



This material has been provided by Asbury Theological Seminary in good faith of following ethical procedures in its production and end use.

The Copyright law of the united States (title 17, United States code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain condition specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to finish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be *“used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.”* If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

**By using this material, you are consenting to abide by this copyright policy. Any duplication, reproduction, or modification of this material without express written consent from Asbury Theological Seminary and/or the original publisher is prohibited.**

### **Contact**

B.L. Fisher Library  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
204 N. Lexington Ave.  
Wilmore, KY 40390

**B.L. Fisher Library’s Digital Content**  
[place.asburyseminary.edu](http://place.asburyseminary.edu)



**Asbury Theological Seminary**  
205 North Lexington Avenue  
Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

800.2ASBURY  
[asburyseminary.edu](http://asburyseminary.edu)

## **ABSTRACT**

### **OVERCOMING THE OMISSION:**

# **A STUDY IN DETERMINING THE FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS AND VALUES THAT LEAD TO THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT**

by

John L. Whitsett

One of the most obvious characteristics of the first followers of Jesus was a clear commitment to corporate prayer—a practice that infused their fledgling movement with a sense of divine power and enabled it to impact a culture that was largely indifferent, if not outright hostile, in a powerful fashion. Throughout church history, one of the common denominators of the renewing work of God is a return to this time-honored practice. Today in North America, with its cultural undercurrent of individualism, secularism, and naturalism, prayer has largely become an individual pursuit to the detriment of corporate prayer. The purpose of this dissertation is to discover the underlying beliefs and values that assist in the effective implementation of corporate prayer in a local church in North America. This phenomenological study sought to determine threads of commonality by interviewing pastoral team members from thirteen local churches selected by purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques. A three-step coding process of open, axial, and selective analysis yielded three major findings: (1) An initial commitment to corporate prayer was driven largely by a previous life experience of personal brokenness in the life of the leader more than a key scriptural endorsement or theological conviction; (2) corporate prayer requires intentional,

relentless, and effective pastoral leadership if it is going to be embedded into a local church's culture; and, (3) a major outgrowth of corporate prayer is an enhanced sense of congregational health as well as the bolstered growth and spiritual maturity of participants.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

OVERCOMING THE OMISSION:

A STUDY IN DETERMINING THE FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS AND VALUES

THAT LEAD TO THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

OF CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT

presented by

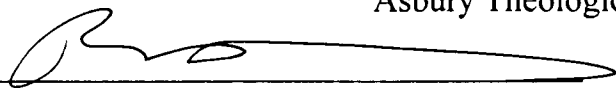
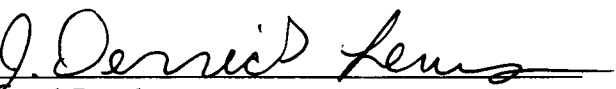
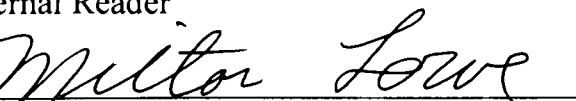
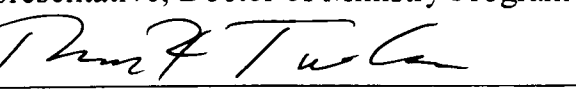
John L. Whitsett

has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY degree at

Asbury Theological Seminary

 Mentor	April 22, 2013 Date
 Internal Reader	April 22, 2013 Date
 Representative, Doctor of Ministry Program	April 22, 2013 Date
 Dean of the Beeson Center	April 22, 2013 Date

OVERCOMING THE OMISSION:  
A STUDY IN DETERMINING THE FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS AND VALUES  
THAT LEAD TO THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

John L. Whitsett

May 2013

© 2013

John L. Whitsett

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	x
CHAPTER 1 PROBLEM .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Purpose.....	8
Research Questions.....	8
Research Question #1 .....	8
Research Question #2 .....	9
Research Question #3 .....	9
Research Question #4 .....	9
Research Propositions.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	10
Ministry Intervention .....	13
Context.....	13
Methodology .....	14
Participants.....	14
Instrumentation .....	15
Variables .....	15
Data Collection .....	16
Data Analysis .....	16
Generalizability.....	16

Theological Foundation .....	17
Overview.....	28
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE.....	29
Introduction.....	29
A Brief History of Corporate Prayer.....	34
The Early Church Fathers .....	35
The Middle Ages and the Example of the Waldensians .....	36
Reformation and Post-Reformation .....	38
The First, Second, and Third Great Awakening .....	39
Recent Impact of Corporate Prayer.....	43
Corporate Prayer Established as a Primary Pursuit by the Early Church .....	45
Corporate Prayer as an Activity Consistent with Human Nature .....	49
Not Just Prayer but Corporate Prayer .....	49
The Nature of <i>Ecclesia</i> .....	51
Corporate Prayer as an Expression of One’s Longing for Significance .....	53
A Biblical Account of Praying People Empowering a Significant Outcome .....	54
Corporate Prayer as a Demonstration of Love for God and Others.....	56
A Biblical Example of Love Motivating Corporate Prayer .....	57
Another Scriptural Example of Love Motivating Corporate Prayer.....	59
Not Just Love for God and Others but Also Love for Each Other .....	60
The Connection between a Deepening Love and Personal Spiritual Growth .....	60
Corporate Prayer as a Source of Divine Power Sparked by Agreement.....	63
Biblical Promises Regarding the Power of Agreement .....	65



Historical Voices Regarding the Power of Agreement.....	66
Agreement as Embodied in the Metaphor of Family.....	69
Agreement as Embodied in the Metaphor of Body .....	70
A Scriptural Example of the Body/Family Metaphor in Action.....	71
Agreement as a Springboard for Spiritual Power .....	72
Corporate Prayer as a Measure of a Church’s Spiritual Condition.....	75
Corporate Prayer as a Tangible Expression of Dependence upon God.....	81
The Connection between Dependence and the Furtherance of God’s Kingdom .....	84
A Scriptural Example of Dependence Resulting in the Furtherance of God’s Kingdom .....	85
The Upper Room Principle .....	87
Corporate Prayer as a Means of Acquiring Divine Wisdom and Guidance .....	89
A Second Example of Corporate Prayer Utilized as a Source of Guidance.....	90
A Third Example of Corporate Prayer Utilized as a Source of Guidance.....	91
An Example from the Old Testament .....	93
Guidelines for Leading an Effective Corporate Prayer Gathering.....	93
Common Corporate Prayer Hazards .....	97
The Uniqueness of Leading Corporate Prayer.....	98
Establishing a Focus on God.....	101
Helping People Become of One Accord.....	103
Eliciting a Broad Base of Participation.....	108
Being Open and Maintaining Flexibility .....	111
Summary .....	112

Research Design.....	113
Conclusion .....	114
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	116
Problem and Purpose .....	116
Research Questions and/or Hypotheses .....	116
Research Question #1 .....	116
Research Question #2 .....	117
Research Question #3 .....	117
Research Question #4 .....	118
Population and Participants.....	118
Design of the Study.....	120
Instrumentation .....	121
Expert Review.....	122
Variables .....	122
Reliability and Validity.....	123
Data Collection .....	123
Data Analysis .....	124
Ethical Procedures .....	126
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	127
Problem and Purpose .....	127
Participants.....	128
Research Question #1 .....	128
Research Question #2 .....	137
Research Question #3 .....	144

Research Question #4 .....	153
Summary of Major Findings .....	161
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	163
Major Findings.....	163
Commitment to Corporate Prayer Driven by Personal Experience .....	165
The Need for Effective Pastoral Leadership.....	167
Spiritual Results from the Implementation of Corporate Prayer .....	170
Reflections on Research Propositions.....	172
Indelibly Marked by a Remarkable Incident .....	172
The Pastor as Primary Influencer of the Church.....	172
The Highly Effective, Evangelistic Church .....	175
Theology of the Holy Spirit and Commitment to Life Change .....	176
Socioeconomic Standing of Participants .....	177
Implications of the Findings .....	178
Recommendations for Further Study .....	180
Postscript.....	182
APPENDIXES	
A. E-Mail to Parachurch/Denominational Ministry Leaders.....	185
B. E-Mail to Prospective Participants.....	186
C. Belief and Values Extraction Protocol.....	188
D. Codes, Code Clusters, and Code Sets .....	190
E. A Detailed Accounting of the Use of Data Codes.....	196
WORKS CITED .....	202

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 3.1. Research Participants .....	120
Table 4.1. Formative Influences Code Cluster .....	138
Table 4.2. Leadership Skills Code Cluster.....	145

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure	Page
Figure 5.1. Continuum of Leadership Behavior .....	169

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any major project does not happen without the valued and helpful contributions of others. As I reflect on this effort, I realize I am the recipient of blessings that came my way long before I read the first piece of literature or conducted the first interview in conjunction with the research.

