

# Devoted to prayer

## The six essentials to becoming a praying church

Have you ever found your heart leaping with a big ‘YES!’ as you read “They *devoted* themselves to... prayer.” in Acts2:42? Well then, this article is for you. I want to explore the question “What will it take for your congregation to become truly ‘devoted’ to prayer?”

I believe there are often *perceptions* about prayer that need to change, *obstacles* to freedom and power in prayer that need to be cleared away, and a work of *cultivating* that needs to be done, so that the many facets of prayer begin to flourish among us.

### CARRYING THE WEIGHT

When we explore the New Testament it is clear that *leaders carried the ‘weight’ of prayer* – they led the way through teaching, modelling and initiating. They gave the Word and prayer equal value. In response to a need for practical care, they declared “We *must* devote ourselves to prayer and the Word.”(Acts 6:4) They had already discovered that these two aspects were the pivot and the anchor of their life and work together as his people and they were responsible to see that they were strong.

Is this the belief and aim of your leaders? It is never a case of ‘leave it to the intercessors – they’ll carry prayer for us’. Of course a true intercessor is always available to the Lord for serious prayer. But the *leadership* of a body of God’s people in prayer must come from those who have the teaching and training roles. I have too often met despairing ‘prayer co-ordinators’ who are assigned the task of organising prayer, but do not have a place to teach and influence and change wrong perceptions about prayer. I have listened to a number of them as they have felt they had to leave their roles and often their churches in frustration and sadness. The answer is for leaders to carry the conviction and the responsibility, and for them to plan for and permit the development and growth of prayer along with those who have a calling and passion in this area.

Leaders who do not have a heart for prayer cannot lead a body of God’s people into the purposes and power of God. It simply does not happen. There must be a heart-searching and realignment before God so that the Biblical model becomes our reality.

### CLEARING THE OBSTACLES

I am convinced that many in our congregations struggle with prayer, both in their personal time and in praying with others.

- Some feel inadequate, because they compare themselves to others especially gifted intercessors, or are given models that are inappropriate for their lives.
- Others are carrying a disappointment, usually with God. He did not ‘come through’. Something did not work out. They have ‘judgements’ against God. So they hold back from trusting and praying at the level they once did.

- Some are in a dry or dark season, and no-one has taught them how to interpret these times and find where the Lord is, or how to hold on until a fresh season comes.
- Many feel they do not ‘pray enough’ – but have no idea what ‘enough’ really is! They have a view of prayer that is calculating and not relational. They seem to miss cultivating the presence of Jesus, and receiving the prompting of the Spirit.
- Some give up on group prayer because they have experienced dreary, uninspired prayer meetings, or a meeting dominated by one or two eloquent people. They have never discovered the joy of encountering his presence and being led by the Spirit together.
- Others have frantically busy lives, and have not learnt the art of ‘practicing the presence of God’ and taking prayer into every situation.
- There may be tension and disunity that hinders freedom in prayer together. The absolute necessity of prayer has been sabotaged by personal rivalry or unforgiveness.
- Some need a big cause to invest themselves in – and when they find it, their prayer life shifts into a whole new gear.
- Some have a ‘fatalistic’ view of life. ‘God will do what he wants – he doesn’t need my help. What difference would my little prayers make anyhow?’ They have never seen how prayer releases the power of God into situations and lives.
- Others can be resistant or fearful of the work of the Spirit because of past experiences where they were offended or felt exposed. As the Spirit is our main teacher about prayer, this blocks them from freedom in the area.

*There is a great need for all these obstacles to prayer to be cleared up* through honest and inspiring teaching and modelling. It never works to just make people feel guilty and inadequate about prayer. But giving them opportunities, examples and reasons for prayer that will capture their hearts again can soon release a new ‘spirit of prayer’ among you.

## ACCEPTING OUR PRIESTHOOD

One of the areas of teaching that needs to be foundational is found in Peter’s first letter. He called us all ‘a holy priesthood’ and then a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:5 and 9). We consider ‘the priesthood of all believers’ a crucial doctrine, but many seem only to understand the first facet of this jewel, namely the privilege of having personal access to God. There are two other facets; one is the responsibility of bringing offerings in worship – ‘a holy priesthood,’ and the other is the responsibility of bringing petitions to the King and seeing his rule extended in our world - a royal priesthood. (1)

This latter one is about intercession. The priests represented the people to God, in repentance, sacrifice and petition. We must do this also, representing those who cannot or will not pray. It is not an option, but a sacred obligation. Being ‘a priest’ is not about being heard in a church meeting but rather about being heard at the throne of grace! All of us have access – so all of us have this responsibility... parents praying for their children, leaders for their flock or their group, bosses for their workers, the church for the community or the city.

Once we accept this as our *sacred task*, and pledge ourselves to be open to the prompting of the Spirit, we will find that prayer flows more naturally - it wells up in us through the Spirit - as we are now in line with his will. (2)

## HEARING HIS HEART

Prayer can explode in our lives and our church when we hear his heart. About three years ago I was at a weekend conference and the Lord showed me his heart for ‘the harvest all around us’. It changed the landscape of my heart, and my prayer patterns and focus. I have seen this happen over and over to people and individuals who get a fresh glimpse into the Lord’s heart for a people or a cause, or a part of society. Leaders must be praying for this to happen to every member of their church. This is where the fire comes into our bellies!

I remember feeling very sad once when I visited a group – and a woman was asked if she had any ‘prayer requests.’ “No...things are going OK,” she said. What!! She had no sense of burden for anyone else (her life was very, very busy) and if all was OK then prayer was not needed? What a limited view of prayer.

