meeting.** If a church is a house of prayer, then the prayer meeting is an essential hour of the week. In a praying church, the weekly prayer meeting is the furnace that keeps the church warm.
9. **A designated prayer team provides leadership.** The team has been identified through prayer, designated by the pastor and church leadership, and anointed by the Holy Spirit to provide leadership. This team is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the prayer ministry vibrant and growing.
10. **God is answering prayers.** A praying church knows when God answers prayer because they consciously identify, record, and celebrate God’s answers. Lives are transformed, people are coming to know the Lord, and the church is growing spiritually and numerically. While the church understands that God doesn’t always say “yes,” they know that God always answers.

getting started

Building a praying church might sound like an overwhelming task. It is. There is no way you, or an entire prayer team, or even the senior pastor and the whole leadership board can accomplish it. Only God can. Building a praying church is always the work of God.

The call to a prayer ministry must be God’s call. Sometimes God places this call in the heart of an individual intercessor who begins to pray for the church, its leadership, and the community. Often, God calls more than one person in a congregation—although it may be months or even

years before they discover each other. Sometimes God may call a family or a small group to begin praying. Sometimes God may call the pastor, a staff member, or a member of the leadership board. But while the leadership of the senior pastor is imperative in building a praying church, prayer is primarily a ministry of the people of God—and the call to pray is often heard first by people with the spiritual gifts of intercession, discernment, or prophecy. That is why when you sense God calling you, respond as Samuel did by saying, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:10). Becoming a house of prayer begins in dialogue with God.

While there is no set formula (be suspicious of anyone who suggests there is), there are some basic steps for developing a praying church:

1. **Pray.** Ironically, many churches that desire to become a house of prayer skip the most important step. The initial tendency is to jump right in—start a prayer group, build a prayer chain, set up a school of prayer . . . We figure the quicker we get started, the quicker we can become a praying church. But the place to start is prayer.

The second tendency is to have our plans already set before we go to God in prayer. Then we essentially ask God to bless our own plans. Sometimes God will; frequently God doesn’t. It is far better to discover God’s will and join him in it. If we follow his will, his blessing is guaranteed.

The third tendency is to short-circuit the process. We call a few people together to pray and then move immediately into planning. Sometimes God answers prayers instantly; more frequently, however, our praying must go on for a season—a month, a year, or even longer. Avoid running ahead of God. Avoid the temptation to do things in your time. The timing is always the Lord’s.

What should you pray for?

- Ask God for a spirit of prayer to fall upon your church.
- Ask God to raise up more people to whom he has also given the burden of building a praying church. When God does that, come together periodically to pray.
- Ask God to anoint people in your congregation with the gift of intercession.
- Ask God for wisdom and vision. What does God want your church to do? Who should be involved? What is the church ready for? (See James 1:5.)
- Ask God to use prayer to begin building a passion for reaching your community and city for Christ.
- Ask God to tell you what he wants you to do.

As you pray, listen carefully for God's answer. And don't stop praying once you have an answer. Scripture says God's word is often confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:6) or sometimes by a special sign (Judg. 6:35-40). Frequently, the "witness" is Scripture: God points you to a passage that clearly designates his leading during your devotions, during a small group Bible study, or during a worship service. Sometimes the witnesses are other believers who have received the same answer. Other times the witnesses are the doors that God opens or closes; observe how things seem to be falling into place: Are people stepping forward? Are the necessary resources becoming available? Is God giving a sense of peace about the decision? When the work is from God, the pieces of the puzzle continue to fall into place until the picture (God's vision) is clear.

Sometimes God asks us to wait. This can mean a variety of things:

- God isn't ready. (Remember, God has perfect timing.)
- There is a sin (personal or corporate) that needs to be confessed before God will answer.
- God is waiting for us to realign our hearts with his will.
- God wants to teach us something—patience, humility, dependence, or trust—before he moves us toward being a praying church.

Sometimes, already in this initial step, opposition may arise. Opposition must be evaluated as carefully as confirmation. Its purpose may be to remind us to continue praying, to challenge us to listen more closely, to invite us to rethink the idea or the timing, or to warn us that the devil isn't happy with the idea that a church may become a house of prayer.

2. **Discover the vision.** A vision is a picture of the future that motivates you to see it happen. Businesses develop visions. They set goals for product development, productivity, sales, delivery, and profit. All too often, churches adopt the same process. The church's responsibility is not to develop a vision, but to discover the vision God has established. This is imperative, for in the future, when the ministry appears to struggle, when we get weary in our persevering, when criticism seems to build, we can take courage from the fact that God will see his vision through.

