



The Gathered Faithful's Prayers

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Praying Together

One of the most central things Christians do when they gather together is pray. They gather to hear the Word, and to cheer on the new members. The Spirit knits them together, and brings them Christ Himself. They hear, see, taste, smell, feel, and sing God's love. And they respond in prayer. Prayer is what most sets a church apart from a social club or labor union or school or service agency.

What's more, public prayers teach each believer a lot about what private prayers are about. In public :

- they pray when they don't want to pray or don't feel like praying;
- they pray when they have trouble concentrating on praying;
- they pray when they aren't prepared for it;
- they pray the Word by drawing on Scriptures in the liturgy and readings;
- they pray for (and with!) those they are in conflict with;
- they pray about people and things they wouldn't think to pray for or would otherwise forget to pray for.

They learn that there is great spiritual power where believers pray together with unity of purpose (also known as 'in agreement'; Matthew 18:19-20). Their prayers are at the core of their relationship with God, which feeds, nurtures, and energizes them, and ties them in with believers of then, now, and to come. And it is in the congregation that they learn how to pray when, say, their business goes bankrupt, they fail in college, their factory closes, or their spouse leaves. And most especially, where death and life meet. Prayer is the most common or 'ordinary' of the ways that the holy and the human come together. Thus, our prayers together are something far bigger than any one person, or even any one congregation.

When church growth specialists started to look at energetic churches to see what made them so vital, one of the themes that came up over and over again was that those congregations did a lot of praying. What they found was that these vital congregations **prayed** and **taught** about prayer: what it is, what is done through it and in it, methods of prayer and related devotions, and prayer in all settings.

Their church leaders :

- **modeled** a life of prayer,
- **turned to** prayer,
- **described** prayer's role in their lives and in churchly doings,
- **trusted** that God would answer the prayers;
- **honored** those in prayer chains and groups during worship services,
- **sought** answers to prayer,
- learned how to **recognize** answers,
- **accepted** and sometimes even **celebrated** God's replies, even when those replies *were*'t what they were hoping for;
- constantly **asked** people about their prayer life,
- encouraged **deeper** involvement in prayer.

For these vital parishes, prayer was a part of every activity of the church, yet it was not allowed to become routine. The staff and council and committees prayed **together** -- real prayer seeking guidance and the power to do as guided (Acts 4:23-31), not rote or superficial 'prayer' that's done as a matter of mere duty. They prayed for support; they prayed for individuals' and groups' needs to be met; they prayed for boldness for the Gospel; they prayed for specific healing. And they had people whose chosen ministry in the church was prayer: prayer chains, prayer teams, prayer circles, prayer watches, prayer

walks, prayer retreats, prayer visitation, prayer vigils, prayer in worship services, and special prayer sessions of gathered friends for healing or help with a burden. The congregations were praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). They prayed as if prayer really matters, because they knew it **does**.

And prayer was not allowed to be just a female enterprise, any more than leadership was allowed to be just a male enterprise. Males, including those without official roles, were brought (dragged??) into the prayer ministries. In fact, since prayer is something anyone can do, prayer activities proved to be a great place for people to start stepping forward in faith and start taking part in congregational life.

Such churches are well aware that God gives gifts to those who keep on praying, most notably the power to get God's purposes done. And they are keen on tapping into a realm that is too deep for our bodily senses to pick up on, but that is there in everything and everyone.

Some of these churches have grown rapidly. But don't think of prayer as a road to numerical growth : many churches have grown large and rich without a lot of praying, and a lot of praying churches stay average or small in size. (In statistical-talk : an emphasis on prayer has only a mild correlation with numerical growth or financial donations.) God gives a different gift to churches that stress prayer : they're more **vital**.

- They have a seemingly endless supply of energy and volunteers for a wide range of tasks,
- they are effective in doing those tasks, and
- they are united about what they do and why they do it;
- the people there sense a strong connection with God in their lives.

