

On Ramps to God's Presence

How to Disciple Your Church toward Prayer

by Fred Leonard

I love the picture in Revelation 4 of John entering into the throne room and the presence of God. When he comes in, he finds himself in a scene of incredible, loud, radical worship of the Lord God on His throne. When I pray, I picture myself entering the throne room of God through the open door in heaven. I can come in only because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who died for me and paid the penalty for my sin. I am covered in the blood of Jesus.

As I enter in, in my mind I picture Jesus looking at me as one for whom He died. I picture the angels and 24 elders and the four living beings listening as I worship and present my requests to God—my act of prayer. It is an honor and privilege to enter into His presence through prayer. With this reality, wouldn't it make sense that everyone would want to rush in and talk with God?

Sadly, this is often not the case. Some people can hardly pray privately, much less corporately. Our prayer meetings are not overflowing with people crying out to God. In fact prayer is one of the most difficult ministries to lead in the church.

Living in the Tension

One reason this ministry is difficult to lead is that followers of Christ live with the tension of God's Kingdom already here among us—and not yet fully realized. In other words, we still sin and rebel against God's rule in our lives.

When we are not walking in submission to God's leadership, we are resisting the Holy Spirit. Unless we repent, we cannot be in right relationship with God, and we won't long to be praying and worshiping in the throne room. Furthermore, if we are living in unforgiveness, our broken relationship with God keeps us from entering the throne room—and we certainly don't want to enter with those who have hurt us! You can still teach Sunday school or be an usher or greeter while you are living in rebellion (though you shouldn't be), but rebellion will greatly hinder your prayer life.

Although discipling a church in prayer is difficult, we don't give up. We know the heart of God is to communicate with us. And—with determination and vision—we want to lead the church into this truth.

Here is our top ten list of ways a church can become a house of prayer for all nations:

10. Develop a strategic plan—or nothing will change.

To grow in prayer, be honest about your church's current status as a house of prayer. Take a look at what is working. Be willing to keep changing. And work to develop a strategic plan that will move you toward your goal. Without an honest evaluation of your current reality and a plan that looks toward the vision God has given you for your future, nothing will change.

9. Offer many “on ramps” at different speeds to help people begin praying.

Developing a prayer culture in our churches requires talking about prayer at all levels. This means providing many different on ramps for people to learn to pray personally and corporately. At our church people can grow in prayer by spending time alone in the prayer room—learning to pray for lost people or using the various prayer prompts we make available. This way they can practice prayer skills privately and then use them in a corporate setting. Our corporate on ramps include a weekly missions prayer gathering, pre-service prayer, prayer during one of our services, or serving as a “prayer usher” (praying with people to help usher them into a fresh experience of Christ's presence). Each of our ministries (such as youth, recovery, and worship), also offers a pre-meeting prayer opportunity. Another on ramp is our strategic *teaching on prayer*. We teach and encourage spiritual disciplines, offering a monthly prayer workshop and a “Love to Pray” study once a year, using prayer book studies through our prayer meetings.

Our church is also committed to hosting prayer conferences. To be a healthy, praying church, prayer should saturate everything. Beyond the teaching opportunities, we also encourage times of church-wide prayer. For example, we hold an Ash Wednesday service to begin the Lenten season of 40 days of prayer and fasting. Each year we have a month of special church-wide prayer for revival. We join with other churches and host the Global Day of Prayer, the National Day of Prayer, and city-wide prayer events. We participate in and help lead weekly prayer meetings for pastors. The list continues on with many prayer initiatives. Prayer is not a ministry we do; it has become *who we are*.

8. Make sure the prayer meeting is awesome!

When a prayer meeting is boring, poorly led, and people- or need-centered, people won't likely keep coming. Our church offers workshops for our prayer leaders, teaching them how to lead corporate prayer. Our prayer meetings are characterized by four *L*'s: Lively, Learning, Loving, and well-Led.

