

# Taking Prayer Out of the Seats and into the Streets

By Phil Miglioratti

“It is time to get the people out of their seats and into the streets.” That thought scrolled across my mind as a clear and compelling message from the Lord in the late spring of 2005. As interim pastor of the Uptown Baptist Church in Chicago, I was responsible for the Wednesday evening prayer gathering and had been seeking the Lord’s direction for our summer months of praying together. His words to me that day would impact the congregation and my approach to prayer more than I realized at the time.

UBC met in a one hundred year old church facility situated on a busy urban corner: McDonald’s directly across the street, several nursing homes for emotionally damaged men and women, a wide diversity of ethnic restaurants, and a homeless shelter. The corner was known throughout the community for clandestine drug buys and prostitution. It was time for the Body of Christ to act.

According to Associate Pastor Mark Jones, “UBC from its beginnings has always been a church deeply involved in our community. Founding Pastor Jim Queen had a vision to see people drawn to Christ by the church addressing the needs of the community. UBC focused on community outreach programs that intentionally embraced street people, ethnic/language groups, an institutional ministry, single parent families and seniors. In the 80s and 90s, ESL classes were offered to Asian, African, European refugees who were inundating the community.

More recently, several members of UBC had become active in CAPS (Chicago Alternative Policing Strategies), a partnership of city services and neighborhood-based groups to combat crime and constructively address community issues. “Historically UBC has been filled with Christians with a heart to see the church practically impact the community,” Jones reports.

Our summer strategy was simple, yet truly strategic. Throughout June, we took our Wednesday evening prayer meeting out of the building. Each week, after a brief explanation or training on how to prayerwalk, we did just that. In pairs and triplets we strolled up and down the busy streets of Wilson and Sheridan. As we did, the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18) and allowed us to see the spiritual hurts and hopes behind the obvious physical circumstances. Our excursions into the neighborhood were followed by a debrief discussion of both what we had seen and prayed and what we were learning about not merely praying for the community but praying in the community. June was a month of asking the Lord to change the spiritual climate in Uptown.

According to Pastor Jones,

“these prayerwalks enabled church members to see the needs but also to get used to being out in the community. During July and August, we set up tables with lemonade along with church information, Bibles, tracks etc. Beginning with a brief time of prayer and preparation, we trained our people not to force the gospel but offer them free lemonade and free prayer and watch what happens.

“When we would offer free lemonade and free prayer some people would only take the lemonade, some would refuse and walk away, but some were so moved by our offer to pray for them that they would open up and share personal prayer needs with us. Because we talked beforehand our people were prepared for these varied responses.”

The news of this simple act of kindness spread quickly. The CAPS Director asked me to speak to all 25 of its district organizers about what we were doing. When a British Broadcasting Corporation crew came to the USA to do a story on effective community policing, they asked the Chicago Police to give them their best practice site for community policing. The police sent them to us at Uptown Baptist Church! The BBC filmed an entire Wednesday night prayer meeting and then interviewed new senior pastor Michael Allen afterwards. When the story was aired several weeks later in the United Kingdom, it moved a pastor from Leeds to travel to Chicago to learn more about how his church could have a greater community impact for Christ.

"The Mayor's staff in the CAPS office continued to highlight our efforts and invited me to meet the mayor to share first hand what we had been doing and the dramatic effect it had," said Allen. "The Police Commander of the 23rd district sent me crime statistical reports which demonstrated a dramatic decline in reported crime in the Uptown Community and particularly around the Church and he credits in part our cooperation with the CAPS program in doing what we do best and being who we are . . . Christian."

Both Pastor Allen and Pastor Jones agree, "one of the great blessings of this ministry is how God used everyday people to reach and touch the lost and hurting in our community. We were simply people who cared for our community and wanted to be a blessing. As we stepped out of our seats and into the streets the Lord blessed our faithfulness. I cannot tell you how many from the neighborhood expressed appreciation that our church was out in the community."

--Phil Miglioratti is the director of the National Pastors Prayer Network and a Community Reaching Facilitator for Mission America.