It sounds simple, but it's not. On the one hand, if the church is to become (and stay) a praying church, prayer must be an obvious priority of the church's leadership. It takes more than just praying, it takes teaching and encouraging prayer. On the other hand, too much talk about prayer will eventually become so much yada yada, in one ear and out the other. (Watch the teens; they're the first to yawn.) And too strong an emphasis on 'modeling' a prayer life can quickly mutate into a concern for keeping up an *image* as praying people - something Jesus came down very hard upon. Wisdom calls for modesty, honesty, and balance.

"Once we spent a whole night in prayer and praise : and many a time, at midnight and at one in the morning, after I have been wearied almost to death in preaching, writing and conversation, and going from place to place, God imparted new life to my soul, and enabled me to intercede with Him for an hour and a half and two hours together I cannot think it presumption to suppose that partly, at least, in answer to prayers then put up by His dear children, the Word for some years past, has run and been glorified, not only in England, but in many other parts of the world."
 from **George Whitefield's** Journals (1960 edition, p.91, from 1737)

Prayer In Worship

In worship, Christians pray a lot. They pray for :

- forgiveness,
- oneself and one's own,
- those who are ill,
- the world and its leaders, sins, momentous happenings, and disasters;
- the pastor, the sermon, and an open mind in listening to it;
- a spirit of fellowship and friendship;
- our learning, discerning, and witness;
- church events, activities, and ministries;
- vision and renewed energy;
- giving thanks to God;
- becoming quieted enough to pay attention to God's presence.

These are all a part of prayer in worship. Worship in the mode of the liturgical churches shows a full vision of prayer. We examine ourselves and see our sin; we see how wrong it is, and commit before God to do it no more; we ask God to help us do it; we ask God to forgive us; we meditate on God's Word as told by the preacher; we thank God for the work of Christ in restoring our relationship; and we celebrate God's presence among us with praise.

Truth be told, many Christians don't really believe that the prayers said in a worship service have effectiveness and power. They pray, but expect that nothing will happen. Yet the Christian faith itself is one in which we pray expecting that someday, somehow, **something** will happen because of faithful prayers, that the Almighty does have room for us in the divine scheme of things. Jesus told us so. When those gathered for worship pray and believe that it matters, it's amazing to be part of it.

There are many forms of prayer in worship :

- Recited scriptural prayers;
- Composed or poetic prayer (which can in the right hands say what others want to say but don't know how to say it);
- Praying together in 'led prayer' or liturgical prayer (with prepared petitions and a congregational response phrase);
- Epiclesis (calling on the Spirit to come and act, especially in Baptism and Communion);
- Everyone praying aloud together their own prayers at the same time (sometimes called 'concert prayer', and is characteristic of Asian Christians).
- Breaking into groups of four or five, and praying in that group for a short period of time (usually five minutes).

In worship, the pastor or worship leader often speaks a prayer on behalf of all of those gathered. But the worship leader is not to do this alone. Those present are to pray along with their leader, so that all are joined together in prayer. These sort of prayers are often

printed beforehand in the bulletin each person receives when they arrive. This way, the prayer can be spoken out loud by all, and they can develop a stronger sense of being joined together. A well-written liturgical prayer not only gets us all to pray together, but also frees our mind from having to create ways to express the prayer. It can 'hit the nail on the head', saying what we all mean to say at that point in the service, so we can simply give it our 'yes' (our 'amen').

Starting a Prayer Ministry

You are getting the idea of starting or reviving a prayer ministry at your church. So what's the first thing to do?

PRAY. (...surprised?...)

But what do you pray for?

Pray for discernment and guidance :

- is this what the Spirit really wants for this church? (Maybe the Spirit wants not a separate prayer ministry that operates within everything. Maybe the prayer is supposed to grow from amidst whatever else the Spirit wants the congregation to emphasize.)
- what does God want us to do in prayer?
- what is the right timing to bring this ministry forward? (It has to be done on God's timetable, not yours (Jeremiah 29:11). When it is done in God's timing, the Spirit will make things work well together to an effect that's better than you thought possible.)
- What's the ministry's vision?
 - what is its goal? its purpose? its mission?
 - why is it needed?
 - are we the ones to do it?