When people leave a well-led, God centered, Kingdom-focused prayer meeting, they will know they have met with God. *And they will appreciate even more their love relationship with Him.*

7. Weave prayer throughout the fabric of everything you do. Keep learning and trying new things.

Prayer must be at the core of a pastor and prayer leader's life and be woven into the fabric of the church. We don't "silo" prayer into a separate ministry. We are a house of prayer that includes every "room" of the church. Prayer remains at the top of our list in everything we do. We may not get through all the business in every meeting, but you can be sure we have prayed. We might restructure our weekend services for a special event, but we will not disrupt our prayer ushers' ability to minister to people during the service, and we won't eliminate a prayer response at the end. Prayer is never simply an add-on.

It is also important to push the prayer *envelope and try new things*. We have offered prophecy training and now have prophecy appointments after the Sunday morning service every few months. We have healing services on Sundays, too. It's good to offer these things during the week, as well, but we find that when we offer them on the weekend, God opens doors for a fresh, forward movement in prayer. Experiencing the blessing of Spirit-led corporate prayer encourages people to discover that reality in their own lives.

6. Find the right leader for your prayer ministry. Appoint a teacher who is passionate about prayer and joyfully submitted to pastoral leadership.

It is crucial to have an equipper/teacher who has a heart for prayer and can release people into the ministry of prayer. This person, who needs to have learned through experience and struggles, also *needs to have the gifting and ability to expand the ministry by training others*. Furthermore, he or she must be someone who is praying in support of the pastoral direction of the church. The pastor has God's authority to lead, and the prayer leader must support the pastor in prayer, words, and actions. Those in the prayer ministry should never pray against the pastor or work to change the leadership. Such actions cause division, disunity, offense, and bitterness—and they are an open door to the work of the devil. The prayer leader needs to be the greatest supporter and encourager of the pastor and of the vision the Lord has given to the leaders.

5. Train prayer ushers to minister to others.

We train people to usher others into the presence of Jesus and to minister to them through prayer. One of the greatest *mistakes some churches make is to assume* that people know how to pray, even if no one has taught them. What happens when a prayer usher meets a person in a prayer encounter and discovers the person needs to repent or surrender—or needs to experience healing or deliverance? Do your prayer leaders know what to do? *Training a group of prayer ushers who pray under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit* is a crucial part of church life.

4. Make prayer training the foundation of discipleship.

Some churches struggle in the area of discipleship as much as they struggle *in evangelism. It is a challenge to see* people experience both salvation and the transformation of "becoming like Jesus." We can track

evangelism, but how do we track discipleship? I believe the best way is through prayer training. We have created a prayer training class that encompasses much of what we *need to know to walk with Jesus*. We train people how to pray for such areas as evangelism, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, using spiritual gifts, prophecy, listening prayer, healing, repentance, surrender, and freedom from sexual sins. As they pray through these components in their own lives, they learn to pray with others as well. They're intentionally being discipled to be like Jesus.

3. Remember that prayer always leads to evangelism.

When prayer is moving as it should, it will always lead to God's heart for the lost. Prayer does not become an end in itself but instead always leads to evangelism. Prayer for God's glory is the goal. And we know God receives more and more glory when people come to know Jesus as their Savior (2 Cor. 4:15). Prayer has to move us to care for, reach out to, and love the lost. Prayer *is not self-serving*. *In fact, it should be* listed under the gift of helps. There is no way we can help others more than to pray for them.

2. Encourage the pastor to set the table and invite people to the banquet.

It is impossible for the church to move forward into prayer if the pastor is not on board and leading the staff and church in prayer. The pastor has to be championing prayer, attending prayer meetings, and spending time in the prayer room if he or she is to lead others. Furthermore, as the pastor is leading and encouraging prayer, the staff and leadership also need to be on board—as people who pray, serve as prayer ushers, attend prayer events, pray in the prayer room, and participate in a prayer group each week. It is impossible to call people to do what we are not doing ourselves.

1. Pray and ask God to pour out His Holy Spirit.

The number one key to becoming a house of prayer for all nations is to be always praying and asking God to pour out His Holy Spirit upon you and to fill your church with His presence. Apart from the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we will never see that vision become a reality. In order for a movement of prayer to take place, we need to intercede for our churches, asking God for the filling of the Spirit.

This is not a program or a strategy. It is a miracle of God to bring your church into His presence. In this way, your church will bring glory to His name.

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