First, I am grateful to my parents, Don and Eleanor Whitsett, and my deceased grandparents, Jack and Neville Whitsett and Rev. A. C. and Bess Watkins, for the legacy of faith handed to me. It is fitting that a study exploring the underlying beliefs and values that inspire effective prayer in the local church be carried out by one who comes from a family where prayer and commitment to the local church was powerfully modeled.

Second, I give thanks to my wife, Angie, and our sons, Kevin and Collin, for the joy and support I receive from my relationship with them. The privilege of being Angie's husband and Kevin and Collin's father is far greater than any other title or honor that has, or ever will, come my way. Their belief in me and encouragement to "get this thing done" was absolutely essential.

Third, I am appreciative of the staff and membership of the church I currently serve—the Lakeside Community Church of the Nazarene in Hastings, Nebraska. Thank you for picking up the slack and allowing me the freedom to enter in and truly pursue something that was not just an academic requirement but a heart passion. Serving with and among you reminds me how enjoyable ministry can be when exercised in a healthy setting and amongst a people who truly possess God's heart.

Finally, I give thanks to Ralph Waldo Beeson, the administrative and teaching team at the Beeson Center at Asbury Seminary, and the fellow members of my doctoral cohort for your generous investment in my personal and professional development. When

I started this journey, my primary motivation for returning to school was that I might *finish well*. With the submittal of this dissertation as the conclusion of this process, I realize each of you has powerfully imprinted me, and the prospect of finishing well is much more likely than it was when I showed up at an unfamiliar campus in the summer of 2008 without a clue as to what to expect. I have a greater appreciation for what the church can be and the incredible contribution it can make to the world. My longing to see it flourish and be an agent of God's kingdom presence is greater because of your investment in me.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM**

#### **Introduction**

On 11 September 2001, I watched in stunned horror as America came under attack from what everyone came to learn were radical Islamic terrorists. As the day played out, we realized the planes that flew into the World Trade Center and Pentagon did not do so by accident. Americans began to mobilize and turn to prayer. Personal and community activities were suspended so prayer gatherings could be coordinated and scheduled at churches all across the country.

Given that the attack happened on a Tuesday, I modified the midweek plans for the following evening of the church where I served as pastor. Many of my lay leaders and I wanted our energies and efforts to be given to a corporate prayer meeting for our country, its leaders, and the families of the many victims who perished as a result of the attacks. The resulting prayer meeting had over a hundred people in attendance in comparison to the handful of people that typically attended prayer meeting on an average Wednesday night. As I guided that gathering and led the people through a number of appropriate exercises and prayer prompts, a variety of thoughts came to my mind:

Why does it take something like planes flying into buildings to cause us to recognize the importance of corporate prayer and give ourselves to it? If prayer is such a source of spiritual power—if it is such a valuable enterprise to utilize in the face of life's difficulties and problems—why don't we turn to it on a more regular basis? Why do I, as a pastor, struggle to get my people to come together and pray? Is it not every bit as needed at times when our nation has not come under attack, when there hasn't been the massive loss of life, and when we don't feel as vulnerable and insecure?

As I continued to reflect, my mind continued to wonder why people who profess to believe in the power of prayer—many of whom have very seasoned and established



personal prayer lives and openly herald its many benefits and life-changing possibilities, are often so disinterested in assembling specifically for the purpose of corporate prayer. I asked myself what would need to happen for a congregation to become good at corporate prayer, for it to become an established and integral part of the life of a body of believers rather than something turned to in a pinch or as a last resort. I pondered what would need to take place for corporate prayer to become an instinctive, normal, and habitual thing rather than an exceptional enterprise driven largely by extraordinary events or desperate circumstances. As I contemplated these issues, I realized I was considering some things that would not quickly fade away but would linger and echo in my soul. A decade later these thoughts would form the foundation of this research project.

A certain amount of the struggle to mobilize North American Christians to have meaningful involvement in the practice of corporate prayer undoubtedly stems from a lack of adequate modeling. George Bakalov reflects on the minimal commitment to corporate prayer in North America:

People have not been taught and trained how to open their ... mouths, how to release their prayer language and how to begin to flow in the Spirit. They have been robbed, mostly by their ignorant leaders, from one of the most precious and powerful means of releasing the power of God on the earth.

Given the preponderant affluence of the North American culture, Christ followers on this continent typically do not sense the kind of desperation that drives them to God or the kind of hopelessness and distress that impels them to petition God corporately. As a result, corporate prayer has not been modeled or intentionally practiced. Additionally, the lack of emphasis on corporate prayer in twenty-first-century North America can be traced to a loss of awe for the holy that is subverted by thought patterns that mirror the surrounding society (Price 15). This observation is authenticated by the presence of three

distinct mind-sets that are well established in the North American culture: (1) individualism, (2) secularism, and (3) naturalism.

Individualism is the cultural value that stresses the primacy and importance of personal goals to the exclusion of anything that would interfere with pursuing them wholeheartedly. Individualism stresses independence, self-reliance, and personal liberty. The championing of individualism de-emphasizes the worth and importance of group, societal, or communal pursuits.

Bruce M. Hartung expresses the way individualism was manifest in his life:

Growing up in ... prototypical American fashion, I learned how to tough it out. The idea was to keep things personal to oneself. To bring people into my struggles by talking about them, or into the struggles of my family, was considered ... out of bounds.... Sharing one's concerns could be seen as complaining, attention-getting, or pleas for sympathy. To come to church was a time to show oneself off at one's best. In public worship some of the expectation was to look good, as if everything was all right even when it was not. In this context, the notion of the church as a community was not fostered. (309)

In a culture of rampant individualism, people typically go through life portraying an air of invulnerability and follow collective pursuits only if they believe they can personally gain from them. The North American church without a doubt exists in a highly individualistic culture—one that elevates the value of the individual over and above that of the community. As a result, many deem the idea of coming together corporately for the purpose of prayer as unnecessary. People see no reason to gather with others when they can connect with God at their own convenience and in their own way. Corporate prayer is at odds with this way of thinking:

Participating regularly in corporate prayer begins to take out the individualistic assumption that Christianity is only about me and my relationship with God.... It helps us discover that our lives as followers of Christ are tied up with one another's. (Dever)

Any activity that confronts and challenges the embedded individualism within North American culture is destined to struggle. Corporate prayer certainly issues such a challenge.

