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# How to Assess the Prayer Life of a Congregation

By Daniel Henderson

Some years ago I attended a conference at a very large church in a western state. The subject was "church transitions." One staff pastor caught my attention when he told of the dynamic prayer ministry of the congregation. I was intrigued by his glowing commentary on their highly mobilized laity that engaged in powerful 24/7 prayer, 365 days a year.

Providentially, I sat next to a couple at the evening meal who identified themselves as the prayer coordinators of the church. As I reflected on the wonderful account of the prayer ministry described earlier in the day, their faces filled with dismay. They began to speak of their deep discouragement. They commented about the "disconnect" between their efforts and the awareness and participation of the pastoral staff. They described a completely different prayer ministry, full of gaping holes and plagued by significant apathy.

## The Need for Accurate Diagnosis

This experience illustrates the sad but common problem in many churches. Pastors can easily embrace an exaggerated sense of the prayer participation in their church. Sometimes we elaborate because of our desire to see more than really exists. Other times, we are just unaware of the true condition of the prayer ministry because we are far removed from actual involvement in the heart and soul of the praying.

On one hand, this misdiagnosis can lead to a false notion of the congregation's spiritual health and vitality. Much like a doctor who misreads an X-ray or blood test, we can miss some key indicators that would normally alert us to some significant needs. On the other hand, underestimating the prayer life of our church can lead to discouragement. Feeling pressure to do more, we can tend to "drive" our people to prayer, rather than graciously lead them to rich experiences of the presence of Christ.

## A Four Dimensional Evaluation Process

Ultimately, only the Lord knows the truth about the sincerity and substance of our prayers. Still, any appraisal on our part needs to be multi-dimensional. I am learning that it is important to evaluate the height, width, breadth and depth of the prayer culture of a congregation. Here's how it might work.

## Evaluating the Height — The Example of the Praying Leadership

The best place to begin an authentic assessment of the prayer life of

the church is with the church leadership. You will find that the prayer life of a church seldom rises any higher than the personal commitment and example of the senior pastor.

#### Key evaluation questions for pastoral leadership

Am I leading by example? - If we want a praying church, we cannot point the way; we must lead the way. We cannot just preach sermons but must lead God's people in balanced, biblical and transformational prayer experiences. This does not mean that pastors have to manage and organize the prayer ministry. There are others with administrative gifts to do this. It does mean that pastors must lead by example. It is not necessary that they attend every prayer time each week, but they must be visible, passionate and consistent in their participation.

Am I cultivating a consistent private prayer life? - At the core of every praying pastor is a hunger for God and a delight in His presence. This will be evidenced, not just in public venues, but in the place of private communion on a consistent basis.

Am I incorporating prayer into the leadership culture? - A praying pastor must also lead and nurture a praying leadership team. This is best accomplished as the leadership team collectively studies the priority and possibilities of prayer. This must lead to engaging times of prayer together as a major component of leadership gatherings. Special evenings of prayer, prayer retreats and prayer summits can ignite a fresh love for prayer as part of the leadership culture

Over my years of pastoral leadership, I have embraced Acts 6:4 as a primary definition of biblical leadership as we give our primary attention to "prayer and the ministry of the word." This allows us to focus our efforts and delegate trustee and administrative duties to other people. As part of our growth in the priority of prayer our leaders have enjoyed multiple three-day prayer summits and embraced prayer and the word as the best use of our collective leadership time.

Are we teaching on prayer in various venues? - A church leadership team should evaluate its members proactive commitment to instruct in prayer. Leadership should consider a regular plan to provide comprehensive, practical and motivational instruction on prayer--starting with the pulpit and implemented in classes, small groups and discipleship relationships.

Do we share personal stories about the power of prayer? - The congregational prayer life is encouraged by personal stories about prayer. The pastoral team should be looking for these "satisfied customers" who can become missionaries of prayer as they share their motivational stories of God's work in their lives.

Am I training other prayer leaders to help mobilize prayer? &ndash; I learned many years ago that if I did not train other motivated church members to lead in balanced biblical prayer, the prayer level might not grow beyond my ability to show up at all the prayer gatherings. I also realized that the quality of the prayer times would suffer.

So I took time to clarify everything I had learned (and was still learning) about leading effective prayer times and keeping prayer meetings out of the ditch. I thought about the personal characteristics of an effective and enduring prayer leader. Then I began to gather current and potential prayer leaders for 6-8 weeks of training, coupled with opportunities to practice the principles we were learning.

I've taught these principles to hundreds of local church leaders over the years. Eventually it became a book, *Fresh Encounters*, which is designed to help church leaders understand how prayer should function in a church setting.

#### Evaluating the Width &ndash; The Variety of Prayer Activities

When pastors lead by example and train others to facilitate biblical, balanced prayer times the prayer activities of the church can grow. This provides a variety of options from which participants can choose.

