

Becoming a Praying Pastor

By Steve Loopstra

The first step: being honest with yourself

I suppose my prayer life was not much different from many pastors. Certainly I prayed for my church. But then I searched for programs that promised to grow it--remembering, of course, to ask God to bless those programs!

So you can imagine the depth of conviction I felt when God moved in my heart to write letters to the churches I had pastored, asking their forgiveness for being a "pastor who prayed," but not a "praying pastor." Perhaps the story of my journey will speak to others who are struggling with what it means to be a praying pastor.

Immersed in War and the Word

Before I came to Christ, I was well on my way to destruction through drugs, alcohol, and lifestyle choices. I was rescued through faith in Jesus Christ at the age of 19, while in the Air Force and on my way to Vietnam. A Christian servicemen's center gave me access to a host of wonderful resources by classic Christian writers, and I was soaked in scriptural truth through books by A.W. Tozer, Oswald Chambers, J. Oswald Sanders, A. B. Simpson, and others. As a baby Christian in a war-torn nation, I grew in faith through profound writings on the foundational principles of prayer and revival. It wasn't until some time later that I discovered that not every believer was grounded in those same truths and passions.

At a Bible conference in Bangkok, Thailand, I knew the Lord was calling me to serve Him. I followed the counsel of others and went on to Bible college and seminary. Those years of training taught me to love the Word of God even more. But then I began to experience a subtle change in my thinking and understanding. I slowly began to rely more on the skills I was learning, and less on my initial child-like reliance on hearing directly from the Father.

“Church in a Can” Approach

After

graduation, I discovered that pastoring a church was a major challenge! I loved preaching and teaching the Word of God, but I soon learned that people expected more. They expected plans and programs and results. Not only did I feel those expectations from the people in my church, but also from leadership in the denomination. Ever so slowly, I began to look for help from programs and methods of church growth, evangelism, and discipleship.

I can look back now and see that I was, in some ways, looking for “church in a can” to help me be on the cutting edge of ministry. I would look for something that seemed to fit my congregation and myself, then go to the training and get the notebook. I would come back, present it to the board, and then pray that God would use it to build my church.

I really thought that was the way to do it, partly because it came so naturally, but also because it seemed to be the “culture.” I saw other pastors doing the same thing; in fact, we would meet each other at conference after conference. Even my denominational leaders would promote this program or that seminar. It became the lifestyle.

Deep within me, however, I felt a growing dissatisfaction. I was getting tired of the endless parade of programs. I think my people were getting tired of them too! They did them because I “believed” in them. But I didn’t really believe in them; mostly, I was “hoping” in them to do the job.

The Root of Dissatisfaction

Thankfully, my heart began to change when I started attending pastors’ prayer summits sponsored by our denomination. I discovered that the dissatisfaction I was feeling was, in reality, my distance from my heavenly Father. My prayer life deepened as I learned to view prayer as part of my love relationship with a God who was seeking me out. I later described it as “God romancing me back to Himself.”

The lid

finally came off for me at an annual denominational meeting. I was attending a sacred assembly of prayer, when the Lord spoke very directly to me: I had been a pastor who prayed, but not a praying pastor. The distinction was extremely clear to me. A praying pastor is one who knows how to spend time in the presence of the Father, seeking Him and hearing what His heart is for the church. A praying pastor gets direction through prayer, not the latest seminar.

I was deeply convicted by this realization. When I got home from that conference, I wrote letters to all the churches I had pastored, as well as to my former district superintendent. I asked them to forgive me for being a "pastor who prayed," but not a "praying pastor."

Confessions of a Senseless Shepherd

The words of Jer. 10:21 hit me powerfully during that time: "The shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the LORD; so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered." I began to understand more deeply that being a praying pastor would mean spending time nurturing and deepening my relationship with God. It would mean learning how to listen for His voice and His direction.

Jeremiah 23:16-18

describes this kind of relationship. God was challenging the false prophets who were speaking "visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD." In verse 18, He describes a true prophet by asking a question: "But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?" The word from which "stood" is translated means to tarry, to dwell, or to stand firm. The words "council of the LORD" imply a close deliberation or intimate consultation. The word "see" indicates discernment or experience, and the words "hear" and "listen" indicate hearing with intelligence, and then obeying—even telling others. The implications for me as a pastor were clear. I needed to know how to hear from God by spending time tarrying in His presence, in intimate consultation with Him, until I knew what He was saying, obeyed it myself, and told others.

Becoming a Praying Pastor

How do we get from being a pastor who prays to being a praying pastor? I offer the following suggestions gleaned from my own journey:

- Ask

God to search your heart and reveal what is the true state of your own prayer life. Have you relegated prayer to simply an "option" among tools from which you can choose? Or is it the basis for direction and decision-making in your life and ministry

- Ask the Lord to lead

you into a deeper prayer life with Him. This means deepening your relationship with Him. Have you been skimming along, allowing sermon preparation to suffice for your "in the Word time"? Or are you feeding your soul and seeking God above all other things?

- Develop your

ability to discern and hear the voice of the Lord. All through God's

history with man, God has spoken to His people. Through the Word, and through the Spirit of God who dwells within you, listen for and learn how to recognize His voice.

- Seek out the intercessors in your church and ask them to pray for you about this. You might be surprised how delighted they would be to pray for you to become a "praying pastor."

God is calling His people—and His pastors—to know the power and privilege of prayer. From Jim Cymbala (Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire) to Henry Blackaby (Experiencing God), the word is the same: Prayer must be our first resource, not our last resort.

Lord,
help those You have called as pastors to be people who know how to pray first. Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two; your life preaches all the week. If Satan can only make a covetous minister, a lover of praise, of pleasure, of good eating, he has ruined your ministry. Give yourself to prayer and get your texts, your thoughts, and your words from God. Martin Luther spent his best three hours in prayer."

About the Author

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