One additional, and unfortunate, way individualism expresses itself is in a biased and flawed interpretation of the Bible. People marked with the imprint of individualism miss the fact “that most of what the Bible says about prayer is addressed to groups, people meeting together, to pray” (Patterson). Prayer is not pictured in the Bible as being a singularly personal pursuit, for numerous verses in the Bible advocate the importance and role of corporate prayer—most notably the book of Acts, which gives a snapshot of the earliest followers of Jesus and how they fleshed out their faith. The image of corporate prayer from that account depicts it as an integral part of how they expressed their faith, an essential element of their identity, and a vital lifeline to which they turned on a regular basis. In the early Church, prayer was something the church family routinely came together to do. It was not the only thing they did, but it was one of the first and most instinctive things they did. The early followers of Jesus routinely turned to corporate prayer and utilized it as a source of power and means of breakthrough when faced with overwhelming circumstances. They considered corporate prayer an essential element of the meaning of being a part of his body. From all evidence it was woven into the fabric of their lives and regarded as an indispensable component of how their faith was expressed.

A second cultural influence that mitigates the value of corporate prayer is secularism, which is the idea that anything of religious substance, while not necessarily harmful, is functionally irrelevant. The secularization of society “is at the root of most of our difficulties with prayer. For many of us, on an almost subconscious level, there is a

lack of confidence that something like prayer can actually get anything done” (Patterson). People stamped by secularism tend to become “frenetically over-committed and so full of blind activity that we become too busy and too tired to pray” (Patterson). In an increasingly secular society with lives that are full of things to do, prayer is shoved to the sidelines.

Closely related to secularism is a third influence known as naturalism—the lingering idea that underlies modern science and traces back to the thinking and work of Charles Darwin. Naturalism says that every observable cause and effect can be explained on the basis of natural causes and anything considered supernatural is either false or can be explained by entirely natural means: “Advances in science and technology no doubt contribute to our confusion about prayer.... Modern skepticism taints prayer. We breathe in an atmosphere of doubt” (Yancey 15). In a culture with a strong undercurrent of naturalism, prayer becomes little more than a sentimental exercise. The idea of setting aside time to pray with others is regarded as sheer foolishness: “Prayer is a subversive act performed in a world that constantly calls faith into question” (51). It is reduced to a personal and private pursuit with the aim of providing inner peace or enhancing feelings of well-being rather than a collective enterprise in which God’s people engage in order that they might advance his purposes in the world.

James K. A. Smith says all cultural institutions, even though they present themselves as benign, have a charged religious nature. These institutions “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, [they] make us into certain kinds of people” (25). People who would not think of themselves as secular or proponents of naturalism often embrace secularist or naturalist ideas at a precognitive level. Consequently, while most

people in churches would not classify themselves as either of these terms, they often reflect and demonstrate thought patterns consistent with those ideologies because of the imprint of the various cultural institutions with which they regularly interact. Since North Americans do not live in a cultural vacuum and these thought patterns are very prevalent within the various institutions in the prevailing culture, they undoubtedly influence and shape the value, or lack thereof, that many people in North America place on the practice of corporate prayer.

Thomas Long reinforces this notion when he talks about the challenges of communicating to people today. He says, “It would be a mistake ... to imagine that we are preaching to blank tablets on which the gospel can be freshly inscribed” (77). Most North American churches are filled with people who, if asked, would indicate they have a strong personal belief in the value and effectiveness of prayer but who have been deeply imprinted with the ideas of individualism, secularism, and naturalism. As a result, people typically perceive prayer as an exclusively personal pursuit: “As long as we view prayer simply as the means of maintaining our own Christian lives, we will not fully understand what it is really supposed to be” (Murray 7). A great need to expand the prevailing understanding of prayer and embrace its corporate dimension exists among North American Christ followers.

One of the consequences of this imprint from surrounding society is that corporate prayer often struggles to generate broad-based participation in local churches: “If people really believed in God’s unconditional love and awesome power, they would pray. It’s a question of values. Our culture values quick results from self-effort” (Duke 59). As a result, “prayer is the most-often talked about, but the least practiced discipline in the Christian life” (Henderson 24). Gatherings primarily or specifically for the purpose of

prayer typically engender only marginal interest from the church constituency and are some of the lowest-attended programs or activities the church offers. Lewis O. Thompson is more blunt in his assertion: “In many a church, the prayer-meeting is looked upon as a fifth wheel to its machinery” (17). A tremendous disconnect exists between what many church attendees say they believe and what their participation, or lack thereof, suggests is actually the case. This study sought to explore this curiosity in hopes of helping local churches struggling to mobilize corporate prayer become more effective and to tap more fully the divine power the Bible indicates is available through the practice.

When Jim Cymbala’s book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* was published in 1997, it became one of the more talked-about books in evangelical circles. In fact, it went on to receive a number of awards from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. In it, Cymbala tells the story of how the Brooklyn Tabernacle, a struggling congregation with dilapidated facilities and a small core of discouraged and worn-out people, was transformed into a spiritual powerhouse that impacted its community and became an agent of numerous stories of incredible life change.

Cymbala points to one of the key moments of transformation as being early on in his ministry when he determined to lead his people to be a praying people:

Quietly but forcefully, in words heard not with my ear but deep within my spirit, I sensed God speaking: *If you ... will lead my people to pray and call upon my name,... I will supply all ... that’s needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response* [original emphasis]. (25)

He continues, informing his flock what the Lord impressed upon him a few weeks later:

*From this day on, the prayer meeting will be the barometer of our church. What happens on Tuesday night will be the gauge by which we will judge success or failure* [original emphasis].... This is the engine that will drive the church.... Tuesday night is what it’s really all about. (27-28)

The book goes on to picture corporate prayer as being precisely what he said it should be—the engine that drives the church. In the process he makes a compelling argument for it being established as a centerpiece of contemporary church life.

God wants every congregation to be a source of spiritual power. He wants it to be a place that breaks shackles and gloriously transforms lives. He wants it to be a place that facilitates breakthroughs and empowers deliverance. He wants it to be a place that advances his kingdom and furthers his redemptive mission. He wants it to be a place that effectively impacts the world for his glory and honor. The hope of helping the North American church realize these possibilities served as the primary motivation for this study.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify threads of commonality relating to the underlying beliefs, values, and life experiences from the pastoral team members of exemplar churches that allow them to implement corporate prayer initiatives that generate widespread participation and involvement by their congregants.

### **Research Questions**

The research centered on investigating churches that have effectively mobilized corporate prayer within their congregational lives. Four research questions helped discover these answers.

#### **Research Question #1**

What key beliefs and foundational values are present in local churches that effectively implement corporate prayer that most contribute to its elevated priority?

**Research Question #2**

How did pastoral team members arrive at these beliefs and values, and what specific life experiences contributed to their embracing of them?

**Research Question #3**

How have those beliefs and values been conveyed and transmitted so they have become shared congregational beliefs and values?

**Research Question #4**

What specific activities or practices, based on those beliefs and values, have been implemented that have proven effective in generating broad-based congregational involvement in corporate prayer?

**Research Propositions**

While research is a journey into discovery, each researcher approaches the task with assumptions about what he or she will find: “Phenomenologists ... believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise” (Groenewald 7). As I began this journey, the following ideas and themes were presuppositions I believed would emerge from my investigation:

1. The pastor that leads a church that effectively implements corporate prayer has been indelibly marked by a remarkable incident where he or she personally encountered the power of prayer. Either personally or corporately, he or she felt a sense of desperation and believed no other options existed than to mobilize an army of prayer warriors and turn to God in prayer. After taking this action, God responded in dramatic, life-altering fashion.

2. The pastor or pastoral team in a church that effectively implements corporate prayer has become the primary influencer or influencers of the church so that their



personal convictions have been adopted by the broader body. Their length of service to the church, or a sense of the perceived value of their ministry on the part of a majority of the congregation, has resulted in a commitment to the practice woven into the church's organizational culture.