Through prayer and through the confirmation God provides, God forms his vision in our hearts and minds. Ironically, it takes prayer to "discover" God's vision for our praying. Brad Long writes:

"To cultivate a praying church, it is necessary to have received a vision from God, which will drive the leadership and eventually the congregation to prayer. A prayerless church does not receive a vision from God." (*Prayer that Shapes the Future*, 1999, p. 193)

Piece by piece, the vision becomes clear. However, in putting the puzzle together,

avoid the temptation to clone an apparently “successful” prayer ministry from another congregation. God won’t give your church another church’s vision. While the vision God gives you may be similar in many respects to another church’s, your vision is unique—reflective of your members’ gifts and resources, of your church’s ministry, and of your community’s needs.

Normally, a vision answers the basic questions Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why?, and How?

- Who should be involved?
- What will the prayer ministry look like?
- When should we begin?
- Where will the focus of the ministry be?
- Why do we need a prayer ministry?
- How do we proceed in building a house of prayer?

The answer to these questions constitutes the vision and ultimately sets the direction of the ministry.

When the vision is clear, write it out and use scriptural support. This will help you share it with the congregation.

Example

The prayer ministry of Community Church exists to involve all worshipers (*who*) in daily prayer (*what*) through training and encouragement (*how*) to enlarge our love for Jesus Christ, to evangelize, to equip believers for service (*where*), and to bring God glory (*why*)!

3. **Define the vision.** While having a prayer ministry is not the equivalent of being a praying church, it is a significant step toward intentionally becoming a house of prayer. There are a number of patterns that churches generally fall into:

- In many churches, prayer is assumed. The church confesses to believe in prayer—during worship, at meetings, and as appropriate in the various ministries of the church. Prayer is often seen as a personal responsibility—between the believer and God. Periodically, the sermon may deal specifically or tangentially with prayer. Unfortunately, in many of these churches, more prayer is assumed to be happening than actually is.
- In a few churches, prayer is the sole (primary) focus. Prayer is the ministry of the church. This is a church marked by prayer meetings, prayer groups, and a heavy emphasis on prayer in worship. They nurture their relationship with God and pray for the lost. And extensive prayer results in intensive fellowship. While these churches are “birthed” with the vision of being a church focusing only on prayer, as they “grow up” (either in size or age) they often add programs that dilute their emphasis on prayer. These churches tend to become introverted, focus on personal piety, and remain fairly small. It also appears to be very difficult to transition an established church into this model.
- In some churches, the pastor recognizes the importance of prayer, takes on the responsibility of leading the prayer ministry, and makes deliberate efforts to build prayer into the life of the church. The pastor may preach a four- to six-week series on prayer, participate in a national prayer initiative, or organize a thirty-hour prayer vigil. This model can work well. But most pastors are overworked and responsible for many other ministries, so frequently the prayer ministry gives way to other pressures.
- In some churches, the emphasis on prayer is left to the respective ministry leaders. So, if the pastor is sold on prayer, worship and messages may emphasize prayer. If the youth pastor

believes prayer is essential to effective ministry, a number of prayer ministries may be incorporated into the youth program. On the other hand, the evangelism or education ministries may not have consistent prayer support. This model provides an inconsistent emphasis on prayer within the church because prayer is dependant on the commitment of each ministry's leader.

- In a few churches, prayer is a distinct ministry in the congregation. That is, in addition to ministries like evangelism, education, worship, counseling, and fellowship, there is a stand-alone prayer ministry. The prayer ministry sets its own goals, recruits and trains its leaders, develops its own programs, and has its own budget. Part of its responsibility is to support and encourage prayer “for” and “in” all the other ministries. This distinct prayer ministry
 - gives a clear signal to the congregation that prayer is important.
 - doesn't get lost among the other programs of the church.
 - can organize and provide a holistic emphasis on prayer.
 - encourages more members to become involved in prayer.
 - holds someone accountable for recruiting, training, and supporting pray-ers.
 - makes it possible to develop and organize other prayer ministries within the church.
 - assists in identifying those with the gift of intercession.
 - is integral in providing a foundation for the other ministries of the church.

Implementing this pattern—a distinct prayer ministry—is a critical step in building a house of prayer.

4. Disseminate the vision. Once the vision has been discovered and defined, it must be shared. There appears to be a proper order for building consensus and sharing the challenge:

- **Get the senior pastor(s) on board.** The pastor must be willing to enter into the discipline of prayer. This is the first priority. In order for the program to be effective, the senior pastor must be an enthusiastic participant and model.
- **Get the leaders on board.** Leaders should be aware of and supportive of the church's prayer ministry. Ask them to pray about it. Get the endorsement of the leadership board; share the vision with ministry leaders. Work closely with the leadership, responding to their input and keeping them well informed.

Encourage the leaders to promote the vision by participating in it. Leaders in the church must embody the vision for prayer by being people of prayer and by actively participating in the prayer ministry of the church.

- **Share the vision with the congregation.** In sharing the vision with the congregation, explain why a prayer ministry is necessary—many people assume they are already spending a lot of time in prayer. And continue to share the prayer vision on a regular basis—at least monthly—in a variety of ways.

