

PRAYER: AN ESSENTIAL IN CHURCH PLANTING
Part Two: The Importance of Intercessory Prayer
By Glenn Smith

In Part One we looked at the vital place of prayer in church planting. Now in Part Two we want to look at a particular type of prayer that is so crucial yet is often underutilized. That is intercessory prayer.

We've already defined intercession as standing between God and someone else, speaking to God on their behalf. (See Part One: The Vital Place of Prayer.) Intercession is essential because intercession is spiritual warfare. Prayer is where our personal battles are won or lost, and intercession is where the battle for a person, a community, or a city is won or lost. It is my conviction that all of us need to be engaged in intercessory prayer. It is essential in church planting!

Does God really act as a result of intercession? Consider this. There are some things that God will give to us whether we ask or not. For example, God has given us life today and air to breath. John Calvin spoke about "common grace," God's provisions and blessings that come to all people. We don't have to ask for these things, God just graciously gives them to us.

Then there are things that God will NOT give to us, even if we ask. Think of a parent with their child. A child may ask for things that a parent deems as harmful, though the child does not see any harm in their request. No matter how much a child begs, a wise parent will never answer that request. God is even more profoundly wise and loving! There are things that seem right to us, but God knows it is not good, or possibly not the best for us. He protects us from ourselves many times without us even knowing it.

However, there are also things that God will give, but only if we ask. In Ezekiel 22:30 we see the picture of God looking for an intercessor, someone who might stand in the gap so that He would not destroy a city. In James 4:2 the Bible tells us "You do not have, because you do not ask God." In the gospels Jesus commands on many occasions to ask. God is pleased when we ask. He's even more pleased when we ask on behalf of someone else. That's intercession. When we intercede in prayer, God responds.

While all of us are admonished to intercede in prayer, some seem to have a unique passion, calling, or possibly even gifting for intercession. Peter Wagner writes about this in his book *Prayer Shield*. From his research in the U.S. and Latin America Wagner identifies some of the characteristics of these types of people. Wagner suggests:

1. They pray longer (e.g. they spend more time in prayer). People who have this calling or gifting just long to spend large blocks of time in serious, intentional prayer. They usually find ways to do this no matter what their vocation.
2. They pray with more intensity. They have a deep seriousness to their practice of prayer, and when they pray they have an unusual intensity about their requests.
3. They enjoy prayer more and receive more personal satisfaction from their prayer times. (I use to feel guilty when I came across people who clearly had much more

passion and enjoyment from prayer than me. Please don't misunderstand, I love praying. But some people just seem to live for this ministry. It's like they just can't pray enough. I appreciate this now and they inspire me.)

4. They see more frequent and dramatic answers to their prayers, and they are acutely aware of sensing God's direction in prayer.

Whether you agree with Wagner on this or not, I would suggest that there are some unique people whom God has placed in or around every church plant who are called to intercede specifically for that new work. I would suggest that every church planter solicit as many intercessors as possible to pray for them and their church. I would also suggest that church planters look for and try to identify at least one person who has this passion, calling, or gifting. They can lead a prayer focus. They can inspire others who are around them. They can have a powerful impact in your new work. As I said in Part One, when we work, we work. But when we pray, God works. What might happen if we had an individual who was leading a prayer mobilization effort for our church plant?

How do we identify these people? Here's what I would do. First, teach regularly on prayer, and specifically on intercession. Make sure your people are informed from the Scriptures about this concept. Next, encourage them to explore the possibility that they might have a calling to this ministry. Encourage them to experiment with intercession, and as they do invite them to reflect on their feelings and their experience. Finally, expect confirmation from the fruit and from the Body of Christ.

Have you known people in your past congregations who you would consider to be real prayer warriors? I have. They usually get very little attention (and they like it that way!) However, when there is a need, these people are sought out to pray and minister through intercession. I've seen this over and over again. Regrettably, I have not always recognized what a gift they were to me and to our congregation. There are probably people like this in your new church as well. Don't miss them. They usually will not make themselves known. They'll simply watch and pray, and they will do it faithfully.

If you have not identified these people, these unique intercessors in your ministry, ask God to reveal them to you. If you don't think they exist in your present group, ask God to bring them in or raise them up. Invite others on your team to pray for intercessors, and particularly for people who have a special calling to this ministry. Remind everyone that it is the responsibility of us all to be interceding in prayer. But cast the vision for intercessory prayer leaders who can raise the "intercession temperature" in your church.

Finally, I would encourage you to have regular and special seasons of prayer in your church planting process. Brainstorm new ideas with your team so that you do not grow stale. One of my dear friends and mentors in prayer is Ken Werlien, pastor of Faithbridge United Methodist Church in Houston. Every chance I get I have Ken share with the church planters that we train. He offers over 40 ideas for incorporating prayer in the life of a church plant. However, there is no "best" idea. Just be intentional about keeping a prayer focus and a prayer vitality in your church. And be sure to build an increasing number of intercessors who pray for the harvest field (the community in which

you serve), the harvest force (your church as well as other churches and ministries in the area), and the spiritual leaders in your ministry. Have them praying through the problems and challenges you face. Have them praying for soft, responsive hearts. Have them praying for spiritual breakthroughs as the needs arise. Intercession is not just a good idea, it is absolutely essential in the work of church planting.