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SHIFT POWERED BY PRAYER

When Pastor John Stallings answered the call to restart the Massillon, Ohio, Church of the Nazarene, his first initiative was to gather a group of fifty intercessors who committed to pray daily for the church. Some were nearby, while others lived far away. John communicated with them regularly to let them know how to pray for the church throughout the critical process. John points to this initiative as the first and most important reason the Massillon church has survived and thrived.

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All nine of the pastors highlighted in this book point to prayer as the most significant factor in their churches' renewal. All nine of these churches are *powered by prayer*. To say that prayer *powers* ministry is not to suggest that the work of the church is generated by human effort. On the contrary, the very reason why prayer powers ministry is because we humbly seek the Powerful One. Rightly put, it is the Spirit of God who *empowers* when His people reach out to Him. While all churches pray, there are a few commonalities in how these nine churches went about the work of prayer.

PRAY FIRST

Prayer is primary. Massillon, Ohio, Church of the Nazarene is a prime example. Prayer is the first order of business. Prayer is not another activity tacked onto an already busy church schedule. Prayer is not peripheral. Instead, it is preeminent. Each of the pastors of this and the other eight churches knew that before sleeves were rolled up, knees had to get dirty.

At the Owings Mills, Maryland, Latin American First Church of the Nazarene, Pastor Walter Argueta describes prayer as the foundation of the church. From the beginning of his ministry, Pastor Argueta created a schedule for prayer and fasting. Every person in the church is asked to give two days a week to pray and fast. As the church has expanded, Pastor Argueta says it has been crucial for this prayer ministry to expand as well.

Pastor Tony Miller of Clarksville, Tennessee, Grace Church of the Nazarene describes “one of the most significant prayer and spiritual breakthrough moments as a result of three solid months of prayer cottages on Tuesdays and Thursdays . . . until one specific weekend called ‘Lay Witness Mission.’”

The entire congregation was assigned a prayer cottage according to the area within which they lived. About fifteen homes were open for prayer between the hours of six and eight in the evening, and each group was given a new list of prayer requests. Primarily, it was a time to pray for revival. At the end of three months we gathered together as a congregation on Friday, all day Saturday, and all day Sunday to hear testimony and teaching about God’s transforming power. Over one hundred fifty people came to the altar that one Sunday! We gained one hundred new people in the next month and never declined. Pastor Miller shares another powerful prayer story:

We needed \$5,000 for a new sign before opening day of our new building. I called the board and asked anyone else who would come together to meet in the parking lot of our new church building one week before our first Sunday. We marched around the church seven times praying and shouting praise and then gathered in one circle holding hands in prayer. After a good while, one man lifted his head and said, “The Lord just told me to give five hundred dollars for our new sign.” We had not even mentioned the need at this point. Soon another followed and then another until all \$5,000 was promised, and we opened the church one week later with the new sign.


Pastor Miller is quick to point out that the sign is not the point of the story. The point is that prayer was their first order of business in a time of need.

For each of our vibrant churches, seasons of prayer are planned prior to significant events, revivals, major decisions, and steps of faith. Prayer is powerful because prayer is *primary*.

PRAY MUCH

Second, prayer is pervasive throughout each church. Multiple, organized, ongoing prayer initiatives are prevalent in each setting. Pastor David West at the Crossroads Community Church of the Nazarene in Farmington, New Mexico, makes sure every lay leader has a prayer partner. Prayer partners make weekly contact for accountability and intercession.

Similarly, Pastor James Asberry of The Core Church of the Nazarene in Winchester, Virginia, has “pastor and leadership prayer partners,” who “pray specifically for a certain pastoral family or one of our leadership team and their family.”



At the Waverly, Tennessee, Church of the Nazarene, each newly elected church board has its first meeting around the altar. Board meetings often feel more like prayer meetings. Another vital prayer effort from Waverly is the church's prayer and care group. This is a Wednesday night option that meets simply to pray for people and to write cards to them, letting them know that the group has prayed for them. Each week cards reach those who are ill or grieving, veterans, schoolteachers, pastors far and wide, and many others who need prayer.

Pastor Tony Miller established a prayer closet at his church. People signed up to gather in the prayer closet during morning worship services and prayed specifically for the pastor while he preached, that people would respond to the messages. Pastor Miller noted immediate positive change as a result.

Each of the nine pastors and churches has established multiple, ongoing prayer efforts such as prayer teams, prayer groups, prayer chains, community prayer walks, forty-day seasons of prayer and fasting, and twenty-four-hour prayer vigils. And each church's regular slate of ministries and events (such as small groups, business meetings, and outreach events) is bathed in prayer from beginning to end.

Pastor Walter Argueta expressed this point well. When asked to list the prayer ministries of his church, he simply began listing every single ministry of his church. Every ministry is saturated with prayer. Like blood circulating throughout our bodies, delivering oxygen to billions of cells, prayer circulates through these churches, saturating each ministry, fueling every effort. Prayer is pervasive.


