

### **Praying Churches = Powerful Churches**

In two major research projects on growing churches, our teams at the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth have shown the importance of prayer in growing churches.<sup>1</sup> Prayer not only opens the hearts of non-believers, but it also empowers growth in believers. Prayer is thus a non-negotiable component of both evangelism and discipleship.

My experience, though, is that most churches *talk* more about prayer than really pray. They have a sense that prayer is important, but prayer is not in their DNA. The result is far too little power under girding the church's ministries and efforts. In fact, often the church is unknowingly "doing church" in its own power.

What's the answer in such a case? The possible answers are several (e.g., a praying pastor must take the lead; deacons and elders must be challenged to pray, etc.), but I want to propose a starting place—give the church some simple ways to pray together.

#### **A Simple Strategy . . .**

This suggestion may seem so basic that it's ludicrous, but here's my point: a praying church becomes a praying church only by praying together—and most churches need ideas to get started here. If we can give them some simple strategies to start the process, perhaps the fire of prayer will spread throughout the congregation. Here are some basic ideas:<sup>2</sup>

- *"Focus on the Family" praying*—introduce to the entire congregation one (or more) church families per week, and commit to praying for that family throughout the week; particularly in a growing church, this method helps the congregation to know one another.

- *“Church Calendar” praying*—rather than using the church calendar only for scheduling and announcements, encourage the church to pray daily about each church event planned for that day.
- *“Targeted” praying*—as an outreach to the community, “target” community groups like teachers, police officers, and government officials for prayer; be sure to inform the groups that you are praying for them, and invite them to submit prayer concerns via the church website.
- *“Drive-by” praying*—encourages the church to pray for church members and other churches each time they drive by a member’s home or by another church.
- *“Progressive Dinner” praying*—utilizing a “progressive dinner” format that allows members to share a meal in multiple homes, focus on praying for each of those homes and for the neighbors that those families are trying to reach.
- *“Birthday Celebration” praying*—publish a list of church members’ birthdays, and challenge the church to pray for others on their special day.
- *“Prayer Survey” praying*—encourage members to survey their neighbors and co-workers by simply asking, “Our church is making a special effort to pray for our community. How can we pray for you?”—and then be sure to lead the church to pray for these needs.
- *“Prayer Points” praying*—at a pre-assigned time each week (e.g., Wednesday at noon), church members will stop whatever they are doing throughout your city and pray for the church and community.
- *“Spotlight the Children” praying*—if your church has children’s Sunday school, enlist a different group of adults each week to walk past those classrooms and pray for the

teachers and children; be certain to secure appropriate clearance to the children's wing first.

- “*Neighborhood Walk*” praying—challenge members (especially those who already walk in their neighborhoods) to focus on praying for each of their neighbors; pray that they will become strong followers of Christ serving Him in a solid evangelical church.

### **Strategize to Take the Initiative**

There is nothing magical about these ideas, and I suspect that there is little new here.

What concerns me, though, is that most churches don't take even this much initiative to get their members praying. What little prayer is done is more *reactionary* praying rather than proactive praying. That is, we start praying only *after* we learn of a problem. A family is in turmoil, so we start praying. A son is wayward, and we then add him to our prayer list. Our church faces conflict, so then we decide to pray for our pastoral staff. None of these prayers is wrong, but in many cases, the damage is severe before we ever start praying.

With few exceptions, the methods listed above require us to pray *proactively*—that is, *before* we hear of problems. This concept of prayer is almost foreign to us, but I am suggesting that praying this way is one way to help change the DNA of a church. Maybe a few of these ideas will help you to get your church praying , and then the fire will spread.

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<sup>1</sup> See Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996); Rainer, *High Expectations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Lawless, *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), for these and more ideas.