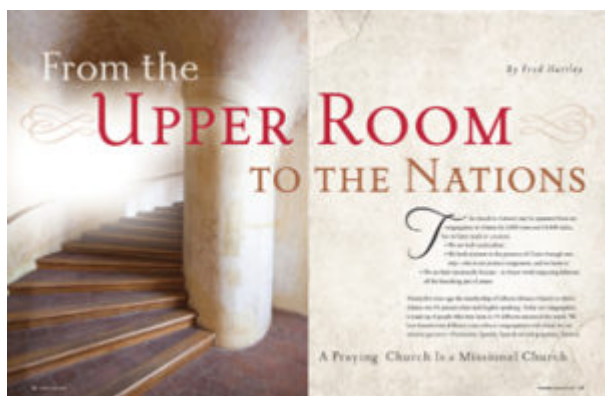


From the Upper Room to the Nations

A Praying Church Is a Missional Church

By Fred Hartley



The church in Antioch may be separated from my congregation in Atlanta by 2,000 years and 6,400 miles, but we have much in common.

- We are both multi-ethnic.
- We both minister to the presence of Christ through worship—this is our primary assignment, and we know it!
- We are both missionally focused—to thrust world-impacting believers off the launching pad of prayer.

Twenty-five years ago the membership of Lilburn Alliance Church in Metro Atlanta was 99 percent white and English speaking. Today our congregation is made up of people who were born in 54 different nations of the world. We have hosted seven different cross-cultural congregations with whom we are ministry partners—Vietnamese, Spanish, Spanish second generation, Eritrean, Asian-Indian, French-African, and

Chinese. Our Vietnamese congregation has planted seven other congregations around Atlanta, and has led more than 1,000 Vietnamese to faith in Jesus Christ.

None of this would have happened without devoting ourselves to Christ-encountering prayer. We follow the upper room model of ministry taught by Christ, demonstrated throughout the early Church and most vividly exemplified in Antioch.

The church in Antioch (see Acts 13:1–3 and Acts 11:19–29) was entirely multi-ethnic: Barnabas from the Mediterranean Island of Crete; Simon from Africa; Lucius, a Greek; Manaen, an associate of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul, a full-blood, pedigree Jew!

The eclectic believers all devoted themselves to ministering to the manifest presence of Christ by staying focused in their worship. They fasted. They hungered more for a move of God than for food. As they knelt on the launching pad of prayer, the Holy Spirit spoke and said to the apostolic-prophets in their prayer-filled, God-encountering gathering: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

They not only built a launching pad of prayer, they had ignition and lift off!

Guiding Principles

Before I tell our story of how God built a launching pad in Atlanta, we need to understand several guiding principles.

- When Jesus built His church, He built a praying church. What kind of church are you building?
- When Jesus made disciples, He made praying disciples. What kind of disciples are you making?

- The size (scope) of your ministry is determined by the size of your prayer life.
- The size of your church's prayer life is revealed by the size of the answers to prayer. What are you asking God for?

The Cape Kennedy Space Center on Florida's east coast built a most remarkable launching pad for the Space Shuttle—Pad 39. It was built to withstand more thrust than any other—36,000 pounds of thrust per square inch. Built of solid, poured concrete, it is 390 feet long, 345 feet wide, and an impressive 48 feet thick!

Jesus said, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out [thrust forth] workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:38, bracketed material added).

If we want thrust, we need a launching pad—a sizable launching pad. As Rick Warren often says, "The significance of your church is not determined by your seating capacity but by your sending capacity." Sending capacity is determined by the thrust of the Holy Spirit. In order to sustain Holy Spirit thrust, we need a substantial launching pad of prayer.

Upper Room: The Crown Jewel

It was no mere coincidence that the only thing Jesus built while on earth was the upper room full of praying disciples. The upper room was the highest accomplishment of Jesus' discipleship ministry—the crown jewel. The tragedy of the modern church is that Jesus' highest accomplishment has become our flagrant omission.

An upper room or huperoon in Greek (Acts 1:13) was common in the Middle East in Jesus' time. People gathered in the flat, open space on the rooftop of the square buildings for conversation—to sip tea, tell stories, welcome out-of-town guests, or unwind at the end of the day. For Jesus and His disciples the upper room provided a meeting place where they

could talk, pray, plan, and eat together.

In one such upper room, Jesus broke bread, served the disciples the Passover meal, and washed their feet. Before He ascended into heaven, while gathered with them on the Mount of Olives, Jesus “gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about’” (Acts 1:4). The word command, used in the military, is the strongest word in the Greek language for decree. So Jesus put them under strictest orders.

Obviously, 40 days earlier, when Jesus was begging them in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him one hour, His disciples were not yet upper-room disciples. But now they were fully engaged. Something had changed. No sooner does Jesus bodily ascend into heaven, right before their eyes, than they demonstrate that transformation: “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room [huperon] where they were staying” (Acts 1:12–13).