What next?

PRAY.

Pray for colleagues and support :

- the pastor. (Without the full support of the head pastor and/or the responsible pastor on a pastoral staff, it will not go far, if at all. If the pastor is not opting in, pray for a change of heart.)
- existing prayer-persons. (Perhaps someone or a small group of someones in your church has been loyally laboring in prayer all this time -- usually in your womens' circles or specialized ministries. You don't want to trump them; you want to *add* to them.)
- congregational lay leaders. (The more of them support it, the faster the congregation's prayer life will change.)
- a core of one to six others who will commit to pray with you about this.

What next?

KEEP PRAYING. (...got it yet??....)

As you do, look for signs of confirmation (taken together, not each one on its own) :

- comments from others;
- inner peace;
- sudden opportunities;
- unexpected support;
- things fall into place;
- ideas/actions coming out of Bible study groups, and from your own study of the Bible;
- it 'bites back' -- the idea becomes harder and harder to avoid the more you or anyone else tries to hold back on it.

Also, hone down the vision, so you can easily share it with others, again and again so that it sinks in or catches fire.

Please, be in no hurry. When it happens, it happens. God's timing is what counts. Get others to lead and take initiative. This is not something to be done alone. And, be ready to accept the idea that someone else may be called to be the main leader. Someone else may have the special set of gifts that takes the prayer ministry forward in depth, member involvement, and effectiveness. Most of all

(... hopefully, by now you can say the rest of it)

Prayerful Group Decision-Making

Let everything move out of prayer and into prayer. *Real* prayer, not prayer done because it's expected of you. The group that prays together may not always stay together, but they will as a whole be more likely to stay open to the Spirit's leadings. This will make the inevitable feuds rarer. If possible, meet with each other and other prayer partners before any meeting, and pray for the Spirit's leadings. (It's best to do that at a personal level, but it may prove necessary to officially set aside a time just for praying together.) Start meetings with some time -- about 5 minutes, more if needed -- for prayer. Then take additional time to pray together before making any key decisions. *Please don't rush, and don't feel like someone has to be speaking.* Church committees can then start to take on more of the character of prayer groups, and less of the character of a political back room.

One of the bad things about church committees (as usually run) is that they tend to become an 'in group'. This tendency can become even stronger in the prayerful approach, because of the close ties that tend to develop between members who pray together. Becoming an 'in group' defeats the purpose of the prayerful committee, because it becomes unable to develop a true consensus for the rest of the church.

On specific, detailed prayer

The world is not general. Specific things happen in specific places at specific times to specific people. When God incarnated, it was not as a 'generic human'. It was as a specific human being, Jesus, in a specific culture of a specific time and place who, while He walked among us, addressed specific situations of specific people. Prayer needs to be detailed and specific, too, as specific as each of us. As detailed as is feasible, without violating confidences. It needs to be our *usual* way of praying.

As an example : In Sunday worship services one week, there is a line in the Prayers of the Church where the congregation prays "for the Sunday School, its teachers and students". But when the parish education committee and any interested others meet later that week, they pray for :

- each teacher ("for Rhonda, that her time burden be lifted so she can better prepare her lessons; for Liv, that in each moment in class she knows what to do next; for Maria,"),
- each class,
- specific pupils,
- the lessons of the upcoming week,
- getting new kids into the classes,
- forming an adult study and drawing new people to it,
- discovering or developing curricula,
- finding ways to mentor the faith,
- the parents, that they come to the faith and live it,
- finances,
- schedules,
- better ways to build the faith in children, teens, and new Christians.

Specific praying changes the way you see what you're praying for. You'll start paying more attention to each part of the picture, and care more about parts of it you didn't think about before. There might even be less infighting and petty squabbles (no guarantees, of course). But the most important thing is that every aspect of the church and the collective lives of its members is raised up to our Lord, the One to whom it all belongs. Our prayers turn our life together into an act of worship.