Width of Quantity &ndash; People connect with one another and the Lord in different ways and times. It is important that a church offer options for prayer-motivated members. Some are &ldquo;roosters&rdquo; and enjoy early morning opportunities while others are &ldquo;owls&rdquo; and like evening gatherings. Some need to connect around areas of common interests like parenting, youth ministry, men&rsquo;s interests or women&rsquo;s concerns. Some prefer prayer partners, others like small groups and many enjoy a large gathering for prayer. A highly directed prayer format will work for some while a more spontaneous and participatory mode suits others.

In evaluating the prayer life of a church it is important to consider the variety of practical options offered to allow people from a variety of backgrounds, interests and schedules to participate.

Width of Quality &ndash; Of course, the quality of the prayer activities must remain solid if the quantity is going to be effective. This requires trained leaders who provide capable, committed coordination for each prayer gathering. A church should have an ongoing training strategy to raise up competent and committed prayer leaders.

These leaders should meet, at least periodically, to share information about the effectiveness of the prayer times offered. Some will need to be discontinued, some should be strengthened.

#### Evaluating the Breadth &ndash; The Substance of a Prayer Culture

There is a difference between prayer-active people. Yet, the church is not largely affected by the prayer efforts. The goal is not to develop a prayer program that functions like a silo and is isolated from the rest of the church. The goal is a praying church where prayer permeates all the activities and gatherings in every department.

When I first came to Grace Church in Eden Prairie, the congregation seemed eager for me to start a weekly church-wide prayer time. We called it Fresh Encounter. However, after a number of months it became apparent that we had the program of prayer ahead of the leadership in prayer. Most of the elders and staff were not attending regularly and I realized we needed to slow the program until the leadership culture had developed more fully around the priority of prayer.

So, we augmented the prayer programming but still worked to grow the prayer culture. We cut the Fresh Encounter service to a once-a-month event. At the same time, we recruited more people to become active in the prayer room during the morning worship services. In this way we were able to adjust the prayer program but still grow a prayer culture with different and more helpful entry points.

A church is growing in a prayer culture when prayer is the default response of the leaders and people throughout the church. As I often say, "prayer is not the only thing we do it is just the first thing we do." This is the mark of a breadth in prayer. The commitment to prayer far exceeds the organized activities in prayer.

Genuine worship-based prayer is incorporated into every department of the church and most gatherings of the people. You see people engaging in spontaneous prayer in the midst of conversations, while talking on the phone or during fellowship times in the lobby on Sunday.

### Evaluating the Depth — The Habits of Praying People

Ultimately the prayer life of a church is evidenced in the lifestyles of the people attending the church. Of course, this dimension is hard to quantify but the goal is that prayer becomes as comfortable as breathing and eating in the daily activities of congregational participants. Prayer is integrated into marriage, home, work and virtually every activity. It has broken beyond the walls of the church building and become fully integrated into the life patterns of the saints.

Again, a great way to fuel this commitment to depth in prayer is to teach about it, feature testimonies of those who are enjoying it and emphasizing it as the exciting "norm" for all Christians.

## Key Questions and the Vital Outcome

If we could boil all of this down to some basic, penetrating evaluation questions, it might look like this:

• **HEIGHT:** To what degree is the senior pastor and leadership team modeling prayer, cultivating prayer among their ranks, teaching on prayer, highlighting stories about prayer and training others to lead in prayer?

• **WIDTH:** How are we raising up other leaders to provide a broad variety of prayer opportunities that appeal to various interests and that are sustained by consistent and competent leadership?

• **BREADTH:** Are we helping our people understand the need for a prayer culture beyond prayer "activities" as we encourage and highlight prayer as a pervasive reality in all we do as a church?

• **DEPTH:** Are we encouraging and equipping our people to develop a depth in private prayer that will also be evidenced in marriage, family, work and community relationships?

Ultimately, this kind of evaluation should lead us back to the Throne of Grace where we appeal to the Savior again, "Teach us to pray." The evaluation should not cause guilt or pride, depending on the outcome. The goal is a resolve to grow higher, wider, broader and deeper in our dependence on Christ and our supernatural impact on the culture around us through the power of His life within us.

## Questions for Further Thought or Discussion

1. Explain why an accurate diagnosis of the congregation's prayer life is so vital and how you would communicate your diagnosis to the congregation you are leading.
2. Summarize each of the four dimensions of the evaluation process and give an example of a step you would take to bring improvement.
3. Create a sermon/teaching outline: The Vital Outcome. Identify each point, provide a scriptural reference, and an action point for the church.

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## Suggested Additional Reading

Lawless, Chuck. *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2003

Franklin, John. *House of Prayer: Prayer Ministries in Your Church*. Nashville, TN: Lifeway Publishing, 1999

Higley, Sandra. *A Year of Prayer Events for Your Church*. Terre Haute: IN: PrayerShop Publishing, 2007

Miglioratti, Phil. "A Diagnostic Tool to Assess the Prayer Life of Your Congregation." <http://nppn.org/articles/article062.htm>

(Note: This article is taken from a soon to be published book, *Giving Ourselves to Prayer: An Acts 6:4 Primer for Ministry*, to be published by PrayerShop Publishing. The book is a text book for seminary students, providing a foundation on the importance of prayer in the life of a pastor and his church.)