3. Churches that effectively implement corporate prayer have successfully accessed the lives of the people in their community and are highly effective evangelistically. People who have previously and more recently felt a deep sense of desperation and been delivered by the power and grace of God are more prone to intercede and invest themselves in an activity that invites his power to be active in the lives of others and the affairs of the world.

4. Churches that effectively implement corporate prayer have a robust theology of the Holy Spirit and are committed to being an agent of positive life change. Their belief in the personal work of the Holy Spirit coupled with their longing to see lives transformed drives them to pour themselves out and plead for God's involvement in the lives of their friends, family members, community, and world.

5. Churches that effectively implement corporate prayer are characterized by people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. A basic sense of desperation and vulnerability leads people to embrace corporate prayer much more readily than people whose lives are marked by abundance and comfort.

### **Definition of Terms**

While most people have an understanding of *prayer* and know the word *corporate* refers to a collaborative or collective endeavor of some sort, the placing of these two terms in connection with each other can be a source of confusion. For the purposes of this study and in the interest of clarity, the term *corporate prayer* refers to a scheduled

communal church activity or gathering specifically and primarily for the purpose of approaching God, communicating requests to him, expressing praise and adoration, confessing sin, or thanking him. The limitation of the words *specifically* and *primarily* means those times when the pastor leads his or her people in prayer during worship would not fall under this definition. The limitation of the word *scheduled* would exclude those instances when two or three believers, while discussing a problem, stop and pray together about the situation. While corporate prayer can take on a variety of different forms and be carried out in a number of ways, the bottom line is that the gathering is (1) collective in nature, and (2) has been set up especially for the purpose of prayer as opposed to worship, education, relationship building, or any of the legitimate reasons churches schedule events.

For the purpose of this study, *beliefs* and *values* also require definition. A *belief* is a personal conviction a person holds as to the truth of a certain idea or notion. A *value* is the relative importance a person places on a particular belief in relation to other beliefs. Not everything a person believes can be of high value. People tend to act based on what they value, but they can only value ideas or notions that they first believe. Because of this deep-seated connection and linkage between *beliefs* and *values*, these two terms will often appear in tandem with each other throughout this study.

A *cultural factor* is an ingredient within the traditions and rules of behavior held by a defined group that contributes greatly to a particular result or situation. For instance a study involving Seventh-Day Adventists, who are typically strict vegetarians and very health conscious, indicated lower death rates from heart disease as compared to people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Key et al. 524S). Vegetarianism—a factor highly valued in the Seventh-Day Adventist cultural context—obviously contributed to this

outcome. Similarly, factors in the North American cultural context undoubtedly contribute to people's openness to the practice of corporate prayer or lack thereof.

*A phenomenological study* is one that explores the meaning of lived experiences of an individual or group as they relate to a specific concept or phenomenon:

“Phenomenological approaches ... are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom” (Lester 1). Drawn largely from the thinking of Edmund Husserl, the philosophical school of thought known as phenomenology rejects the notion that objects in the external world exist independently or that information about them is reliable. The only thing one can be sure of is how things appear or present themselves to their personal consciousness. Realities are viewed as *phenomena* and deemed as the only absolutely certain basis for research. As Thomas Groenewald states, “The operative word in phenomenological research is ‘describe.’ The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (5). The primary objective of a phenomenological study is to understand a certain phenomenon from the perspective of the person or persons involved. The data is assembled in narrative form and then analyzed in a way that allows key themes to be abstracted out and classified so the reader can come away with a better understanding of how a person or group feels to have that experience.

*An exemplar church* is one that incorporates a specific ministry practice—in this case corporate prayer—so effectively that it would become a model church or one that other congregations would conceivably seek to copy or emulate.

## **Ministry Intervention**

This study involved identifying congregations that have demonstrated an ability to rise above the gravitational pull of an individualistic society, to mobilize their people successfully, and to develop a vibrant and effective ministry of corporate prayer. The primary thrust of the research involved learning more about their respective ministry settings and the implementation of corporate prayer through a personal interview with a pastoral team member. Each interview utilized a series of open-ended questions tied to the study's research questions. By getting them to speak to some of the beliefs and values that have enabled them to experience a measure of success in this arena where so many churches seem to struggle, some common threads emerged. These common threads will hopefully prove insightful and helpful to pastors and laypeople with a heart for corporate prayer that are currently serving in churches struggling in this regard.

## **Context**

The context for this study is North American local churches. While the idea of mobilizing corporate prayer may be an issue for churches located in other parts of the world, this study was limited to North America because of the very individualistic nature of the prevailing culture. The local church does not exist in a cultural vacuum and the prevailing culture in North America is highly individualistic. I deemed these two factors so significant that input from congregations located in a different cultural context would not be helpful.

The denominational affiliation of the particular church, or lack thereof, was not a consideration. The challenge of mobilizing broad-based involvement in corporate prayer, as well as the information the study was seeking to obtain, are both issues that transcend

denominational boundaries. For this reason, I approached local churches from a variety of traditions within the stream of Protestantism.

Men and women who are members of the pastoral teams within these congregations supplied the data for this research. The responsibility for vision casting typically falls upon the pastoral staff. The working assumption behind this study is that churches effective in this arena have had a vision cast before them that has enabled them to embrace corporate prayer as an issue of importance and priority. As a result I sought the input and conclusions from individuals with hands-on involvement in this ministry role.

### **Methodology**

Because the data this study sought to uncover is tied to the lived experiences of the people involved, I used a phenomenological approach. The approach involved interviewing pastoral team members of the selected congregations using a semi-structured interview design called the beliefs and values extraction protocol. By allowing respondents to describe and share out of their experience and then classifying and carefully reflecting on their remarks, I anticipated key phenomena and threads of mutuality and agreement would emerge. I also hoped these points of commonality would be of assistance to local church leaders longing to see more vibrant participation in the corporate prayer lives of congregations struggling in this regard.

### **Participants**

The churches utilized for this study were selected through three different forms of nonprobability sampling. I made initial contacts by judgmental or purposive sampling, as pastors of churches that had been highlighted in a book, article, or publication as examples of having effectively mobilized their congregants in the practice of corporate

prayer. I expanded the list of potential participants by use of snowball sampling—a selection strategy where “group members identify additional members to be included in the sample” (Bickman and Rog 105). I did an Internet search on *corporate prayer* and looked for articles and books written on the topic as well as searched Web-sites dedicated to the topic of prayer mobilization. As a result of those efforts I compiled a list of individuals and asked each for the names and contact information of pastoral colleagues or churches they knew that had effectively implemented corporate prayer. Obviously, this list was refined through convenience sampling as individuals and churches had to agree to participate and consent to an interview.

### **Instrumentation**

The actual interview questions for the beliefs and values extraction protocol were drawn from the research propositions I developed in hopes the answers would either support or refute those ideas. However, the questions were intentionally left open-ended so preconceived notions and ideas would not taint the responses and so each interviewee could speak out of his or her experience. The means for collecting the data was through personal contact with the pastoral team members of the respective churches. Some contacts were by means of e-mail with a list of questions with their typed responses placed into a document for further analysis. Others interactions were by phone with the conversation recorded and then transcribed into a document that could be printed and analyzed.

### **Variables**

In every instance, the list of questions used to guide the format of the interview was the same. Obviously each conversation was unique, so I asked appropriate follow-up or clarifying questions that sought to bring understanding or to dig deeper into the

answers provided. However, I followed the same basic protocol to obtain the information from each individual. Additionally, I converted every conversation or correspondence into a document that was similar in form for the purposes of coding and analysis.

