

Rally Cry for Prayer

The Role of Pastors and Leaders in Motivating People

By Daniel Henderson

Imagine sitting down one morning at the kitchen table, grabbing your phone, and glancing through your news app. You expect more depressing stories about economic woes, international conflict, crimes, and political punditry. Suddenly, a riveting headline captures your attention:

- From USA Today: “Conversions to Christianity Multiply Exponentially, Church Leaders Cannot Explain Why.”

Your curiosity on alert, you search for similar stories. Unbelievable news reports leap off the screen:

- From New York City: “Five Rabbis Leave Their Synagogues for Christian Church after Dramatic Conversions
- From Minneapolis: “Dozens of Islamic Leaders Renounce Their Faith to Join Christian Movement”
- From Los Angeles: “Local Buddhist Priests Cause Stir by Declaring that Jesus Christ is God”
- From Time magazine: “Leading Atheists Embrace Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection, Offer Public Apology to Christians.”

You cannot escape the thought that something supernatural has quietly emerged. Could this be the inauguration of a much-needed spiritual awakening when the nation is in chaos?

A Supernatural High Point

Having roused your imagination with hopeful headlines we long to see, I turn to perhaps the greatest revival moment in the

New Testament narrative. In Acts 6:7 we read these words:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Absorb the incalculable impact described in this succinct sentence. Disciples are not added. They are not multiplying. They're "multiplying greatly." Beyond this, a "great many" Jewish priests are converted. Hard-liners. This would be like a modern-day salvation wave engulfing some of the most notable atheists, skeptics, celebrities, domestic terrorists, and critics of the faith.

Truly amazing. Truly God. Truly possible!

The Leadership Connection

But we cannot ignore the connection between the conviction in the apostles' hearts—to devote themselves to prayer and teaching God's Word (Acts 6:4)—and this explosion of new believers (v. 7). Even though the people were demanding that the leaders fix the widow-feeding problem (vv. 1–3), the apostles instead delegated the task to other capable servants. This allowed the apostles to focus on the priority of church leadership: "[We] will give our attention to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (6:4).

This collective leadership tenacity was essential for receiving Christ's direction and power in the environment of a praying church. The same is true today. Pastoring a church is a supernatural assignment. We cannot afford to move away from a full, focused experience of Christ's person and presence, opting instead to solve operational problems or to implement new programs.

A supernatural advancement of the gospel in today's crisis moments requires praying pastors who lead praying churches.

Conviction about the Highest Priorities

Too often we find it more desirable to serve the Lord than to seek the Lord. Overemphasis on service makes ministry an idol and diminishes a church's spiritual power and impact.

My friend and fellow pastor Keeney Dickenson notes, "We pray in the context of ministry, but Jesus ministered in the context of prayer."¹ The apostles had seen, felt, and been forever changed by the way Christ lived, taught, and implemented the gospel ministry. They were imitating the One who only did what He saw His Father doing. Jesus lived with divine spiritual insight and power every day—through His life of prayer. His disciples dared not create a different paradigm. They had to walk in His steps through prayer and the ministry of the Word. That's the calling of every leader.

The apostles were also walking in the example established by many notable Old Testament leaders, who set the spiritual tone and averted crises through prayer.

- Moses communed with God "face to face" as he guided a rebellious people and encountered various crises (Ex. 33–34).
- Jehoshaphat, under enemy attack, led the people to seek the Lord in humility, and he won a supernatural victory (2 Chron. 20).
- Nehemiah, a man of prayer, led the people in rebuilding Jerusalem's walls (Neh. 1–3).

Principles for Leading a Praying Church

In recent years I've had the opportunity to coach hundreds of pastors in developing a dynamic culture of prayer. Here are some key principles that prayer-minded pastors can implement to grow a praying church:

1. A culture of prayer always emanates from the

epicenter of church leadership.

The Acts 6:4 devotion to prayer was not just a reaction to crisis. It was a consistent conviction. The previous chapters of Acts demonstrate that the leaders took the lead in every prayer gathering.

A congregation's prayer level does not rise higher than the personal passion of its leadership. When conviction starts at the core, we lead the way instead of pointing the way. This conviction fuels life-giving prayer on a personal level, among the staff, within the board, among various ministry leaders, and ultimately throughout the entire church.

When I consult with a church, my first two questions are these:

1. How much time do the leaders spend together in prayer?
2. What kind of prayer is it?

There is a difference between meeting simply to pray about various needs and meeting primarily to seek God for all that the Head of the Church has promised. The leadership's current prayer conviction is the single greatest indicator of the congregation's future prayer commitment.

2. Teach people to pray by praying in community.

Western culture has hyper-individualized prayer. And failure to prioritize corporate prayer has hindered our discipleship in private prayer. D.A. Carson wrote, "Many facets of Christian discipleship, not [the] least prayer, are rather more effectively passed on by modeling than by formal teaching. Good praying is more easily caught than taught. . . . We should choose models from whom we can learn . . . then become models for others."²

Referring to the Lord's Prayer, Albert Mohler has aptly noted:

There is no first-person singular pronoun in the entire

prayer. . . . One of the besetting sins of evangelicalism is our obsession with individualism. . . . The first-person singular pronoun reigns in our thinking. We tend to think about nearly everything (including the truths of God's Word) only as they relate to me. This is why when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he emphasizes from the very outset that we are part of a corporate people called the church.³

Pastors teach their people to pray by breaking the chains of individualism and consistently leading the gathered church in prayer. There is no other way.

3. Build sidewalks where footpaths already exist.

It sounds counterintuitive, but I have discovered that the all-church prayer meeting may not initially be the engine of the prayer culture. Instead, in time, it can become the expression of the prayer culture. People stay away from the church prayer meeting, not for lack of a particular approach, but for lack of spiritual appetite. Beyond this, many churches are overprogrammed and people are over-busy. Adding another night out for a prayer meeting may not be a helpful strategy.

But we can grow the appetite for prayer by infusing established gatherings with what I call "Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based prayer." These gatherings may include small groups, Bible fellowship classes, ministry team meetings—and even worship times. Upon these footpaths of existing connection points, churches can build sidewalks of fresh experience to cultivate an appetite for life-giving prayer.

4. Engage in relentless rhythms of worship-based prayer.

Fundamentally, there are two parts to the model prayer Jesus commanded us to experience and enjoy.⁴ The first half is entirely Godward. The second half is manward. I characterize

the two-part rhythm this way: “He is worthy. We are needy.”

The more we pursue His worthiness, the more we are gripped by our neediness. A church that learns to seek His face, rather than just His hand, lives in a vital, beautiful sense of desperation for God. And that desperation becomes the DNA of a truly praying people. Awareness of our neediness flows from recognition of His worthiness.

Imagine What God Could Do!

Can we dream again of the powerful, supernatural advancement of the gospel demonstrated in Acts 6:7?

Embrace the leadership conviction of Acts 6:4, and make the next new thing the first old thing.

Imagine what God could do if praying leaders would lead praying churches to become houses of prayer for all nations.

1Keeney Dickenson, “Prayer Life vs. Life of Prayer,” <http://www.64fellowship.com/resources/articles/prayer-life-vs-life-of-prayer/>. 2D. A. Carson, *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35. 3Albert Mohler from <https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/20/danger-christian-prayer/>. 4When Jesus said, “Pray like this” (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2), it was not a suggestion or one of many options. In Greek it is an imperative. This command provides a consistent, biblical prayer pattern—for our good and His glory.

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