5. Develop a team. If you decide to have a distinct prayer ministry, a prayer coordinator is essential. A prayer team is even more effective. Ask God to raise up a prayer coordinator or potential members of a prayer team. When introducing new prayer ministries, ask God to identify an additional prayer-team member to lead the ministry. The pastor and church leadership group should approve and encourage the prayer coordinator and prayer team.

Dee Duke, pastor of Jefferson (Oregon) Baptist Church, once shared a memory of his father with me: He was around ten years old, and his father took him to the nearby ship yards. They came to a large ship floating next to the dock on slack ropes, and his father walked over to the ship and began pushing on it with all his might. He continued to do so for about twenty minutes, all the while Dee thinking his father must be crazy trying to move the huge ship. Then suddenly the ship began to move backwards, pulling the ropes taut. As they sat on the grass together afterwards, Dee's father said, "I don't know how it works, or what law of physics is involved, but my energy gets stored up in that ship until there is enough to move it. There are two lessons to be learned here. The first is, if I had quit, if I had stopped at nineteen minutes, it never would have moved. And second, if you had helped me, we could have done it twice as fast."

Prayer leaders should have a passion for prayer and the spiritual gifts of organization, compassion, and encouragement. A prayer leader with the gift of intercession is a blessing but not a necessity. For additional information on the qualifications for prayer leaders see Prayer Coordinator (pp. 180-184).

In some situations, the Lord calls a member of the congregation to the ministry of prayer, but the possibility of that person being designated as prayer coordinator remains remote. If you are a lone prayer warrior, you should

- commit to pray regularly.
- pray for a prayer partner—someone to hold you accountable to your commitment to pray.
- ask your prayer partner to pray with you on a weekly basis. Invite others to join your prayer time. Pray for your pastor. Pray that God will begin to make your church a house of prayer.
- learn more about prayer. Take advantage of prayer resources (books, seminars, and so on) and opportunities to pray.

- begin to publicly model prayer: in home, in your neighborhood, in church ministries, in worship.
- become a Lighthouse in your community.
- wait on the Lord. Listen for God's direction to proceed.

6. Plan the work. The primary purpose of this book is to assist committed individuals, leaders, and ministry teams to accomplish this sixth step. In preparing to make a church a house of prayer, careful planning is necessary. Prayer must play an integral part in every facet of ministry:

- **Leadership.** The pastor must become a person of prayer. A survey of pastors at a conference in Dallas indicated that more than 95 percent of pastors pray less than five minutes a day. The pastor should be able to set aside a significant amount of time (one-half to a full day per week) for prayer (see Acts 6:3-4). Only a praying pastor can lead a praying church.

The leadership board should also spend time together in prayer. This should be a top priority.

In churches with three or more staff members, bring the staff together weekly for extended (one to three hours) prayer. In churches with one or two staff members, have the staff join with other key leaders for extended prayer.

At the same time the leaders are praying for the church, the church must be praying for the leaders. Begin a Prayer Shield ministry (see pp. 214-217). When a church begins to earnestly seek God's will, the spiritual attacks will intensify. While the church is the target for these spiritual attacks, the pastor and his or her family are the "bull's-eye." Pastors and leaders need to be protected. Recruit people who are willing to pray every day for the pastor and for other leaders.

See The Leader's Prayer Life section of this book for additional assistance in this area.

- **Education.** Develop opportunities for people to learn how to pray. This might include developing a resource library of books, videos, and tapes on prayer; offering educational courses on prayer; holding regular prayer retreats; or sponsoring an annual prayer emphasis week with opportunities for people to be trained in prayer.

Ministries such as Children's Prayer Ministry, Prayer Library, and School of Prayer, described in the Prayer Ministry Ideas section of this book, are designed to assist in this area.

- **Pastoral Care.** Intercede for church members. This ministry should offer support and encouragement to all church members. A prayer chain is helpful for those in crisis. A prayer team can visit those in the hospital or those confined to their homes. A team of intercessors can pray through the directory each week. Prayer calendars can encourage people to pray for specific groups of people (marrieds, singles, parents, children, elderly people, and so on) and specific church ministries. Share with the congregation the answers God is providing and celebrate them together.

The Prayer Ministry Ideas section of this book describes ministries such as Elder Care Ministry, Prayer for Healing, and Prayer Support Group that offer assistance in this area.

- **Small groups.** In many churches, the small group ministry provides caregiving, spiritual nurture, and discipleship training. It is an ideal place for people to learn to pray for each other. This book's section on small group prayer is designed to encourage praying in small groups.
- **Evangelism and missions.** Effective evangelism and missions involve intentional and active prayer for people

in your local community (evangelism) and around the world (missions). The term *Harvest Prayer* describes both special mission prayer initiatives and the integration of evangelistic prayer in the life of the church.