Prayer Practices

It's usually helpful for a parish to have many different ways of praying. Each different way brings forward something different to our mind, something we haven't given over to God

before, something else to praise God for, something that we take to heart. Each facet to a church's prayer life gives an opportunity for each newcomer to step forward in faith. But your church doesn't have to pursue every approach to prayer; it would then become 'something to do' instead of 'something to be'. Just try things one at a time and see how they take hold. If a certain approach doesn't catch on, leave that and go to another. You cannot force real prayer.

Prayerwalking Your Neighborhood

Most churches feel somewhat disconnected from their neighborhoods. It's an almost-sure bet that many people in your church's neighborhoods think your church is aloof from them. One of the many things churches are doing about this is 'prayerwalking'. The basic idea is that the church's prayer ministry team (and other concerned members) go in pairs to walk through various parts of the neighborhood, and pray there. This may be :

- in front of the house of someone in material need;
- at a street crossing run by gangs, pimps, or pushers;
- where people earn a living;
- where the local occultic followers gather;
- in front of each house or apartment building, for the potential believers who live there;
- at roadside memorials, crime scenes, and cemeteries;
- next to where the powerful movers and shakers make their decisions;
- at places where violence and death rule.

Cell churches also prayerwalk, often involving two or three cells or prayer ministries in a section of town. Student groups at colleges and high schools can make a prayer stop a day to places in the school where trouble is most likely to happen. During their breaks, nurses make stops in front of patients' rooms, out of their sight, praying for health and faith. Wherever the pull against God is strong, that's where the prayerwalking is done most regularly. It is to be done *as invisibly as possible*, so that those praying become part of the background. That way, if someone comes to you, it is purely a work of God and not your own attention-grabbing. Prayerwalking is not to be done to be seen (Jesus warns us against that; Matthew 6:5); *it is done to see*.

Some writers describe prayerwalking in terms of complex strategies of spiritual warfare and exorcism and 'territorial spirits' and claiming victory over neighborhoods. But you don't have to think of it that way. The idea is really very simple : when you go to a place to pray for the people there, you're where the action is. You're not projecting. You're seeing it differently, learning your neighborhood in a different light. You'll see the people and buildings and activities, and you may even be seeing things happen as you're standing there. You'll hear the sounds and smell the smells. You're not at some far-away locale safe behind walls. In most churches, most of the people don't really know or care much about neighborhoods outside of their own; prayerwalking can be an eye-opener for them. When you're actually on the scene, the meditations are clearer and more focused, and the prayers are more urgent and are much more likely to have a face or a life in mind. It gives

you a chance to think of what place each activity has in the world and each person has in the Kingdom of God. And after you've prayed there a while, you might actually feel the Spirit tugging on your mind, telling you what deeds you might be called on to do there. Someone might come up to you and ask for your prayers, or maybe your help. **You get real.** It may also help to take notes before you leave a spot -- impressions, things for further prayer, and so on. Even if you do nothing but pray together with the others you're with, you've taken a major step in loving the people there and in setting things spiritually right.

Prayerwalks work best when there's a definite starting time and a definite end time, when all of the prayerwalkers meet together. At the start, they talk together about any specific questions or tips, and have a joint prayer. Then they break up and go to their areas (it's okay if there's overlap). At the end, they do a semi-formal debriefing, sharing what they saw and experienced, and any new prayer concerns. They might then go somewhere to eat and fellowship.

In prayerwalks, we pray in detail, care in detail, and learn in detail. And hopefully, listen to God in detail.

Another helpful practice is that of having a prayer team do a mini-prayerwalk of the grounds of the church before anyone else arrives on Sunday. The team walks around the property of the church building, in the parking lot, along each row of seats in the sanctuary, then in the altar area, the sacristy, prayer stations, information racks, choir/band area, Sunday School classrooms, the fellowship hall, and the doorway, praying for those who would be in each of these places, that the Spirit would work in them and that lives would change for Christ. The tour usually ends with a prayer session with the minister and the worship leaders before the service begins. It can also be done before events at the church. An especially interesting account of the effects of such walks is given by Glenn McDonald, in the book **Imagining A Church In the Spirit** (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 70. He discovered the difference such diligent and thorough prayer had on his congregation and on himself.