A church that is not seeking for the Lord’s heart for the community or city they live in, will have a very small and inward view of prayer. Here is another place for teaching and testimony. Once one or two catch this and model it, it will spread. It needs to be the norm, not the exception.

## EXPLORING THE DIVERSITY

After describing how to stand firm against evil powers, Paul writes, “*And pray in the Spirit, on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and petitions.*” (Ephes.6:18) Prayer is more than asking. It is more than Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication (ACTS). There are *all kinds* of prayers that the Spirit stirs in us in all kinds of situations. There are many examples in Scripture of ‘all kinds of prayers’. It is a delight to explore these, and to encourage others to add them to their repertoire. (3) What could be released among you if there was a teaching series on all these kinds of prayer we find in Scripture? I get excited just thinking about it!

There are also different settings for prayer; secret prayer - praying as partners/couples - praying as a family - praying in a small group - and as a congregation. None of those settings negates the need for the other ones. We cannot say that because most people are praying individually, we don’t need the power of focused, united corporate prayer. Or because we have an intercessors group, we do not need to teach families to pray together.

And each of these settings will have a different style and focus. Meaningful small group prayer is often hindered because an intercessor or leader goes into over-drive (suitable for other settings) and shuts out the simple, heartfelt prayers of the rest of the group. (4) Couples can find it hard to pray together, often due to their differing ‘doorways’ into prayer and worship. For some years I used to thoroughly bore my husband with my long, intense prayers. If it was late at night he would go to sleep while I prayed! Then one day I realised he is a ‘Word’ man, and praying from a passage in short declarations and petitions, each adding to the others words,

helped us both pray together with freedom. (5) Learning different styles for praying together is incredibly helpful in stirring people to pray together.

When people struggle personally with prayer, I have often found that teaching them some new ways of praying the Scriptures can ‘turn the light on’ again. It is not always about discipline, ‘getting sin out of our lives’ or becoming ‘more committed’. It can simply be that the ‘read, reflect and pray’ method of the past has dried up and fresh ways of encountering and hearing the Lord need to be explored.

## BEING OPEN TO THE SPIRIT

I have observed that churches who welcome the varied work of the Holy Spirit are usually free and fervent in prayer. This is because the Spirit is our teacher and motivator in prayer. He gives us assurance in God’s presence, he quickens the Word to us, he reveals the heart of Jesus, and he stirs us up to pray using many kinds of prayer including the gifts of the Spirit. Paul exhorts us to ‘*Pray in the Spirit, on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests.*’ (Ephes.6:18) We really must explore and discover what this means. It is more important to be ‘Spirit-friendly’ than to be ‘seeker-friendly.’ A powerless church is an oxymoron. We owe the world a transforming encounter with Jesus. We need to become desperate about our powerlessness.

John Wesley said that ‘If the church will not pray, God will not act.’ God has tied his hands to our prayer. And the Spirit is given to teach and equip us in all facets of prayer, both individually and corporately. We must become open to his voice among us (and those who are experienced here need to teach those who aren’t) and learn to wait on the Lord. (I know a church that has a week of waiting together using Scripture each year. They stop ministries and groups, and morning and evening gather to wait on him to recapture their love for Jesus and to hear him regarding their work.) Group prayer times where the Spirit reveals Jesus and inspires and leads our prayer are incredibly blessed times. I have found people most reluctant to finish and go home when this happens, even though it is getting late into the night!

Churches where prayer has become ‘the engine room’ of an effective ministry to their community will testify that the power to break spiritual blindness and open doors for the gospel depends on corporate prayer. (6) The power among us for healing and restoration depends on corporate prayer. *Fervent corporate prayer changes the spiritual climate among us, and in our community, and releases the presence and power of God in ways nothing else does.* We must be committed to finding how to do corporate prayer effectively under the direction and empowering of the Spirit. Where there are blockages to the Spirit, these need to be gently cleared up. The reward is well worth it!

Clearly developing a praying church will take time and a lot of thought and prayer. But it is time well spent. Prayer is likened to incense – the aroma will fill the air. It creates a warm and expectant atmosphere. Faith rises – testimonies increase – and the Word comes alive in our day.

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Note:

For each number in the text, there is an article on that topic on [www.prayerchangeslives.org.nz](http://www.prayerchangeslives.org.nz)

- (1) Holy Priests offering Spiritual Sacrifices
- (2) The Privilege of Prayer
- (3) Exploring different ways we hear and respond to God.
- (4) Group Prayer and Worship
- (5) Finding living water in the word again.
- (6) see the video message in 'links' My House shall be called a House of Prayer' - and the review of Jim Cymbala's DVD series '[When God's People Pray](#)' in 'Inspirations'

Family – provide tools and help – expecting answers – showing the power of prayer at an early age. Expecting children to exercise gifts. See email from Joel news.

Couples- provide help to pray together. Stir up men.

Partnerships – encourage a buddy system

Groups – train leaders in effective leading

Mission groups – seeking God for development. Making prayer a priority

Worship team – understanding their intercession/priestly role

Intercessors – stir – train – guide – mentor – handling prophecy/insight gifts

Leaders of teams – teach them how to pray for and with their teams.

The Leadership team – prayer and governance – hearing God – being priests to the people – getting our hearts in tune with God and each other.

Neighbourhood prayer – prayer walking – developing a 'house of prayer' for your neighbourhood.

Work prayer groups – encourage and resource

Healing rooms - times/style

Retreat times for groups or anyone. 3x year

Waiting on God seasons at church – together listening – hungry for God

Train congregational prayer – for each other – silence – in sm.groups – ministry type

Answers to prayer bulletin – testimony board on web site and in foyer and hall. Or make videos of stories?

Biblical principles – Pictures –

Produce a library of material on key topics – plus material for personal use or group use.

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