Locally, consider becoming a Lighthouse church, or join with other churches in praying for your city. In considering world missions, pray for the 10/40 or 40/70 Window or participate in the Adopt-a-People program. The Harvest Prayer Ideas section of this book provides guidance in this area.

- **Worship.** Prayer must be a meaningful part of worship. This can include corporate prayer, opportunities for people to receive prayer, and regular preaching on prayer.

In addition, worship services must receive significant prayer. Pray before, during, and after worship for spiritual protection, the Spirit's presence, anointed preaching, receptive hearts, enhanced fellowship, visitors, and so on. Consider using a special prayer group, rotating through your church's small groups, or asking people to pray while they are worshipping in order to implement this ministry.

The section on worship ideas offers options to use in this area.

In addition to preparing an overall prayer ministry, consider some additional details:

- Each prayer ministry should submit its budget needs to the prayer ministry team. The prayer ministry team should submit the needs of the entire prayer ministry to the church's leadership at the appropriate time.
- Prepare job descriptions for key positions. Sample job descriptions for a prayer coordinator and prayer team members are found in the Prayer Ministry Ideas section.

- Provide a balanced program with some variety to involve a wide group of people with differing preferences.

7. Work the plan.

- **Start slowly.** Avoid the temptation of doing too much too quickly. Begin with a couple of ministries. Get them up and going before introducing new ministries. Be sensitive to ministries currently going on.
- **Explore resources.** Look for appropriate resources: books, tapes, people, and training opportunities. What people are available for consulting? What are nearby churches doing? Which people have the gift of intercession? What seminars on organizing a prayer ministry are available?

- **Recruit participants.** When you introduce a new prayer ministry, people who have been praying for such an opportunity will immediately become involved. But recruiting pray-ers is an ongoing responsibility in prayer ministry. Many churches hold annual, or even quarterly pledge campaigns asking people to pledge to pray for a specific need for a specific period of time. Other churches rotate the recruiting throughout the year by highlighting one prayer ministry each month. A few churches continue to recruit throughout the year for every ministry.

When recruiting, promote the prayer opportunity in a variety of ways—bulletin announcements, encouragement from the pulpit, testimonies of the ministry's impact, word of mouth, and personal invitations to join. Always ask people to commit for a specific period of time (the first request should not exceed one year).

Build in opportunities to appreciate people who fulfill their commitment and then encourage them to sign up again.

- **Provide training.** Train people through preaching in worship services, through teaching in Sunday school, and by developing skills in adult education opportunities. Hold special seminars and workshops and provide “on-the-job” training. Give people an opportunity to practice prayer at retreats, at prayer vigils, in their personal devotions, and even during worship services. People need to hear messages on prayer, to be taught about prayer, and to have opportunities to practice prayer.

Teach multiple formats for prayer. Some formats will appeal to some people; other formats will appeal to others. Keep the praying fresh. Keep it focused on God.

- **Maintain flexibility.** Involve the entire church—children, youth, singles, couples, families, the elderly, and so on. Continue to pray and look for new ways God might be leading you. Schedule events at different times and for different purposes.
- **Continue to expand your ministry.** Develop new prayer ministries in the context of current ministries. For example, if you have an effective small group ministry, bring the small group leaders together. Challenge them to incorporate prayer into their small groups (see *Small Group Prayer*, p. 242), or ask a small group to adopt a prayer ministry as their ministry. If you have a prayer chain that operates during the day, consider expanding it to involve more people, span more time, or deal with more prayers than just emergencies.

As the Lord blesses your current prayer ministry and as the needs continue to surface, add additional ministries. As you develop a variety of prayer ministries to meet diverse interests, additional people will become involved.

- **Persevere.** Building a prayer ministry requires a long-term commitment. Initially, progress is often slow. Comparisons to large, successful ministries that have been growing for decades foster discouragement. Be persistent and keep praying.

Remember, the devil considers prayer an act of aggression. Spiritual warfare and counter-attacks are common. When you begin to resist the enemy's darkness and take ground for Christ's kingdom, you will encounter spiritual opposition. Expect Satan to do what he can to stop you.

God will draw people into his movement. God can use a "Gideon's band" as well as large legions. God places certain burdens on certain hearts. Yet, over time, with solid teaching, continual encouragement, and faithfulness, more and more people will discover the vision and your church will become the house of prayer God intends it to be.

8. **Evaluate.** Periodically, it is imperative to pause and honestly address the hard questions: When people describe our church, do they mention prayer? Is prayer our number one priority? Are we a praying church?

In our world, we strive to do things with excellence and success. We set goals that stretch us. We make them quantifiable. We assume that if we meet our goals, we are successful. We figure if we are successful, we must be doing things right.

Unfortunately, this often results in discouragement (our numbers are down from last year), frustration (a couple of old ministries dried up when we added the new ones), and feelings of failure (a neighboring church's prayer ministries seem to be going much better than ours).