A Praying Place for the Congregation

In past eras when crime inside churches was rare, the church sanctuaries were open most, and often all, of the time, ready for anyone with spiritual needs to come in and pray in peace. As with everything else nowadays, the fears, expense, staffing and effort to do that is too much for most congregations. But then, where can we pray? Anywhere, I suppose, but the rest of our lives and our world get in the way. There is still a need for a place to go, set aside for the purpose of praying, set up to help us in the act of praying. Often, this would be an outdoor area, such as at a riverside (Acts 16:13), or (as in Korea) on a hill on or near the site, or (as for the English) in a garden, or (especially in Africa) under large shady trees, for morning prayer and meditation. A few believer's groups have put praying spaces and prayer vigil sites in unexpected places, along the mean streets, in the shopping malls and outlet centers, and in the hubs of hedonism.

Prayer Rooms

A growing proportion of churches are setting aside a special room solely for the purpose of prayer. There are several models for this, each reflecting a different approach to prayer. These are places to *actually pray*, rather than places to think about or learn about prayer.

In the **prayer closet** model, a small room is chosen. It is designed to be a private room for prayer, though it needs to be large enough for at least two so a comforting presence can be given to those who need it, or perhaps for prayers of confession. This style is best when it is in a stripped-down form : a padded kneeler, a basic altar-like area with a cross on or behind it, a pair of soft-seated folding chairs, a box of tissues. A less basic approach would add sound-deadening walls or sound-canceling headphones to provide maximum silence for the praying person. Some churches would find the prayer closet to be too individualistic, a me-and-God way of faith, but if it is part of a congregation's wider prayer practices, it does not have to be so. Most churches lack the space or money for much more than this sort of a room; it is sometimes quite literally a former utility closet.

In the **prayer room** model, the room is large enough to do some walking around in, maybe large enough for several different things to be happening at once. It always has an outside door (so it can be used when the rest of the building is locked), but may not have an inside door (for security reasons). It may have the walls set up in sections, each dedicated to some different aspect of prayer : prayer for missions and missionaries in one section, prayer for the church's staff in another, still another for posting prayer requests. Other spots would have icons, headphone music and art for contemplative prayer, or a place for answered prayers and other thanksgivings, or a section for prayer journaling with a table, pad, pencils and such, or perhaps even an "E.R." section with assigned prayer ministers and an emergency phone for stat-calling a prayer helper if one is not there. If the room is large enough, there may be a labyrinth that courses through a changing set of prayer challenges and hard questions about life, prayer, and God. Noone that I know of has the whole idea in effect. Some *partial* varieties of this model are found among the larger non-denominational congregations, and in several urban prayer ministries. It is quite adaptable to places outside of the parish grounds, and for use by people who are allergic to churchy formats.

A report on one church's prayer room was found in the Covenant Companion magazine, Feb 2005
(<http://www.covchurch.org/cov/companion/article/0502HoursofPrayer.pdf>). The report is great, but I most love the photos of what this type of mid-sized prayer room looks like, right down to the note-laden walls and ceilings, and the "sin shredder". A wonderfully glorious mess, made by people simply giving themselves over to God.

The oldest of the current models is that of the **prayer chapel**, most commonly found in parishes of the 'liturgical' churches. It is set up like a small sanctuary, with an altar that has the Bible and (actual or symbolic) Eucharist elements, sometimes a baptismal font, hymnals, and (unfortunately) rows of pews. The walls would have stations of the cross, or icons or other contemplative faith-art, or congregationally-made paintings and banners. The chapel room can be used for small weddings and specialized worship services. (Some see that as an advantage, others as a problem.) While this model is fine with liturgicals like

me, for many others its churchy atmosphere will cause the wrong kind of discomfort.