### **Data Collection**

After pastoral team members from the identified churches agreed to participate, I contacted each and offered them one of two response options—e-mail or phone conversation. I sent an e-mail to those who wished to respond electronically that contained the questions and asked them to reply with detailed responses by a certain date. For those who preferred a phone call, an appointment was set up and recorded. The phone conversations ranged in length from approximately twenty to forty minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

I converted the data from each online contact or phone conversation into an electronic document for the purpose of further analysis. I also assembled a journal that contained a transcript of each contact or conversation. The data then proceeded through three steps of coding: (1) open coding, where I identified and named the various categories that emerged from the data, (2) axial coding, where I sought to identify relationships and connections between categories, and (3) selective coding, where I identified and connected the remaining categories and subcategories to the core category or central phenomenon.

### **Generalizability**

Because (1) I selected the participants in the study by non-probability convenience sampling, (2) I built no randomization into the design, and (3) I restricted the research for this study to the North American context, this study has a somewhat limited generalizability. As Stan Lester explains, “Phenomenological studies make

detailed comments about individual situations which do not lend themselves to direct generalisation in the same way which is sometimes claimed for survey research” (2). The purpose of this study was not to find universal truths that can be widely applied but to understand the underlying circumstances that enable some churches to implement corporate prayer effectively in a cultural context that wars against the practice. For this reason congregations may find the insights gleaned to be of help and value to them in the effective implementation of corporate prayer in the local church setting. At the same time, because the work of God is so mysterious, a caution should be sounded. Anyone who reads this study should resist the temptation to reduce effectiveness in corporate prayer to some formulaic equation: Action one plus action two equals corporate prayer functioning in the church at a higher level. While I hope the fruit of this study will be a heightened effectiveness in the practice of corporate prayer for many congregations, the results should be interpreted as informational insights into the inner workings of these respective churches and these particular pastors and not necessarily as a prescription or recipe that guarantees success.

### **Theological Foundation**

Corporate prayer has a rich biblical history as a vital practice of God’s people. Particularly in the life of the early Church, Christ followers came together on a number of occasions solely for prayer. Even then, the practice of corporate prayer was not something new they invented but something adapted and updated from the Jewish religious tradition from which many of them came:

In trying to understand the place of prayer in the early Christian Church, we would do well to remember that the Church was born in the cradle of Judaism. Over the centuries the Church has developed its own forms and practices, but it did not have to invent new ones *ex nihilo*. (Booth 283)



Thus, the demonstration of corporate prayer carried out by the early Christians was a revision and variation of what they undoubtedly saw practiced in the Old Testament Scriptures by God's people on several occasions.

While the primary pattern in the Old Testament seems to be one in which God dealt with specific people on an individual basis, corporate prayer is not without precedent. Particularly on occasions that surrounded a recognized need for renewal or the dedication of a religiously significant facility, corporate prayer was very much a part of the life of the people of Israel.

Because "Genesis deals mainly with patriarchs and their families.... we do not find much material on corporate prayer until the people of God grow from a family to a nation" (Hamilton). The book of Exodus describes how the Hebrew people prayed and what they said when they did pray. Exodus 15 provides the account of Moses and his people's song in prayer to Yahweh after the Egyptian army perished in the Red Sea. This Scripture is the first instance of the Bible opening a window of insight into what went on when the Hebrew people came together corporately to encounter God. Exodus 17 recounts Moses, Aaron, and Hur overlooking the battle as Joshua leads Israel against the Amalekites. When one understands that "when people prayed in the Old and New Testaments, their most common posture was standing with their hands upraised" (Banks 26), the inevitable conclusion is that more is going on here than Moses merely getting some help holding up his staff. The staff had come to represent the power of God, and Moses' raising it before the Lord is, in effect, a petition seeking the Lord's blessing. When Moses lacked the strength to continue in his own power, Aaron and Hur came alongside and lent their support. This passage provides a picture of the intercessory

nature of corporate prayer—three men struggling together to secure the blessing of God for their countrymen involved in a fierce battle.

Once Israel gained a sense of identity as a nation, their religion became centered around the Tabernacle and, a number of years after they settled and were established in the Promised Land, the Temple. When one mentally envisions all that went on in these two settings, one can easily imagine the constant activity of people coming and going, offering up sacrifices with smoke ascending from the altar. One does not think of prayer as being one of the primary activities. In Isaiah 56:7, however—a passage Jesus cited and used as justification to explain his cleansing of the Temple—the house of God is held up as a place of prayer. Isaiah did not specify it as a *house of sacrifice* or a *house of priestly service*. He specified it as a *house of prayer*. While the Tabernacle and Temple were places where individual prayers were offered, they were also places where people came together to pray corporately.

For instance, in Luke 1:10, while the priest Zacharias offered up one of the daily incense offerings, the verse says a number of people were gathered outside the place where he was carrying out his duties and praying. This text, while taken from the New Testament, gives a snapshot of the common religious practices of people under the Old Testament system in that day. Quite clearly corporate prayer was a part of the life of the Temple. When Jesus said the Temple was to be a *house of prayer*, he was not redefining or reinterpreting its role but highlighting a key aspect of its originally intended purpose.

On repeated occasions, the Old Testament pictures people falling facedown and crying out to God (Num. 16:22; 1 Chron. 21:16; Ezra 10:1-2). In the book of Judges, each time a neighboring nation gained control and the situation deteriorated, Scripture says the people “cried out to the LORD” (Judg. 3:9, 6:7, NIV). Corporately, they prayed for a

deliverer and God raised up men such as Othniel and Gideon. As James Banks explains, “Falling facedown was a way of praying with humility, and whenever you see God’s people doing this in the Old Testament, they are praying together” (27). On each occasion, God responded mercifully to the people’s heartfelt confession, repentance, and prayer. Just as the events of 11 September 2001 resulted in a momentary passion for prayer on the part of most United States citizens, times of crisis often brought God’s people to their knees.

Another practice seen in Israel is the periodic setting aside of entire days so the whole nation could wait before God. Such days were scheduled on the brink of civil war during the period of the judges (Judg. 20:23), during the reign of King David when the ark of God was brought back to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:3), and at the dedication of the Temple at the completion of its construction during the reign of King Solomon (1 Kings 8:2). Much pomp and ceremony surrounded the latter two occasions, but clearly corporate prayer is a key ingredient in them. In fact, the account in 1 Kings 8 culminates by saying, “The king and all Israel with him” (v. 62), participated in the dedicatory activities, of which prayer was a central emphasis. Years later, when the Book of the Law was discovered in the Temple, Josiah assembled all the religious leaders of Israel and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord (2 Chron. 34:29-31).

At the dedication of the tent that would house the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, David led the people in a time of corporate prayer (1 Chron. 16:7-36; Ps. 105). Solomon, also, led the people in corporate prayer at the dedication of the temple. After the consecration of the priests and a time of praise, he lifted his voice and asked God to fill the temple (2 Chron. 6:14-42). The Bible says that when he finished praying, “fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the

glory of the LORD filled the temple” (2 Chron. 7:1), so much so that “the priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it” (2 Chron. 7:2). One of the key indicators of the importance of corporate prayer is the presence of the first person plural in many of the Psalms, a large number of which were created during the time of King David and utilized in the years following.

However, where corporate prayer shows up most powerfully in the Old Testament is in the post-exilic writings. Esther called for corporate prayer, along with fasting (4:16), when she faced the life-and-death decision of going before her husband the king. Ezra led corporate prayer (8:21-23, 9:1-15) that resulted in a corporate expression of repentance (chap. 10). The prophet Zephaniah sounded a call for the people of Israel to “gather together ... and seek the Lord” (Zeph. 2:1-3). Something very similar appears in Nehemiah, with the people coming together at the conclusion of the wall-rebuilding effort to make petition before God and confess their sin (Neh. 9:1-38). Clearly, by the time of the intertestamental period, corporate prayer is a recognized and established part of the Jewish religious practice.