Thankfully, God isn't interested in the world's definition of success. Scripture instead talks about ministry in terms of

service, sacrifice, and suffering. Scripture's model of success is Jesus—who humbled himself in birth, suffered persecution throughout his ministry, and willingly offered his life on a cross.

It is important to regularly evaluate the prayer ministry using the proper criteria, such as "faithfulness," "authenticity," "spiritual growth," "obedience," "intimacy with God," and "bearing fruit." While goals and numbers can be helpful in evaluating the ministry, we must be careful that they do not define it. Some questions to ask:

- Is prayer a part of the church's stated mission and core values?
- Is the pastor given time to pray? Is it part of the pastor's job description?
- Is prayer an extended part of each leadership meeting?
- Is prayer a regular part of every worship service?
- Are members of the congregation willing to participate in public prayer?
- Does the pastor regularly preach on prayer?
- Is there regular teaching on prayer in the education ministry?
- Are there opportunities for people to be involved in prayer throughout the week?
- Are intercessors regularly appreciated?
- Are answers to prayer publicly noted and celebrated?
- Does the staff pray together on a weekly basis?
- Is there intentional prayer for the lost throughout the week?
- Is the prayer ministry included in the annual budget?
- Have those with the gift of intercession been identified in your congregation?

The answers to the following questions should include personal experiences as well as numerical statistics:

- What answers to prayers have been received over the past year?
- What growth has been experienced in the prayer ministry over the last year?
- What growth is evidenced in the personal lives of church members?
- What growth has our church experienced through conversions?
- Has the percentage of people involved in a prayer ministry increased over the past year?

Whether you have a “Gideon’s band” or a “legion of intercessors,” the essence of a successful prayer ministry is perseverance and faithfulness. Our finite eyes seldom see the full impact of prayer, a praying people, and a praying church. Our finite minds seldom comprehend how God uses our prayers to move mountains. The primary question to ask in evaluating your prayer ministry is simply, “Have we been faithful?” If you answer in the affirmative, God is using your prayers to build his kingdom. God will bless your congregation.

9. Celebrate. Seeing God’s answers to prayer reinforces our sense of God’s faithfulness. Seeing God’s faithfulness encourages us to pray more. Praying more brings more answers to prayer. Share God’s answers with as much regularity and passion as you share the needs. And when God answers prayers, celebrate! Celebrate God! Here are some ideas:

- Hang a banner in the church declaring “God answers prayer” and inviting people to write answers to prayer on the banner.
- Start a visual prayer chain where the petitions and intercessions are one color and the answers are another color. Every time a prayer is answered,

the “petition link” is taken down and replaced with an “answered link.”

- Share answers to prayer as well as requests for prayer during worship.
- Place a “prayer answer box” next to your “prayer request box.”
- Hold a special worship service periodically to celebrate “God sightings” (testimonies of people who have seen God at work in answer to prayer).
- Include periodic testimonies during worship by people who have prayed and received answers.
- When people return to church after an illness or hospitalization, welcome them back to worship and thank those who prayed for their recovery.
- Hold an annual appreciation dinner (or breakfast) for those who have been involved in the church’s prayer ministries.

Section 1

PRAYER
FORMATS



GROWING IN PRAYER

The key to building a praying church is to build a praying people. This section is designed to encourage people to learn to pray, to practice the disciplines of prayer, and to enjoy the privilege of spending time with God.

In one sense, there is no wrong way to pray—as long as the prayer is directed to God from a sincere and contrite heart. However, there are distinct prayer forms that can enhance our faithfulness in prayer.

The purpose of spending time alone with God is to develop an intimacy with him, to learn how he wants us to live, and to intercede for the things that are close to his heart. To achieve this purpose, we must spend time with God, find a regular place to pray, and stretch our relationship with God by varying our discipline of prayer.

time

Most of us know the familiar story of Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10). Martha uses her time, energy, and expertise in the kitchen to prepare a meal for Jesus while her sister, Mary, simply sits and listens to Jesus. Martha is every pastor's dream—a hard worker, a good organizer, active in ministry. However, we must remind ourselves of Jesus' response to Martha's demands that Mary help her in the kitchen: that he values the service Martha is extending, but he values the time Mary is spending with him more. Mary is sitting at

the feet of Jesus—a place and posture we tend to overlook in our busy culture.

In our fast-paced culture, where there is much to do and be done, we tend to look like Martha. Time is a premium, so it seems foolish to “waste” it. But while both time with the Lord and time in his service are important to the kingdom, Jesus prioritizes the time we spend with him. In his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, Bill Hybels writes that if we are too busy to pray, we are simply too busy.

We must make time to pray. We need to schedule it on our calendars like every other important “meeting.” We must factor it into our daily routines. Spending extended, regular time in prayer will radically deepen our personal discipleship, transform our priorities, invigorate our service, and increase our awareness of God's presence.

place

Some prayer leaders recommend having one place to meet God. They call this place the “altar” and encourage people to go there on a regular, daily basis (for example, for an hour every morning). This altar can be as simple as a favorite chair.