Prayer stations

A "prayer station" is usually a place set aside for prayer in the back or sides of the worship hall / sanctuary. It can be set up with a combination of candles, crosses, icons, Scripture passages, devotional questions, a prayer notebook (for sharing thoughts and asking questions), a box for prayer requests, photos, art, prayer concerns lists, video images, music (through headphones), and a soft place to kneel or sit. (You don't need to have all of these, just what is right for your church.) Have in it only what's directly for use in prayer and meditation; it is dedicated to and focused **only** on prayer. It can be made of, or include, a portable kneeler / altar. Many places that have prayer stations allow people to use the stations freely, even during worship services, sermons, classes, and meetings. There may even be a trained prayer helper "on duty" to pray with you. This not only shows prayer's high priority, but (more importantly) puts this space at the ready for the moments when the Spirit is touching us. There must be strict rules, though, against using it as an area to chat in. There are other places for that. If other people are led to pray there, they will see the chatterers and walk away.

One or more of these options may suit your parish especially well. A congregation with a place for prayer in its churchly life needs a place for prayer in its churchly facilities.

Prayer Information Center

There's also a need for a place where anyone can find information about prayer and prayer ministries. The best place for this is somewhere near the place set aside for prayer, but not directly *in* it (unless it's part of a large-style prayer room). Do you want to learn more about:

- the church's prayer opportunities and prayer leaders?
- prayer in the Bible?
- what prayer is and why Christians pray?
- prayer disciplines?
- answers to prayer, as reported by church members?
- how to get in touch with a prayer chain or with intercessors?
- devotional materials?
- signup boards for a prayer vigil?

If your church is serious about prayer, it needs a place where people can do their own self-starting on the road to a prayerful life, a place that is ready when they need it. Prayer can be safe, easy, and natural for people to do. A wise congregation will give people every opportunity to do it, and take down any barriers that might stop them.

Prayer Walls and Boards

One of the tools that praying parishes have found most helpful is the prayer wall or bulletin board. It's space set aside for posting what's been happening on a specific prayer concern

of the congregation, usually where the prayer information is. The news may be an update on the condition of a cancer patient. It may be word from former members who moved to Arizona, that they've settled in safely. It may be praising God for a new job, or for healing, or for a new baby. When they go to or leave worship services, people will see the board, and thus also see that the prayers are having an impact. It gives everyone something to praise about. A few pastors have tried to use it as a place to put thinly-disguised announcements or commentaries; when that's done, the wall becomes distrusted or ignored and won't have its intended effect.

Prayer Calendars

Most people have a life that's so complex and hard to plan that they just can't get around to setting aside the time to pray about specific concerns of the parish. Or, they're like me : extremely forgetful. For those people, a **prayer calendar** can be a useful tool. These can be in the church newsletter, at the prayer information area, and/or handed out. On the prayer calendar, each day is set aside for a specific prayer on one specific matter, then the next day another prayer on another matter, then another on another matter, and so on. On one sample week, prayers would be for :

1. discernment for the district/synod/presbytery as it makes decisions;
2. the parish's teen outreach;
3. the church in Madagascar that they may reach those who do not believe;
4. the churches in Camden NJ, coping with grinding poverty;
5. a new church being planted in the Tidewater of Virginia;
6. a write-in day, when you pray for peace in your son's family.
7. for the parish nurse ministry in your church.

The next week would have a different set of prayers tied into each day, covering the same wide span of things universal to personal. (This way, the prayers stay balanced instead of narrowed-down to one's own main interests or needs.)

Prayer vigils

vigil [< Latin (= watchful, alert), < hypoth. Indo-European *wegeli-* (lively, alert); akin to English *watch*]

To be on a vigil is to be wakeful for a purpose. To the ancient Romans, that could be to stand guard, spy on the activities of a possible enemy, or prepare for a holy occasion. Originally, the desire to take part in the holy occasion is so strong that you can't wait for it to happen, which means you're so full of determination that waiting and getting ready is *all* you can do, to the neglect of sleep or food. You don't want to miss a second of it, you want to be there even for the preludes or the first sunbeams.