In the gospel accounts of the New Testament, Jesus provided a very balanced picture of prayer, representing it both as a private and personal exercise as well as a collaborative endeavor in which God’s people participate together. Andrew Murray states, “One of the first lessons of our Lord in his school of prayer was: Not to be seen by men.... He comes to us with a second lesson: You have need not only of secret solitary, but also of public united prayer” (108). While certainly Jesus advocated the importance of personal and individual prayer, by no means did he do so at the expense of coming together with other believers. Jesus’ promises regarding prayer are of two kinds:

There are general promises sanctioning prayer simply—all kinds of prayer, and without reference to any particular form or kind, and equally available and applicable to all. There are also special promises made in specific terms for the encouragement of social prayer. (Johnston 54)

In Jesus' mind the tension between personal and corporate prayer did not exist. He viewed both as important.

Jesus demonstrates the important role of personal, private prayer on a number of occasions. He spent forty days alone praying and fasting prior to the launch of his public ministry (Matt. 4:1-2). He rose early to pray (Mark. 1:35), and periodically withdrew from his closest followers so he could spend time alone with God (Mark 6:46; Luke 5:16). He prayed all night before a major decision (Luke 6:12), and he went to the Garden of Gethsemane for a season of prayer before the events leading up to the cross (Luke 22:40). Personal prayer was an established part of Jesus' life.

However, one of the more overlooked realities is that he was also an advocate of corporate prayer. One of the key supports for the vital role of corporate prayer is a Scripture passage that, ironically enough, people have often misinterpreted and used to downplay its importance. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus taught that one should go into his or her room, close the door, and pray to the Heavenly Father, who is unseen. The use of this verse to champion the priority of personal prayer to the exclusion of corporate prayer is to miss the intent of what Jesus was saying.

First, the focus of this verse is not so much on the privacy of prayers as on their motivation. The immediately preceding verse records Jesus as saying those who pray should not position themselves conspicuously in high-traffic places where others can observe them. The point he is making is that prayer, even if offered in the context of a

public worship service or a prayer gathering, is to be directed to God and not to become a public spectacle to highlight or emphasize the piety of the one who prays.

Second, in the King James Version, this verse talks about going into the closet to offer up prayer to God. While the word *closet* today connotes a small room for storing our clothes, the meaning back in the day of the King James Bible was much different. In the castles of England, a *closet* was a special meeting room in the interior of the palace where special guests or close acquaintances could meet away from distractions or interruptions. In the original language the word is *tameion*, and it is used four times in the New Testament. In Matthew 24:26 and Luke 12:3, it is rendered *inner room*, and in Luke 12:24 it is translated *storeroom*. Jesus did not have in mind a small cubicle for individual prayer. He had in mind a place off the beaten path where someone or *someones* could give themselves to prayer without disturbance or disruption.

Third, in the verses that immediately follow (Matt. 6:9-13), Jesus imparted his preeminent teaching on the topic of prayer by providing his followers a pattern for prayer known as the Lord's Prayer. As is the case in many of the Old Testament Psalms written centuries previously, Jesus used plural pronouns throughout the prayer. He began by saying, "And when you pray" (you being in the plural form), assuming corporate prayer gatherings would be an ongoing part of people's spiritual development. Throughout the prayer, he used plural pronouns—"Our Father," "give us today our daily bread," "forgive us our debts," "lead us not into temptation," and "deliver us from the evil one" (NIV). As John Piper notes, "When crafting a summary prayer for his disciples Jesus puts it in a form that will commend it for social or corporate use more than private use." Certainly had Jesus wanted to convey that prayer is a uniquely personal and solitary pursuit, he could have used the singular terminology without altering the meaning of his words. He

did not. The Lord's Prayer is "an invitation not only to pray but to pray together with other believers" (Dunlop). While the text contains some singular pronouns, a reality that makes the prayer easily adaptable for individual use, these seem to convey the idea that even corporate prayer can be a very personal experience of communion with God.

Jesus also spoke to the importance of corporate prayer in Matthew 18:18-20—the familiar passage about binding on earth what has been bound in heaven and loosing on earth what has been loosed in heaven. He framed the condition for answered prayer in such a way that indicated a heightened emphasis on the corporate element. He told his disciples in verse 19, "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." He very easily could have chosen words that emphasized the individual nature of prayer and started his statement with the phrase, "If anyone asks." He crafted his words in the plural, as if he intentionally wanted to combat people's tendency towards isolationism and emphasize the powerful possibilities that are introduced when they come together and unite in prayer. The way earth comes into alignment with what God wants and releases his power into a particular situation is through harmonious prayer—two or three gathered together and praying in a context of agreement and togetherness.

Another indication of Jesus' support for corporate prayer comes from John Franklin who studied and searched Jesus' use of the words *pray*, *prays*, *prayed*, *praying*, *prayer*, *prayers*, *ask*, *asks*, *asked*, *asking*, *watch*, *watches*, *watched*, and *watching* in the Gospels. Franklin counted those verses where Jesus gave instruction about what to pray for or how to pray, as well as verses where a command or condition was required for a favorable answer to prayer. He did not double-count a verse if two words appeared in the same verse (e.g., *watch* and *pray*) and only counted those verses where he deemed the

commands transcended a specific situation and were more universal in application. In all, he arrived at thirty-seven verses in the gospels that fit these criteria and discovered an amazing reality: In thirty-three of the thirty-seven verses, Jesus used the word *you* in the plural form. He concludes, “The fact that Jesus taught in the corporate made a compelling case by itself, but Jesus also framed the condition for answered prayer in such a way that heightened the stipulation of praying together” (*And the Place* 10-11). Corporate prayer was clearly an enterprise Jesus sanctioned and endorsed.

Perhaps, however, the clearest indication of the importance Jesus placed on corporate prayer is evidenced on the night before he was crucified. While he obviously spent some time alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, the fact he invited his disciples to accompany him and asked them to watch and pray with him is a compelling demonstration of the value and importance he placed on corporate prayer. When Jesus faced the peril and insecurity of the dangerous events that rested on the immediate horizon, he valued the collective prayer support of those who were closest to him.

The book of Acts, however, provides the greatest biblical sanction for the practice of corporate prayer. Luke, the writer, records the history of the early Church from a theological world and life view. As a careful historian committed to being as objective as possible, he would not leave out one of the most important factors in the survival and growth of the Church. Numerous times, throughout the book, he let his readers know prayer held a prominent part in the day-to-day and week-to-week life of the Church: “The power of prayer—concerted prayer eminently—formed the life-spring and impulsive cause of all that distinguished them ... from all others” (Johnston 130). Acts reads like a journal or register of God’s ability to intervene and act in response to the prayers of his faithful people.



Immediately after Jesus' ascension, the apostles returned from the Mount of Olives to an upper room in Jerusalem where they, along with some others numbering roughly 120, were continually united in prayer (Acts 1:14). As George Buttrick notes, "The Christian enterprise began, not in an organization, but in the group prayer of Jesus and his disciples" (271). The group prayed for wisdom in knowing who Judas' replacement should be (Acts 1:24), and this upper-room gathering was the epicenter of the Holy Spirit's activity on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). The church cried out to God for boldness when Peter and John were apprehended in the Temple and threatened by the Sanhedrin, and the place was shaken (Acts 4:24, 31). They prayed over the seven chosen to serve the Hellenistic widows who were overlooked unintentionally in the distribution of resources (Acts 6:6). When Peter was apprehended and put in prison following the martyrdom of James, the church gathered and fervently pleaded with God on his behalf (Acts 12:5). While the prophets and teachers were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to carry the gospel to the Gentile world (Acts 13:1-2), and the church prayed before sending them out (Acts 13:3). Paul and Barnabas commended the new churches to God by prayer (Acts 14:23). Paul and his companions were en route to a place when Paul cast the demon out of the slave girl (Acts 16:16), and they were praying when the earthquake happened that resulted in the jailer's conversion and their release (Acts 16:25). Paul prayed with all the Ephesian elders following his farewell address before he departed for Jerusalem (Acts 20:36), and he prayed with the disciples from Tyre before he left their city (Acts 21:5). The book of Acts, which details the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early Church, is also, in many ways, a chronicle of the movement of the Holy Spirit in response to the collective prayers of God's people.