Others emphasize that believers are to live prayerful lives and should pray throughout the day wherever and whenever the Holy Spirit moves. We should be praying while

- waiting in line (at the grocery store, bank, and so on)
- riding the bus or a taxi
- waiting for someone
- doing dishes
- driving
- watching the evening news
- browsing the local library
- eating dinner
- visiting a local retreat center
- worshipping at church
- walking
- taking a shower or a bath
- exercising

In reality, both having an altar and praying throughout the day are important pieces of a healthy prayer life. We need to be disciplined enough to have a regular, daily prayer time; and it is the disciplined routine that gives rise to the spontaneous opportunities.

variety

There are nearly as many different ways to pray as there are pray-ers. Some

In talking to pastors and other leaders over the years, I've always tried to stress that everyone is led by God to pray in a little different way. In fact, it often seems one person's approach may even contradict another person's approach.

—Warren Wiersbe

people write out their prayers; others prefer more spontaneous praying. Some people pray silently; others pray aloud. Some people prefer praying alone; others like to pray in a small-group context or lead prayer in worship. Some people are comfortable

with shorter periods of prayer; others prefer to pray for extended periods.

While there is considerable variety among pray-ers; there appears to be less variety in an individual's prayer life. It is not uncommon for us to learn a form of prayer (for example, seated, with head bowed, hands folded, and listening as the leader prays) and use that prayer form exclusively. We tend to resist "stretching" our prayer formats—yet it is this "stretching" that pro-

motes growth. Using a variety of prayer formats

- allows us to grow spiritually and to build intimacy with Jesus.
- helps us avoid the overuse of a single format that produces a mechanical prayer life.
- prevents boredom and keeps our prayer lives fresh and vibrant.
- continues to make prayer relevant by allowing us to adapt as our needs change over time.

In order to grow, we need to be challenged—perhaps prodded and pushed—to step out in faith, to take a risk, to try something new that jars our comfort zone. Perhaps this means praying aloud when we have prayed only silently before; perhaps it means leading in prayer when previously we have only participated; perhaps it means spending an hour in prayer when we normally spend only minutes; perhaps it means praying the Names of God when we are used to the A.C.T.S. format.

While most new prayer formats may feel uncomfortable at first, they can do much to enhance our relationship with God. And because different prayer formats will be helpful to different people, refusing to try new ways to pray may mean we never discover a prayer format that brings us more fully into God's presence.

how to use the formats

This section includes many formats for prayer. Some emphasize seeking God's presence; some seek his power; some request God to act; some encourage simply spending time with God. But whatever the nature of the formats, they are offered for one purpose: to help bring you into the presence of God.

These formats come with no guarantees: no format is helpful if it goes unused, and no one format is a prescription for intimacy. Modify, adapt, and change the prayer

formats to meet your personality, style, and specific needs. While being comfortable with a certain prayer may be an indicator from the Holy Spirit that this is a good fit, it may also signal that there isn't enough "stretch" in the format to bring growth. While it may take some time and experimentation to find additional prayer formats that are helpful, don't lose patience. The benefits are worth the effort.

The explanations that follow are not intended to be exhaustive. They simply introduce the prayer format and provide sufficient information to begin using it. In many cases, additional references are offered for further study.

Each format is labeled by three indicators—setting, level, and time. The *setting* indicator acknowledges that some prayer formats fit better in one setting than another. This guide recognizes five basic *settings*:

- *individuals* (for personal quiet times)
- *families/households* (for example, around the table after dinner)
- *small groups* (three to twelve people participating in a formal or informal small group, including smaller Sunday school classes)
- *large groups* (thirteen or more people, including larger Sunday school classes)
- *congregations* (usually a larger group, particularly in a worship setting)

The *level* indicator recognizes that some prayer formats are simpler to use than others. Normally, pray-ers should begin simply. When they are comfortable with the *initial* formats, they should be challenged to step up to an *intermediate* level prayer format and ultimately to participate—at least periodically—in an *intense* prayer format. These levels do not imply that one prayer format is more effective than another or that God hears the higher level prayer first. But as pray-ers move from initial to intermediate to intense prayer formats they will notice growth in time commitment, personal vulnerability, and dynamics not commonly found in our spiritual lives (for example,

reflection, contemplation, and spiritual confrontation). The more intense the prayer format, the more the pray-er is asked to stretch.