A *prayer* vigil (or prayer watch) happens when someone(s) get that way about praying It can be done individually, but it's usually done by a group of people who set it up to make sure there is always someone praying. The Moravians at Herrnhut were able to keep it up

for over a hundred years. Most churches and ministries would have trouble doing it for a hundred hours. Today's vigils are done to hold a specific matter in prayer before God. Usually, it's to prepare for a specific action, such as reaching out in witness for Christ, starting a ministry with the poor, making a major decision, or supporting a broader Christian ministry or mission. Traditional church vigils for holy days are not really 'prayer' vigils because so much else is involved, but they do contain much prayer.

To start a vigil, someone has to want it passionately enough to get 8 or more people to commit at the start. (These early joiners help shape and lead the vigil.) That group must decide what the vigil's focus will be, and stick to it. It's important to get the full support of a church pastor. Once that is done, it's a good idea to prepare a written guide that tells what a prayer vigil is (assume they don't know), what this vigil is being done for, how long it will run, and how they can take part in it. Also, it should tell them who to talk to about it. Have one focal place for the vigil, where people know they can go to be part of it. This place can be a sanctuary or a prayer chapel, or even an outdoor site. The place must be fairly quiet, worshipful, and easy to get to. Many can be there at any one time (in fact, plan that there would be times when many will be there), but there should always be someone there for the entire vigil. Privately encourage those who can't make it there to pray at home, according to the guide's schedule. Try to involve prayer-people from other churches, especially those from churches your church doesn't normally relate to.

Prayer Chains

Prayer chains are among the most common of prayer activities among congregations. The idea is simple : when there are prayer needs in the congregation, rather than wait until Sunday, get praying on them now by spreading the concerns by way of the telephone. It's simple, and almost everyone has the time to do it. But how does it work?

(1) Ask around.

- See if there isn't a prayer chain already. If there is, join it, and talk to its coordinator/leader about its expansion.
- Most active churchgoers already know what a prayer chain is, though most of them have never been part of one. Tell the people in the worship services, Bible studies and small groups that you're starting one.
- while there needs to be at least a few people who have a mature faith, it's also a good idea to seek a few newcomers as well. Invite the folks who drop their children off for Sunday School and then leave (that's right -- stand out there among the cars -- but be careful or you might need prayers for healing !). Or, invite someone who is receiving services from the church.

(2) Create prayer-chain 'trees' -- a paper outline of who will pass the prayer requests to whom, with names and phone numbers. Each 'branch' should have at least three and no more than 10 people on it; when there's more, create a new branch. This tree, with numbers, is to be given to each member of the chain.

(3) The coordinator/leader calls the first person on each branch with the message. The first one on the branch passes it to the next; if that person is unavailable, try the next one on that branch until you talk to an actual person and pass the requests along, who should pass it on to the next person on the branch. When passing along the requests, specifically say "I'm calling for the prayer chain, and these are our current requests :". Then give the message. Then end the call with a goodbye or God bless.

(4) NO CHATTING, and NO ADDING DETAILS beyond those passed along. PERIOD. Chatting and added details are the stuff of rumors, and a prayer chain must never become a rumor mill (James 1:26). It's true of male and female, young and old alike : the more talk, the more gossip. If you know (or think you know) further details, keep them to yourself no matter how strong the urge is to share them. It's the coordinator/leader's responsibility to speak to the person being prayed for about what to tell the prayer chain, when there is question. If it's not in the message, assume there's a reason it's not. Stick strictly to the message. Also, no word should be spread on or off the chain about who asked for the prayer; that, too, is private information. Such tight limits may sound un-friendly, but experience shows that it's extremely important.

If you've got a group of people who are 'highly-wired' (have email and use it once a day or more), then email can be a good way to chain them together, by way of a formal newsgroup or by just a cc list. This has a potential advantage in that it can more easily involve former members in distant places and time zones.