PRAY FORWARD

Third, the content of each church's prayers is significant. When asked, "Specifically, what does your church pray for?" pastors not only responded with expressions like *needs* and *intercession* but also listed *the community, our building, the future of our church, our vision, God's plans for us, our mission, the un-churched, and the pastor*. In other words, prayer is both reactive and proactive. While prayer in response to needs, illnesses, and issues is necessary and vital, these churches also pray forward. They make their church's mission and future a prayer priority.

The Crossroads church designates each season of Lent for prayer and fasting for the church's future. Pastor West says these forty-day prayer periods have triggered numerous outreach and ministry opportunities, including the purchase of land, the establishment of a Christian school, the spawning of a day care center, and the purchase of a new facility.

The Waverly, Tennessee, church is in the process of a capital fund-raising campaign called Faith for the Future. Alongside the fund-raising campaign is a prayer campaign called Prayer for the Future, which consists of several prayer efforts intended to fuel the vision. One example, phone alarms are set at 1:27 PM daily to remind people to pray for the future. The time was chosen because Psalm 127:1 is the driving verse for the focus: "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain."

In order to pray for the community, Pastor Junior Sorzano and the people of London, Ontario, First Church of the Nazarene place prayer cards inside bags of food distributed to those in need. People respond by writing their prayer needs and returning the cards to the church. Not only does this ministry offer prayers for those in need, but it also gives the church a



second contact with those who return the cards. In addition, the church periodically engages in Sunday evening prayer walks throughout the community.

PROMOTING PRAYER

Pastors were asked, “How do you help people *want* to pray?” Vibrant pastors agree that the best way to motivate people to pray is to celebrate previous answers to prayer, which is done through testimonies, social media, newsletters, prayer chains, and in worship services. Pastor Sorzano and the people of his congregation set aside time in each weekly worship service to celebrate answers to previous prayers. Pastors also noted that prayer breeds prayer. Praying churches naturally attract and raise up prayer warriors. Praying churches become magnets for praying people.

The pastor plays a central role when it comes to prayer. Churches that are powered by prayer have *pastors* who are powered by prayer. Our nine pastors have a deep hunger for God. They want to meet with Him regularly and repeatedly. Pastor Miller states, “Before pastors can lead a church in prayer, they have to come to terms with whether they’re convicted of prayer themselves.”

Pastor Sorzano made a point in the early days of his ministry to go straight to the altar every time he entered the doors of the church building. Pastor David West missed the worship service on his first Sunday at Crossroads Community Church. Instead of meeting with the church family, he ventured into the community for a prayer walk. On his walk he gathered twelve stones to bring back to the church as a reminder.

These pastors continually seek an encounter with a living God. They live in the thick of the presence of God. They are not praying mechanically or out of a sense of obligation.



Instead, they have a deep desire to be in constant communion with Christ.


Several common threads run through our nine churches when it comes to prayer. One key adjective that continually surfaced throughout our conversations was *intentional*. These churches are intentional about teaching and practicing prayer. They are deliberate about when and how and how often people pray. Their pastors are praying. Their initiatives are creative. Their passion is abundant. They clearly understand that prayer is their power source. They pray first. They pray much. And they pray forward.

In Acts 12 the Early Church was facing great opposition and trial. Stephen had been killed. Persecution was spreading. Judean believers faced financial hardship. King Herod was arresting believers. James, the brother of John, was put to death by sword. And Peter was imprisoned. In the midst of this growing persecution and hardship, verse 5 stands out as a welcome ray of hope: “but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” When the church earnestly prays, chains fall and prison doors swing wide open. When the church earnestly prays, renewal is realized and obstacles are overcome. When the church earnestly prays, communities are changed and the mission is materialized. Whatever is happening in your context, let it be said of you, “The church is earnestly praying to God.”

NEXT STEPS

Chapter 1: Powered by Prayer

1. Chapter 1 key thoughts
 - a. Our *first things* are (1) powered by prayer and (2) a holy core.
 - b. “*First things* call for specific actions related to prayer . . . lived out among the church’s core leadership.”

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- c. Pray first, pray much, pray forward, promote prayer, intentionally pray.
2. Discussion starters
- a. Read Acts 4:23-24, 29-35. When the Early Church faced their first crisis, what was their first response? How can your church be mobilized to respond the same way?
- b. Does your community consider your church a house of prayer? Do people who do not attend your church seek out your members and request that the church pray for them?
- c. How does your church behaviorally demonstrate that prayer is not just “another activity” among many others?
- d. A number of illustrations were given in this chapter concerning prayer. Which of these has your church practiced before? Which might be incorporated into the prayer life of your church?
- (1) Use of a prayer closet during worship services.
Where? Who?
 - (2) Scheduling of specific times of prayer and fasting.
When?
 - (3) Seasons of prayer prior to significant events. Which events?
 - (4) A prayer partner for every leader. Who?
 - (5) Praying forward for the church’s mission and future.
How? When?
 - (6) Prayer walks through the community. Where?
When?
 - (7) Celebrating answers to prayer in every service. How?
 - (8) Prayer retreat for the pastor and leadership. When?
3. Suggestions for further reading
- Jim Cymbala, *When God’s People Pray* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2007).



Jonathan L. Graf and Lani C. Hinkle, eds., *My House Shall Be a House of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2001).

John Wesley, *How to Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour, 2007).