The same disciples, who before couldn’t pray one hour, now could pray the better part of 240 hours—ten straight days! Into that upper room He had led His disciples. Into that room He had poured out His Spirit. Out from that room He had thrust forth His empowered disciples. Out from that room He carried out His mission on earth.

In a matter of hours the early Church grew from 120 to 3,120. That kind of church growth would be impressive anywhere, but this happened in Jerusalem!

We, as a local church in Metro Atlanta, realized that this pattern of upper-room, God-encountering, launching-pad-building prayer is a prototype that continues through New Testament life. The initial upper room in Jerusalem was by no

means the only upper room in the Book of Acts.

- Peter and John were on their way to an upper-room encounter with Christ when they met a lame man (Acts 3).
- The early Church had an upper-room, earth-shaking, prayer encounter with God (Acts 4).
- The apostles appointed deacons so they could remain devoted to upper-room prayer (Acts 6:4).
- Paul had an upper-room encounter with Ananias (Acts 9).
- Peter had an upper-room encounter with God (Acts 10).

The church in Antioch certainly built an upper room that launched the first mission team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). In fact, every church Paul planted became an upper room. And when Paul launched a new mission trip, he was sent from the launching pad in Antioch.

An Upper Room in Every Church

When Lilburn Alliance Church saw this upper-room, God-encountering, launching-pad-of-prayer pattern, we realized we needed an upper room. We asked God for His blueprint and began a central, all-church prayer gathering known as the RIVER.

What makes an upper-room prayer gathering unique?

The primary focus of an upper-room prayer gathering has one ultimate purpose—to minister to the manifest presence of Christ. Just as in Antioch they were worshipping the Lord when God gave them their mission, so every upper-room prayer gathering has one agenda—to minister to the Lord with our prayer and worship. Until we understand that our first assignment is to minister to the manifest presence of Christ, God will not give us our second assignment.

It was in the RIVER one night that God put a burden on our hearts for the neighborhoods, apartment complexes, and subdivisions immediately adjacent to our church property. I saw a picture of myself going door to door, introducing myself

and saying to the people, "I would like to pray for you—what would you like Jesus to do for you?"

This struck a chord with our whole church family. Since then, we have visited 5,000 homes around our church campus. At our Wednesday night AWANA kids clubs, more than half of the children are from the neighborhoods around our church. Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu parents bring their children to our church. It looks like a meeting of the United Nations each week.

Now when I walk the neighborhoods around our church, most of the people recognize me, smile big, and many thank me for all our church is doing for the community.

During the past 25 years, we have seen more than 3,000 people come to faith in Christ through the personal witness and ministries of our people. I wish I could say they all became members of our church, but they have not. The greatest reward, however, is the knowledge that we will all be gathered before God's throne one day in united worship.

The Upper Room Today

The upper room is the closest place to heaven on earth. Just think about it. Jesus went from the throne room to earth to build the upper room. Before leaving earth He told the disciples to go to the upper room so that He could ascend back to the throne room. From the throne room through the upper room, He would then carry out His ministry on earth. This is the New Testament upper-room pattern.

In the first century the upper room was on the rooftop. For us the upper room can be in a basement, a chapel, or the back porch. The upper room does not need to be "upper" in location, but it needs to be upper in priority and upper in prominence. Upper-room, God-encountering prayer is the launching pad and lifeline of every church ministry and activity. Everything else is wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

Recently, when I preached a new message on the upper room to our people, a woman ministry leader came to me in tears and said, "Pastor Fred, that message described to a T what our women's meetings are like every Tuesday morning. Thank you for pointing us to keep first things first."

Though 6,400 miles separate my church in Atlanta from the church in Antioch, we share the same DNA. The same missional thrust that God created in Antioch, He is creating today in Atlanta some 2,000 years later. It is all coming out of a culture of prayer. We take seriously the words of Jesus, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:38).

Our mission is to reach a lost world through a revived church. A lukewarm church will never get the job done. My congregation in Atlanta wants to be part of reaching the remaining unreached people on earth. For this reason we take seriously our call to build a Christ-encountering, upper-room, launching pad of prayer.

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How to Build a Prayer Culture for a Missional Church

While the Holy Spirit will show you the unique pattern for your particular congregation to become a house of prayer for all nations, here are some keys we have discovered in Atlanta

and around the world.