Praying That Non-Believers May Believe

Lots of churches talk about evangelism, outreach, etc. blah blah blah, but few actually do much of it. There are lots of reasons for that. But one of the key reasons may be that we're not praying for the Spirit to bear witness to those that do not believe.

One way to put such prayers into practice is to make a simple ritual for it. At your church's altar, prayer station, or other dedicated place for prayer, have a small area with pad and pen, a basket and candles. Then tell people how to use this area : write down the name of someone you care about who is 'missing' from the faith, put that name into the basket, pray for them to have faith in Christ, and then light a candle for them. The prayer circles/chains/ministries of the church will also pray for each of the 'missing' persons in the basket. The candle gives each participant a way to 'act out' their prayer, with the newly-lit candle as a symbol of the light of Christ lighting up the lives of the non-believer. The hope and expectation is that the participants keep praying for the 'missing' person, and maybe even find the courage to use natural oportunities for bearing a more specific witness for Christ.

Another way is to hold specialized prayer meetings. For instance, hold prayer nights for educators, health workers, legal professionals, high school students, or sales staffers. Hold them at appropriate locations other than church grounds, to better build bridges to them. Get the word out about the special night and invite broadly everyone in that field. The

purpose is to pray about the needs of that specialized concern; this is no time to lay an evangelistic gospel rap on them or to hand out tracts. But it is a place where people in that specialty can see others eagerly and openly bringing their full Christian faith to bear on their field. And that can be a good living witness. Even if they don't believe, they may want to pray, and they may want the prayers of others. That's a start; the Spirit will use it.

The term 'missing' is "borrowed" from Jim Henderson, and many good ideas can be found in his Off the Map idealab (<http://www.off-the-map.org/>).

Closing the Back Door

A slightly different approach is needed for closing the congregation's back door : the people who just stop coming but are not going to another Christian fellowship. Some of these have burned out from doing too much. Some of them are ill or just tired from age. Most congregations have at least a few that leave because they have been burned by the church itself and by other members. **Most of the people who leave simply don't think it's worth the effort to come anymore.** Each reason demands a different response. But there is one thing that the congregation can do in all of these cases, and any others : pray for each of them.

Some congregations even send letters to them after a year, saying, "we're still praying for you". But if you asked the people responsible for such prayer a month later, if they were honest with you, they'd probably say, "yes, once, when we sent the letter". And then they forgot about praying for that person. **That is not prayer support!** Those responsible for such prayers, and anyone else who has a burden to continue to pray for that person, need to keep praying. How long? Until they come back to the congregation, or any other Christian fellowship. Until someone finds out that the back-door leaver is somewhere taking action on their belief in Christ. Until the ball has been picked up by others who are with them in Christ. This kind of caring persistence is key to closing the back door exit from church life.

Some resources on prayer in the congregation :

Bjorn Pedersen, *Face To Face With God In Your Church : Establishing A Prayer Ministry* (Augsburg, 1995)

Alvin VanderGriend w. Edith Bajema, *The Praying Church Sourcebook* (Church Development Resources, 1997)

Steve Hawthorne and **Graham Kendrick**, *Prayerwalking* (Creation House, 1993)

Douglas Kamstra, *The Praying Church Idea Book* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2001)

Ask Yourself

You've read here, and perhaps in the sites on the prayer link list and the listed books on prayer, about a lot of ways a congregation can become prayerful.

1. Do any of these ideas seem well-suited to your congregation? Why?
2. Are there one or two of these ideas that your congregation can quickly put in place?
3. Would any of these ideas have special obstacles to overcome in your congregation?
4. Was there a time in your congregation's past when prayer meant more to congregational life than it does now? In what ways did this higher priority show itself? Are those ways still worth doing today?

Personal site: <http://members.aol.com/rlongman1/longman.html>
<http://www.spirithome.com/sitemap.html> (Spirithome.com site map)
<http://www.spirithome.com/foreword.html> (about Spirithome.com)
<http://www.spirithome.com/refindex.html> (subject index)
If you like this site, please link to it, and tell others about it.

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