

Praying Pastors—A Non-negotiable to Effective Church Growth **By Chuck Lawless**

The famous English pastor Charles Spurgeon once wrote words that still demand our attention today: “Do not restrain prayer. . . . For only through prayer can the prosperity of a church be increased or even maintained.”¹ We know that healthy church growth does not occur without God’s blessing, yet how easy it is to talk about church growth ideas, methods, goals, and strategies, while missing this most significant component of church growth: prayer! The goal of this article is to call us to prayer as we lead churches toward growth.²

Characteristics of Praying Churches

Think for a minute about praying people in the Bible. Abraham prayed for a city (Gen. 18:20-33). Moses prayed for God’s people (Exod. 32:11-13). Joshua prayed for guidance (Josh. 7:1-26). Hannah prayed for a child (1 Sam. 1:1-20). Solomon prayed for wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:1-15). The prophets of God prayed, too, for various reasons (e.g., 1 Kgs. 18:36-39; Jer. 20:7-18).

The early church—dependent on God as they were for all things—prayed fervently (Acts 1:14, 3:1, 4:31, 6:4, 10:9, 12:5, 13:3, 14:23, 16:25, 20:36, 28:8). The apostle Paul prayed for believers (e.g., Rom. 1:8, 1 Cor. 1:4), and he expected them to pray for him (Eph. 6:18-20, Col. 4:2-4). Jesus, of course, modeled a life of prayer for all of us (e.g., Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42, 5:16, 6:12, 11:1; John 17).

Here’s the point: prayer matters, and praying believers lead to praying churches.

Praying Churches Admit That They Are Powerless on Their Own

Almost twenty-five years ago, I became the pastor of a small church in southwestern Ohio. I had little formal education and no pastoral experience. I had never baptized a person, officiated a wedding, or led a funeral. What I did have, though, was a church family that knew

how to pray. I think of Sonney and Christie, Paul and Edna, and Red and Gloria—all who understood that God alone could grow their little church. They knew they were powerless without him. In fact, I'm convinced they trusted me as a twenty-year old pastor *simply because they knew that effective church growth was not dependent on me.*

Here's the reality: churches grow effectively—that is, by reaching and discipling lost persons—only by God's power. That power is available to us through prayer. Until we are willing to admit that our churches cannot make a dent in a lost world without God's power, we will not pray enough.

Praying Churches Put Their Focus on God

One of my favorite verses in the creation story is Genesis 3:9—“Then the Lord called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (NAS). This verse grabs me because *God came looking for Adam and Eve after they had sinned against him.* They had rejected his Word, but he sought them anyway because he's always been an outward-focused God.

Prayer is about a relationship with this God, and praying churches focus on him. A church simply can't focus on God through prayer and remain centered on themselves.

Some time ago, I spent an exciting weekend with an evangelical church in the western part of the United States. When I walked into their building, I immediately saw the flags of several nations hanging in their worship center. The flags represented countries to which the church had sent missionaries. It was not surprising that that same church had committed the weekend to fasting and praying for God's will to be done in their congregation. God-centered churches are praying churches.

Praying Churches Learn to Persevere Patiently in Faith

Effective church growth is not an easy process. We preach the Word, and we must then

wait for God to move a heart. We share Christ with a lost person, and often that person does not respond immediately. Visitors attend our churches week after week, and we wonder why they never officially join.

What do these stories have to do with prayer? Have you ever wondered why the Bible so often calls us to wait? (e.g., Isa. 40:31, Psa. 52:9, Acts 1:4). One reason must be that we are often impatient—we want God to respond to our needs in a microwave fashion. We church leaders want God to change our churches *right now*. Sometimes it even seems like we want the answers to our prayers before we ever pray the prayer!

Praying churches realize, though, that God’s timing seldom matches our timing. He does not always respond as quickly as we would like—but we can still trust Him to accomplish His plan.

A Basic Principle for Developing a Prayer Ministry

Elsewhere I have written extensively about developing a prayer ministry in the local church.³ My goal in this section is simply to describe the most basic prayer ministry principle described more completely in these other works: *the pastor must set the example*.

Listen to these words from the pastor of a growing church in Texas:

For thirty years I preached more about prayer than I prayed. But it wasn’t until people started seeing praying in my life that my words made a difference. We are fighting on the wrong battlefield. The battle is to be won on our knees. Then we go out and do what God tells us to do. *There is no substitute for praying preachers.*⁴ (emphasis added)

Most church leaders want a ready-made program for prayer, but almost every prayer study indicates that a praying church begins with a praying pastor. Pastor, take a moment to answer this question honestly: “If all of my church members prayed as much and as fervently as

I do, should I expect my church to grow?” If your answer is “no,” you know where to begin.

Here are a few steps toward becoming a praying pastor.

1. Hold yourself accountable to someone. Find someone who knows you well, and who cares enough about you to confront you with this question: “have you prayed today?” The age of email makes it possible for someone to ask us this question every day, and most of us need *daily* accountability for our praying.

2. Pray with your spouse and family every day. Even a few minutes a day is a starting point, especially if you have small children. You will emphasize prayer more and more forcefully challenge your church to pray if you know that prayer in your own home is consistent.

3. Do Bible studies on great prayer warriors. It is difficult to read the stories of prayer in the early church without longing to pray as they did. More specifically, how hard it is *not* to pray more when we read how much Jesus prayed (for example, in the book of Luke). Spend some time studying the stories of prayer noted earlier in this article, and you will likely pray more.

4. Be comfortable with small daily improvements. Few persons become prayer warriors overnight. If today you pray for ten minutes longer than yesterday, thank God for that improvement. If tomorrow’s prayer is simply more focused than today’s, be grateful for the progress. Daily growth eventually means long-term growth.

5. Pray today. You get the point—nothing will change unless you begin by praying today. May God help you to start today in becoming the model prayer warrior for your church.

NOTES

1. Charles Spurgeon, *The Power of Prayer in a Believer’s Life* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1993), 105.

² Much of this article can be found in Thom S. Rainer and Chuck Lawless, *Eating the Elephant* (Louisville: Pinnacle, 2003). Used with permission.

3. Charles Lawless, *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Chuck Lawless, *Disciplined Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002).

4. Glen Martin and Dian Ginter, *Power House* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 45.