

## **PRAYER: AN ESSENTIAL IN CHURCH PLANTING**

### **Part One: The Vital Place of Prayer**

*By Glenn Smith*

In my first church plant I was conscious of the fact that I needed to pray. Most church planters are! However, I had no idea what I was going to encounter and discover as it relates to my personal prayer life.

I spent nearly a year intensely thinking, studying, and to a degree praying prior to my planting venture. I took a few prayer retreats where I would get alone with God for a day. Many years ago I was strongly impacted by a Navigators booklet written by Lorne Sanny entitled “How to Spend a Day in Prayer.” I had come to value this experience but I must confess that I was never very consistent at it. And fasting, well, let’s just say that was never a serious consideration. However, when I did spend a day in prayer I usually found it to be a deeply meaningful experience.

As I gathered a core group to help me launch this new church, prayer was always a part of our activity. But when we launched and the wheels started turning full speed, prayer (at least for me) became little more than an add-on to the “really important” stuff.

About a year and a half into our new church plant I began to acutely feel the lack of sufficient prayer. I was also concerned about the lack of vital prayer within our congregation. My solution (like every good pastor’s) was to preach a series of messages on prayer!

As I began my preparation for this anticipated 6 week series of messages I read numerous passages of Scripture related to prayer and reviewed a couple of new books on prayer that I saw in the Christian bookstore. I studied, thought, and worked for several days only to come to the conclusion that I couldn’t muster up 6 meaningful sermons on prayer. It just was not a vital part of my life. This was both embarrassing and humbling.

After some time of real soul searching, I decided to preach one message on the subject, basically telling about my own realization and need. I don’t remember what happened (if anything) within the congregation, but I do know what happened within me. That was the beginning of a very rich prayer journey that has continued to this day. I decided that I would always have a good book on prayer that I would be reading as part of my daily devotional experience. I did this because I needed the constant reminder and inspiration to faithfully pray. I also developed some consistent prayer routines. As time went on I realized that there were some incredible biographies of Christian leaders who were men and women of prayer. I began to read some of their stories and testimonies to deepen my faith and prayer life. This is probably the most significant life-change experience that happened for me in my church plant!

Since that time God has given me the privilege of training and coaching many church planting leaders. Prayer is a central part of our training process. This is the first article in a series written specifically to encourage church planting leaders in prayer.

One of the basic principles we teach church planting leaders is this: **We must establish a foundation of prayer and build upon it as our church grows!** One of my favorite quotes is from a Methodist brother, Terry Tekyl, who said “This year’s level of church growth cannot be sustained on last year’s level of prayer.” A spiritual work has to be built on a prayer foundation. However, that foundation must expand as the work develops and grows. Church planting leaders are tempted to give minimum attention to this foundation and practically no attention to the expansion of it. This is a critical mistake!

The establishment of a prayer foundation should be one of the first assignments for a church planter. The planter needs a few personal intercessors, as well as a core of intercessors who bathe the new church in prayer. I have seen some of our planters recruit intercessory teams of several hundred. It is no surprise that those who have strong intercessory prayer bases report more spiritual activity in and around their church planting work. Church planting is not a human work; it is a spiritual work that must be grounded in prayer. I have discovered that when I work, I work. However, when I pray, God works!

Paul Billheimer said “Prayer is where the action is. Any church without a well-organized and systematic prayer program is simply operating a religious treadmill.” This is so true! The scripture that God led me to in my personal prayer crisis after planting a church was Psalm 127:1, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” Church planting is a foolish endeavor if one attempts to do it in the power of the flesh. Unless the Lord “plants” the church, we labor in vain! Every church planting leader **MUST** see themselves as totally hopeless in this endeavor without God’s intervention! We can work ourselves crazy and it will accomplish nothing of eternal significance. Or, we can pray diligently and God will do more than we could ever imagine!

Intercessory prayer is a concept that every church planting leader should learn well. Intercession comes from two Latin words; *inter* which means “between,” and *cedere* which means “to go.” Intercession is the concept of standing between God and someone else, speaking to God on their behalf. We can intercede for another individual, a group, or even a community that does not know Christ! As Christian leaders, we need others who intercede for us! As church planters, we need to teach our congregations to intercede for the people whom we are trying to reach. Scripture teaches that Jesus intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25) and the Holy Spirit intercedes (Romans 8:26-27). Paul interceded for others (Romans 1:9) and regularly asked others to intercede for him. Intercessory prayer is a Biblical concept but one that is often lacking in church planting.

The saddest verse in the Bible to me is Ezekiel 22:30 where God says, “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.” I believe that God is looking for men and women today who will stand in the gap on behalf of a community and a city. He is looking for church planting leaders who will be intercessors for people

who do not yet know Him. Church planting is the ideal opportunity to mobilize intercessors to pray for a community. I believe that He is looking for Christ followers who will intercede for the moral, social, relational, and spiritual needs of a community. I wonder if today, as He looks, He says “but I found none.” Jesus instructed us to pray in Matthew 6. He told us that as we pray to pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. I believe that Jesus wants to show us manifestations of His kingdom in our families and our communities, and He exhorts us to pray to that end. This exhortation is hardly ever more appropriate than in church planting.

If you are beginning the church planting process, I hope you will be intentional about establishing a foundation of prayer for your new work. If you have already begun, I hope that you will be intentional about building on whatever prayer foundation that currently exists. Make sure that prayer is a central part of your strategic plan.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One of the key books that God used to help me during my personal prayer crisis was *Too Busy NOT To Pray* by Bill Hybels. Another book that was instrumental in my life at that time was *Daring To Draw Near* by John White. Since that time the writings of E.M. Bounds, Samuel Chadwich, and Andrew Murray have been especially meaningful. The biography that has meant the most to me in the area of prayer was George Mueller’s.