In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Paul laid out regulations for the how men and women should behave in corporate prayer. He asked the Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians to pray for his ministry—the implication being they would take time to do so when gathered together. He counseled Timothy to instruct the Christ followers in Ephesus to pray for kings and those in high positions and to do so without anger or quarrelling (1 Tim. 2:1-8). The priority of corporate prayer is not only demonstrated in the fact that he asked them to do it “first of all” (v. 1) but also in his encouragement that they were to do it without disputing. If people had been praying in isolation, or if each person had been alone communing with God, disputes would be impossible—as there would be no one with whom to get into a dispute. The fact Paul framed his words this way is a strong indication he was assuming they would be praying together.

Finally, in the book of Revelation, a few compelling images of corporate prayer emerge. Not only are the saints who have gone before corporately petitioning the Father (Rev. 6:9-11), but the prayers of the saints are pictured as incense before the throne of God (Rev. 8:1-4). From cover to cover, the Bible heralds and highlights the validity, potency, and constructive possibilities of corporate prayer.

The inescapable conclusion I take away from the Bible is that corporate prayer is an essential exercise for communities of Christ followers and that “praying with others adds dimensions to our prayers that cannot come when we are praying by ourselves” (Fuqua 16). It cannot be dismissed as a bygone relic of the past that is unnecessary or nonessential for today. Even though the cultures of the Bible, and in particular that of the first century and the first followers of Jesus, did not have the individualistic bent of contemporary North American culture, the practice of corporate prayer cannot be

dismissed as something beneficial and important from a different era that is of no practical value for this one. If the church is to be an entity marked by supernatural impact, a means by which the life-changing power of Christ readily touches the lives of people, and a place where the manifest presence of God is in evidence and effective, it must recapture a sense of the priority and importance of the calling to corporate prayer. The hope of promoting and assisting in this effort served as the principal rationale for this study.

### **Overview**

Chapter 2 expands on the history of corporate prayer, as well as summarizes past and current thinking on the topic by looking at recurring themes that writers have used to justify or promote its practice and effective implementation. Chapter 3 includes a detailed discussion and explanation for the design of the study, the interview questions used, and how the data was collected, catalogued, and analyzed. Chapter 4 details the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the conclusions from the data and some suggested applications, as well as further questions that emerged and could serve as the focus of subsequent studies.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Ben Patterson says the Western church is filled with people who are “practical deists, acting as if God had given us a package of resources ... [and] walked away, leaving us to figure out what to do with it all.” The term *practical deist* is a fitting description because many people filling the pews of North American churches bear the imprint of a culture ingrained with the ideologies of individualism, secularism, and naturalism. As a result many churchgoers view prayer as “a kind of superstitious instinct handed down to modern man from a remote magical past” (Wright 148) or an “antiquated routine that was set up more than a hundred years ago” (Rinker 17) and is no longer relevant to today. When many current churchgoers think about corporate prayer, the kinds of words that immediately come into their minds are words such as *boring, dull, and lifeless*.

This view of the value of prayer stands in stark contrast to the early Church, which “was awakened, equipped, and mobilized to pray. They prayed in the temple, in one another’s homes, and in the streets. They even had a special room where they assembled for prayer” (Sacks 17-18). Prayer to the first followers of Jesus was not a sentimental vestige from a bygone past but an essential lifeline for everyday life. Corporate prayer was not an activity to be minimized, downplayed, or viewed with skepticism. It was, instead, an instinctive and almost intuitive response to the routine challenges they faced in living out their faith. The earliest followers of Jesus habitually came together to pray, drawing support from each other’s presence and uniting their voices in petition to God.

One gets a sense of how far afield North American Christianity has drifted from the practice of corporate prayer pictured in the Bible when the way most current Christ followers live out their faith is compared and contrasted to the biblical model. James Banks offers this sobering summary of what has transpired in North America in recent years:

It may be no coincidence that the culture we live in has become increasingly indifferent and even hostile to Christianity at the same time that united prayer has gone out of the church. As recently as fifty years ago, prayer meetings were a vital part of many churches. As American culture became increasingly entertainment oriented, the mid-week prayer meeting was replaced by the Wednesday night service. The active work of prayer was replaced with passive listening as the focal point shifted from God's power to answer prayer to what was happening at the front of the church. Eventually the prayer meeting moved out of the sanctuary and into a corner of the church library. At the same time, the church's impact upon the culture around us began to decline. (15)

As it relates to the all-church prayer meeting, the church's response was more or less, "If Christians are not inclined to pray in public, invite them to do something for which they have an inclination. Doctor the symptom, not the disease" (Cowan 21). Instead of seeking to vitalize and breathe life into the practice of corporate prayer, the church largely opted to move away from this biblical essential. The result has been a comparatively weak and ineffective North American church—one with an abundance of resources at its disposal but one having a limited impact on its surrounding world.

Granted, the local church's waning impact on the surrounding culture cannot be laid exclusively at the feet of its diminishing commitment to corporate prayer. The rapidly changing North American culture and the shift from a modern to a postmodern worldview coupled with the church's propensity for struggling to adjust during times of great cultural upheaval are also factors. The parallel between the church's reduced impact on its surrounding world and a diminishing emphasis upon the practice of corporate

prayer in North America is a thought-provoking linkage to say the least. The very nature of that association should give credence to the idea that this reduced devotion to corporate prayer is, at least in part, responsible for the plateau of the North American church and its nominal impact on its culture in recent years.

However, pockets of North American Christ followers have successfully resisted the individualistic, secular, and naturalistic influences of contemporary culture and live out their faith in a way that places a high value on the time-honored practice of corporate prayer. A few churches feature vibrant, dynamic, and energetic corporate prayer gatherings that are considerably more than a meeting in the corner of the church library supported by a handful of senior saints who spend 80 percent of the time talking and 20 percent of the time praying. The goal of this study was to look into the life of a few of these congregations in hopes of unearthing the underlying beliefs and values they hold that enable this practice to thrive and flourish when so many congregations seem to struggle and languish. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify threads of commonality relating to the underlying beliefs, values, and life experiences from the pastoral team members of these exemplar churches that allow them to implement corporate prayer initiatives generating widespread participation and involvement by their congregants.

This second chapter explores the topic of corporate prayer from three distinct angles. It begins by tracing the thread of corporate prayer throughout the church's history. Although it was an essential and indispensable part of how the first followers of Jesus lived out their faith, its presence throughout history has been somewhat intermittent and sporadic. It will make an appearance and be a point of emphasis in a certain situation or for a brief period, only to vanish gradually from the scene and slip into obscurity.

Then, at some later point, it will reemerge, usually bringing with it a sense of spiritual renewal, evangelistic effectiveness, and social impact. Just as ancient Israel often drifted from God and then returned to him with zeal and passion, so Christianity throughout history has often drifted into a coldness and worldly conformity, only for God to break through and people to return to him with a sense of fire and passion. Of the fluctuating nature of the practice of corporate prayer D. J. Craig says, “United prayer meetings inevitably reflect the ebb and flow of the spiritual vitality of the wider Christian church” (32). Nevertheless, one of the ingredients at the center of these reviving and restorative movements of God that have periodically dotted the landscape of Christian history is a renewed commitment to, and practice of, corporate prayer.