Some prayer formats involve a greater time commitment than others. The *time* indicator suggests the average amount of time necessary to use that particular prayer format appropriately and is admittedly subjective. These time labels should never be used as limits or time constraints:

- *short* designates a prayer format that can be used effectively in less than ten minutes
- *medium* designates a prayer format that requires ten to thirty minutes
- *long* designates a period of thirty minutes to one hour
- *extended* requires one or more hours

Remember, the format is simply designed as a conduit into the presence of God. The format of prayer should never replace the function of prayer.

prayer positions

People often ask, "What is the proper physical position for prayer? Is one position more conducive to prayer? Which positions does Scripture recommend?" While Scripture does not appear to recommend a specific prayer position, it does identify at least five distinct physical positions for prayer. They are (in alphabetical order):

- **Bowing the head.**

Then the man bowed down and worshiped the LORD, saying, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham . . ." (Gen. 24:26).

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes," he said, "then let the Lord go with us" (Ex. 34:8-9).

- **Kneeling.**

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said (Matt. 15:25).

[Jesus] withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed (Luke 22:41).

- **Prostrate.**

Going a little further, [Jesus] fell with his face to the ground and prayed . . . (Matt. 26:39; see also Mark 14:35).

- **Standing.**

[Solomon] stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice . . . (1 Kings 8:55).

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men. . . ." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:11, 13).

- **Raised hands.**

When Solomon had finished these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven (1 Kings 8:54).

From these Scriptures and others we may draw some basic conclusions:

- Prayer can be offered to God from any meaningful position.
- The position taken in prayer often reflects the type of prayer being offered (for example, submission—prostrate; worship—standing). That is, the nonverbal (body language) ideally matches the verbal (prayer).
- The position of prayer may change during a single prayer.
- The pray-er's position can enhance the pray-er's praying.

- Prayer is an active—not a passive—activity.

A.C.T.S.

This is probably one of the most-used and best-known prayer formats. The acronym serves as an outline for structuring prayer.

a

The first part of prayer is *adoration*. We offer praise for who God is, for what God has done, and for what God has yet to do.

C

Adoration is followed by *confession*. We acknowledge our sins and our need for God's forgiveness. Our confession must be open, honest, and specific.

t

Next is *thanksgiving*. We thank God for his goodness and for his answers to our prayers.

S

Finally comes *supplication*, where we lay both the needs of others and our needs before God.

Sometimes an additional "S" is added to the acronym, representing *surrender*—

waiting on the Lord and being willing to accept his answers in obedience

Setting: individuals, families/households, small groups, large groups, congregations

Level: initial

Time: medium, long, extended

Agreeing in Prayer

Jesus calls us to agree in prayer (Matt. 18:19). He wants us to pray “in agreement” with God’s Word and with other believers for a specific, desired outcome.

Scripture doesn’t require that two or more pray-ers agree about everything—but that they agree about what they are praying for. So two pastors from different denominations can pray together. A husband and a wife—even after a heated argument—can

Nothing tends more to cement the hearts of Christians than praying together. Never do they love one another so well as when they witness the outpouring of each other’s hearts in prayer. Their spirituality begets a feeling of union and confidence, highly important to the prosperity of the church. It is doubtful whether Christians can ever be otherwise than united, if they are in the habit of praying together. And where they have had hard feelings and differences among themselves, they are all done away, by being united in prayer. The great object is gained, if you can bring them really to unite in prayer. If this can be done, the difficulties vanish.

—Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, p. 117

come together in prayer. Church leaders, in spite of disagreeing over some policy issues, can stand side by side in prayer. Jesus calls us to pray about those things we agree on, and to agree on those things we pray about.

Praying in agreement, also known as “praying in accord,” allows the Holy Spirit to introduce the themes. So this prayer format requires intensive and intuitive listening to the Holy

Spirit. It requires those praying to pray through the theme(s) together until the Holy Spirit moves them to another issue. When Christians pray together, the Holy Spirit usually speaks the same thing to two or more as they pray. Likewise, the Spirit never contradicts himself.

While people praying in agreement normally are together, it is not necessary that they be in the same room—or even be praying at the same time. One of the best examples of praying “in agreement” has been the intercession focused on the 10/40 Window (see p. 277 for a description). Intercessors around the world receive information on particular people groups and then pray for these groups on their own schedule. Although these pray-ers will never be in the same place physically, they pray in agreement as they pray for the same things.

Charles Finney, in his book *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Fleming H. Revell, 1988), offers the following suggestions for praying in agreement:

- **Avoid long prayers.**

The prayers should always be short. When individuals suffer themselves to pray long, they forget where they are, that they are only the mouth of the congregation, and that the congregation cannot be expected to go along and feel united in prayer if they are long and tedious, and go all around the world and pray for everything

they can think of. Commonly those who pray long in meetings do it not because they have the spirit of prayer, but because they have it not.

- **Avoid lectures or sermons.**

Some pray out a whole system of divinity. Some preach, some exhort the people, till everybody wishes they would stop. They should keep it to the point, and pray for what they came to pray for, and not pray all over the universe.

