

# Teaching a Church to Pray

The pastor who preceded me at Arcade served the church 40 years. Bringing change to this congregation would be either a supernatural work of God or professional suicide.

My first sermon at Arcade stressed the importance of learning to pray in community. Our priority, I said, was to become a house of prayer. Most people are prone to become complacent; instilling a desire to seek after God was essential to revitalizing Arcade for a new level of impact. And that desire had to ignite in the lives of individuals if the church as a whole was to be transformed.

## Gather the Prayer Leaders

I announced we were looking for people who seriously wanted to pray for the church. I didn't know them well enough yet to select leaders for a ministry, so I sought out people who were already passionate about prayer. A handful volunteered. Along with the current prayer leaders, they formed a core that would lead a prayer renewal.

I trained these leaders in four areas.

**1. *The personal attributes of a prayer leader.*** Building the hearts of prayer leaders is the most important step. I remind them, "Prayer ministry will never go any farther than the personal passion of those who lead it."

**The first attribute** we target is motive. The leaders must be clear in mind and heart on why we pray. It's not a church growth strategy; it's not to twist God's arm to bring revival. Prayer is not about the church. The focus must be on seeking God and knowing him, not on seeking what he can do for us.

**The second attribute is conviction.** We have 130 programs going on at Arcade. Some people think of prayer as program number 131. Our leaders cannot. Prayer is not another program at the church, prayer is what drives everything we do.

**The third attribute is longevity.** Inspiring others to pray is a permanent calling.

Early on the morning of a scheduled prayer gathering, I reluctantly tossed the warm covers aside and dragged myself out of bed. After leading multiple

prayer meetings every week for years, I pleaded with God, "I'm tired, Lord. How long must I do this?"

"How long will you dress, shave, and brush your teeth?" I felt him say. "Until you die. So shall you pray." Prayer leaders need a dream of dying on their knees.

**2. *The vision for corporate prayer.*** Our individualistic culture robs us of a vision for corporate prayer. Private devotion is upheld as the ideal. But Scripture teaches that the church prayed together. And Jesus taught us to pray in a collective sense. The language is essentially, "When y'all pray, pray 'Our Father,' and 'give us our daily bread.'" His ideal was that we pray in community.

People who have considered this teaching have asked me, "Which is more important, private or corporate prayer?"

I respond, "Which leg do you need to walk on more, your right or your left?"

**3. *The practical dynamics of effective prayer meetings.*** I grew up in a church whose prayer meetings were, well, boring. A mournful hymn, an unrelated Bible study, and thirty minutes listing the woes and needs of the community left me feeling as though the whole world was suffering from slipped discs and financial trouble. Effective prayer meetings move beyond "bless him, be with her" prayer to elevate pray-ers into the presence of God.

Jesus taught the disciples to begin in adoration—"hallowed be thy name." We developed meetings that began in worship and focused not on informing God of all the troubles he already knows about, but on drawing the people into communion with God. I teach our leaders, "If you pray to seek God's face, you'll know his hand. But if you're looking for his hand, you may miss his face."

Our weekly prayer meetings now begin with opened Bibles, prayerful declarations of God's character, and spontaneous songs of praise. All requests are held at bay until we have worshiped well and connected with God's heart, mind, and kingdom purposes.

**4. *Principles for managing prayer meetings.*** We want prayer leaders to facilitate effective, engaging prayer meetings. Part of their training involves managing the common distractions—lack of focus and members who mumble lengthy, disconnected discourses. We teach the leaders to implement clearly

defined themes for focus, and to use a song and gentle instruction to center a group that has disengaged.

Some of our leaders fret over whether God approves of the direction they give the meetings. I tell them, "God's not wringing his hands over whether you pray for India or South America next. He's simply delighted that you are leading his people into his presence."

That first training class became a six-week program that we have repeated many times. During the program, each leader has opportunities to lead the group in prayer, and afterward we discuss and encourage their leadership. We also expose them to extraordinary forms of expression—prayer walking, prayer partners, even Internet chat room prayer. The goal is to release them to begin prayer initiatives in the ways God is leading them.

Shortly after we began our first training class, I announced a three-day out-of-town prayer gathering. I anticipated twenty might accept the invitation. More than one hundred came to that first prayer summit. The enthusiasm of our trained prayer leaders had already begun stirring the church. In the past eight years, we've had 22 retreats, each one directed by lay prayer leaders and attended by between 80 and 250 people.

Our Thursday evening prayer meeting, which attracts hundreds of people, has become the church's context for vision casting and ministry initiation. Our trained leaders have created dozens of opportunities for prayer expression, including prayer meetings, pastor's prayer partners, and our World Prayer Center, an intercessory ministry for the church worldwide.

It's been said that when we work, we work; but when we pray, God works. I'm discovering the best work I can do is to pray and train others to lead prayer with a passion to see God at work. It's the investment that brings life change and lasting renewal as we build a house of prayer—together.

Daniel Henderson pastors Arcade Baptist Church in Sacramento, California  
[daniel@arcadebaptist.com](mailto:daniel@arcadebaptist.com)