1. **The pastor sets the tempo.** Jesus made praying disciples (Acts 1:4). John the Baptist made praying disciples (Luke 11:1). We, as pastors and leaders of our people, are the ones who make praying disciples. We dare not delegate prayer discipleship to anyone else.
2. **Bring others with you.** Just as Jesus, John the Baptist, and the Apostle Paul brought praying people along with them, we want to invite rising leaders to pray with us. The best way to learn to pray is with people who know how.
3. **Build a prayer shield.** A prayer shield is a group of personal intercessors who are recruited to consistently pray for the pastor(s)—prayers for God to protect them from the plots of the evil one and to empower them for service. I now have more than 400 people around the world who are committed to praying for me on a daily, or at least regular, basis.
4. **Appoint a prayer team and a team leader.** The prayer team in my local church is a powerhouse. They not only facilitate pre-service prayer—filling the room with the presence of God before our worship celebrations—they mobilize prayer throughout our church family.
5. **Every meeting is a prayer meeting.** We find that a prayer meeting breaks out more often than not in gatherings such as small groups, Sunday school classes, women's meetings, elders' meetings, and business meetings. We follow the pattern, "everything by prayer" (Phil 4:6).
6. **Call for seasons of fasting.** We call for fasts through the year—seven days, 21 days, or 40 days. During these times of accelerated spiritual growth, we see dramatic answers to specific prayers.
7. **Give invitations to meet God.** In the middle of Sunday worship we call people to come to "The Garden of Prayer" at the front of the auditorium to meet God. We've discovered that church is not a place to hide from God;

it's a place to meet God. People bring their highs and lows, their challenges and their blessings. Some weeks 50 or more people flood to the front and encounter God.

8. **Emphasize mid-week prayer.** Our mid-week corporate meeting is called the RIVER, a worship-based prayer gathering. We assemble chairs in concentric circles, which puts the focus on Christ and keeps us close enough to hear each other pray. It also gives opportunity to call people with needs into the middle of the circle so we can pray over them.
9. **Ask for the nations.** The size of our prayer life is revealed by the size of our answers to prayer. Therefore, we ask for the nations. What bigger thing can we ask for than the nations? When we began asking God for the nations, He began to expand our territory. We now have 54 nations worshipping together under one roof. "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance" (Ps. 2:8). God wants to take us all from the upper room to the nations.

–Fred Hartley

What Is the College of Prayer?

One missional ministry that has come out of our increased prayer life is the College of Prayer International, which helps churches rebuild upper-room, God-encountering prayer environments all over the world.

Fifteen years ago we planted the first campus of the College of Prayer in Atlanta, GA, with a vision of mentoring leaders to reach a lost world through a revived church. We wanted to lead pastors and leaders to a fresh encounter with Christ and teach them to rebuild upper rooms in each local church and in the regional church. Today we have 119 campuses of the College of Prayer in almost 50 nations of the world. We have noticed

a pattern. The more desperate the people, the more eager they are to pray. When you know your very survival depends on God dramatically answering specific prayers, you pray with desperation.

Seven years after the establishment of the College of Prayer in Côte d'Ivoire, a pastor looked intently at me and said, in tears, "I don't know if the church in Côte d'Ivoire would have survived the civil war had it not been for the College of Prayer."

I asked why, and he said, "You opened the door to the supernatural and yet taught us how to avoid excess. When God, through prayer, was all we had, we discovered that God, through prayer, is all we need. The foundation of our church is now built as Christ-encountering prayer." Holy desperation becomes holy expectation; holy expectation becomes holy anticipation. Hope is rising among the hopeless as they learn to pray and rebuild the upper room.

Designing a College of Prayer

A campus of the College of Prayer consists of a leadership team of at least five Christian leaders with influence to gather 50–500 people twice a year (three days at a time) over a three-year period. During that time the following curriculum is taught: Year 1: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray," Year 2: "Lord, as Families, Teach Us to Pray," Year 3: "Lord, as Local Churches and Workplaces, Teach Us to Pray."

We discovered that a genuine encounter with the manifest presence of Christ normally involves five crucial elements:

- high worship
- deep repentance
- receiving forgiveness and freedom
- being filled with the Holy Spirit

- being empowered for ministry.

Gulu, Uganda, is the epicenter for the “Invisible Children,” where a warring tribe comes at midnight to steal adolescent boys, train them to be warriors, and then send them back to their village to kill their families and tribal people. We held three years of the College of Prayer in Gulu.

During a large reconciliation service with almost 1,500 people, members of the warring tribe came and publicly repented of their sins. Hundreds of members of the victimized tribe then stood and wailed, asking forgiveness for their resentment and bitterness. A member of the Ugandan parliament said, “I never thought I would live to see this day. The College of Prayer is truly changing the world.”

We have heard similar reports in Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, China, Spain, Norway, Congo, and Senegal.

Now God has opened to the College of Prayer many nations where the church is being severely persecuted. We are now serving 14 of the 50 nations where the church is most persecuted. The more desperate the people, the more eager they are to pray.

For more information regarding the College of Prayer, go to collegeofprayer.org.

–Fred Hartley