- **Focus on one thing at a time.**

Everyone should pray for some one object. It is well for every individual to have one object for prayer. Two or more may pray for the same thing. When one leads and the others follow, but are thinking of something else, prayer is hindered. Their hearts do not unite, do not say "Amen."

- **Follow the Holy Spirit's leadings.**

Great pains should be taken, both by the leader and others, to watch carefully the motions of the Spirit of God. Let them not pray without the Spirit, but follow the Spirit's leadings. Be sure not to quench the Spirit for the sake of praying according to the regular custom. Avoid everything calculated to divert attention away from the object.

- **Pray aloud and clearly.**

People cannot agree with what they do not hear or what they do not understand. Avoid speaking in tongues in this setting.

- **Stay focused.**

This prayer format requires checking our personal thoughts and prayers, focusing on what is being prayed, and agreeing with the biblical prayers of others. Avoid changing the subject unless you are convinced the Spirit is prompting you to do so and the previous subject has been exhausted.

- **Feel free to vocalize your agreement.**

Praying in agreement can involve praying the prayer with someone, praying for similar things immediately following the initial prayer, or offering your personal "yes" or "amen" during (or at the conclusion of) the prayer.

Setting: families/households, small groups, large groups

Level: intermediate, intense

Time: medium, long

Examples

Moms in Touch; Shield a Badge; Marches for Jesus; See You at the Pole; National Day of Prayer

Resource

Brad Long and Doug McMurry, *Prayer that Shapes the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

Alphabet Prayer

The Alphabet Prayer format can be used in a couple of ways.

praying through the alphabet

The leader begins with “A,” and participants say the attributes and/or names of God that begin with that letter using a single word or short phrase. This can be done by simply naming the attribute (for example, “almighty”) or by saying a sentence of thanksgiving (for example, “God, I thank you for being an awesome God”). People can participate as often as they would like with each letter. When the list is exhausted, the leader announces the next letter. It is not necessary to do the entire alphabet at one sitting, nor is it necessary to go in alphabetical order. However, the most creative and heartfelt responses often come after the familiar ones have been mentioned. On one occasion, “Z” brought out, “God, you are the ‘Zamboni’ of my life.”

praying around the circle

One person begins by thanking God for an attribute starting with “A,” the second person thanks God for an attribute starting with “B,” and so on. Continue to go around the circle until the entire alphabet is

completed at least once. The letters “Q” and “X” may be omitted.

Here is a partial list of the attributes and/or names of God:

A—almighty, all-powerful, Adonai, Advocate, Alpha (and Omega), Ancient of Days, Anchor, Author of Life

B—Beginning, Begotten Son, beloved, Branch, Bread of Life, Bridegroom, Bright Morning Star

C—caring, Cornerstone, Counselor, Creator, Chosen

D—Deliverer, Door, Defender, Divine Physician

E—eternal, everlasting, ever-present, Eternal Life, El Shaddai (The All-Sufficient One), El Elyon (God Most High), El Roi (The God Who Sees All), End

F—faithful, Friend, Finisher of our Faith, Firstborn of Creation, Forgiving Father, Fortress

G—good, gracious, Great Shepherd, guileless, Guest, God

H—holy, helpful, Head of the Church/Body, Hope of Glory, humble, High Priest

I—influential, Immanuel, innocent, “I Am,” infinite, incomparable, inscrutable, invisible

J—jealous, just, joyful, Judge, Jesus, Jehovah (The Self-Existent One), Jehovah-Jireh (The Lord Is My Provider), Jehovah-

Mekoddish (The Lord Is My Sanctification), Jehovah-Rapha (The Lord Who Heals), Jehovah-Rohi (The Lord Is My Shepherd), Jehovah-Shalom (The Lord Is Peace), Jehovah-Tsidkenu (The Lord Is My Righteousness), Jehovah-Shammah (The Lord Is Present with Me)

K—kind, King, King of Kings

L—loving, Lord, Lord of Lords, Lamb of God, Life, Light of the World, Living Water

M—merciful, Mighty God, Morning Star, majestic, Mediator, merciful, Most High, Messiah

N—Name above All Names, God of the Nations

O—omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, Omega

P—powerful, perfect, Physician, Prince of Peace, Potentate, Personal God, Preserver, Prophet

Q—question-less

R—Redeemer, Ransom, Resurrection and Life, Righteous Judge, Rock, Refuge

S—Savior, Shepherd, Sinless One, spotless, Strength, Son of David, Son of God, Servant of God, Suffering Servant, Stone, Scapegoat, Sanctuary

T—Truth, Temple, Thunder, Tower, Treasure

U—Unspeakable Gift, unchangeable, unequal, unsearchable

V—Vine

W—wonderful, Way, Word, Word of Life, Wisdom

X—(e)xcellent

Y—Yahweh

Z—zealous

Setting: individuals, families/households, small groups, large groups, congregations

Level: initial, intermediate

Time: medium, long, extended