In an attempt to reflect both past and current thinking on the issue, I highlight six themes that emerge from writings on the topic of corporate prayer that are used to support and advocate its practice. The challenge of reviewing literature on the matter of corporate prayer is a difficult one because, while prayer in general has been a very popular focus of attention over the years and received wide treatment, the specific topic of corporate prayer has been largely neglected and overlooked. Many books on the subject matter of prayer delve deeply into the nuances and realities of individual prayer but say precious little about corporate prayer—maybe a passing reference or, at best, a single chapter in a multi-chapter work. For instance Richard Foster, in his landmark book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, lists in his Table of Contents twenty-one different kinds or types of prayer that he explores during the course of his book, but corporate prayer is not included in the list (vii). Just as most North Americans view prayer as more of a personal pursuit than a collective enterprise, so most writing on the topic of prayer reflects this bias. Most people see prayer as a *me* exercise instead of a *we* practice.

However, Scripture's testimony is that prayer is not primarily a personal pursuit. Although "we might fail to notice this in our individualized age, the Bible ... assumes that God's people will pray together" (Hamilton). The clear testimony of Scripture is that, even though God is all-sovereign, he has chosen to work on earth through humans. As Cheryl Sacks states, "He is in partnership with us, not independent of us. Scripture reveals no other way in which God intervenes in the affairs of earth" (22). One of the primary ways through which God becomes involved in human affairs is when his people come together in prayer: "God employs means in the spiritual as well as in the physical world for the fulfilment of his purposes of wisdom and love; and intercessory prayer is one of those means" (Young 45). To neglect the importance of corporate prayer is to turn away from one of the primary avenues through which God chooses to work in the world.

After tracing the history of corporate prayer and looking at some of the themes and motifs that have been held up as validation for the practice, I spell out some practical guidelines that have been recommended to leaders and facilitators of corporate prayer gatherings to ensure its effectiveness. Phil Miglioratti summarizes matters relating to the effective implementation of corporate prayer:

Gone are the days "when good intentions or strong emotions are enough to set the table for a strong and successful prayer gathering.... Today's prayer group ... needs a leader with the ability to facilitate an ... authentic, meaningful encounter, both with the ones they pray with and the one they pray to." (314)

People have been expressing for years their dissatisfaction with the current model in place, not so much with their words but by their lack of participation. Any study of the successful implementation of corporate prayer in the local church setting needs to give attention to some of the practical suggestions that have been spelled out over the years to guide its effectiveness.



## A Brief History of Corporate Prayer

The practice of people coming together specifically for the purpose of prayer is first modeled in the Bible. A strong case for corporate prayer stems from God's activity in history and the fact he has typically related to people through a mediator. Many stories from the patriarchal era of the Old Testament—Noah, Abraham, and Moses, for example—highlight this arrangement where God looks for a mediator to bridge the gap between himself and his people. This same arrangement was behind the establishment of the Levitical priesthood during the days of the Tabernacle and Temple. Key people assume this mediatory role on various occasions (e.g., Moses for the people of Israel after the Golden Calf incident, Exod. 32:11-14; Joshua for the people when Achan sins, Josh. 7:6-9; Samuel for the nation when they request a king, 1 Sam. 8). Kings also periodically stepped into this mediatorial role (e.g., Solomon leading the nation in prayer at the dedication of the Temple, 1 Kings 8; Jehoshaphat interceding for God's deliverance for Israel, 2 Chron. 20). Ezekiel the prophet lamented the fact that no one could be found to stand in the gap for those in distress (Ezek. 22:29-31), and the apostle Paul urged Timothy to assume a mediatory role by leading his people to make "requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving" for everyone (1 Tim. 2:1-4). As was mentioned briefly previously, this intercessory action appears in Esther, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Ezra. The Bible is filled with examples of people embracing this mediatorial role throughout its pages: "It's this idea of intercession which gives life to the very idea of corporate prayer. Corporate prayer exists, in other words, because God has determined to grant his shalom-restoring covenants *through* a mediator and *to* a people" (original emphasis; Hamilton). God's people turning to the practice of corporate prayer is a means, today, by which Christ followers can assume a mediatory role and be God's agents in the lives of people

who are distant from him. In that respect, corporate prayer is a shadow of the very message of the gospel because it involves a collective standing in for others and making intercession for them.

Jesus also demonstrated the benefit and value of corporate prayer in his interaction with his disciples. The pattern he utilized with them, of periodically meeting together for prayer, seems to have provided a model his first followers adopted for their gatherings after he ascended into heaven. They gathered together on a regular basis, often in public meeting places for the hearing of the word but also in homes for prayer: “House churches (cell churches) or small gatherings of people intent on sharing their lives and their love were the common means of apprehending God. Prayer was the foundation of their relationship” (DeJong 56). During times of persecution, these meetings frequently moved to secret locations, such as caves or the catacombs, to avoid the intervention and disturbance of the government. Corporate prayer was a constant: “For the first three hundred years, the early church had no formal buildings, no personal Bibles, no multi-media, and no sound systems. But they prayed persistently, and God moved in amazing ways as a result” (Banks 44). In fact, “after the cross the mighty moves of God came when *the church* [emphasis mine] was praying, not an individual” (Franklin, “Teaching Transferable Principles” 4). One can hardly overestimate the priority and importance the earliest followers of Jesus placed on corporate prayer.

### **The Early Church Fathers**

During the time of the early Church fathers, the observance of the daily hours of prayer began to come into prominence. Church leaders challenged Christ followers to make all of life a constant prayer offered to God—a concept the monastic era amplified, expanded upon, and reinforced—with the practice of specific times set aside for prayer. If

one likens the relationship between individual and corporate prayer to the swing of a pendulum, the pendulum definitely swung in the direction of individual prayer during this period in Christian history.

However, some voices still proclaimed and promoted the importance and necessity of corporate prayer. The emphasis on the communal nature of prayer by the early Church fathers caused them to recognize “if we pray in union with Christ, then we pray in communion also with His Body and Bride, the Church” (Stuckwisch 15). Origen (ca. 185-254), an early Christian scholar and theologian, said, “Let no one disdain prayers in the churches, since they have something exceptional for the person who assembles in them genuinely” (qtd. in Stuckwisch 9). Origen’s advocacy of corporate prayer grew out of his belief that when people gathered for prayer, each person’s angel was also present. Thus, a corporate prayer gathering featured a *double church*—one of people and one of angels. While his theology may be somewhat questionable, one “cannot help but wonder whether Origen’s remarks in this matter are indicative of a problem with people avoiding ... public prayers” (9). If so, he identified an issue that has reemerged repeatedly throughout the course of history.

### **The Middle Ages and the Example of the Waldensians**

During the Middle Ages, Christianity went through a major metamorphosis. It changed significantly as the church’s alignment with political power, the implementation of a hierarchical structure, and institutional development moved prayer away from an extemporaneous activity toward something that was increasingly formal and liturgical. A variety of monastic communities sprung up as they “grew out of the pursuit of God in private prayer and in fulfillment of the command to prayer always” (McDonnell 35). These monastic communities tended to minimize the role of collective spiritual pursuits

such as group prayer. Their emphasis on purity of heart and overcoming the baser passions of life lent itself to a focus on personal spiritual formation to the comparative exclusion of activities such as corporate prayer.

The church's close connection with the state rendered it as much a political reality as a spiritual one, and it assumed many of the characteristics of a bureaucratic institution. One notable exception, however, was the Waldensians. Forerunners of the Reformation, they sought to conform their practices to the example of Scripture in reaction to the preoccupation with ecclesiastical power they saw playing out within the church. In so doing, Pope Lucius III in 1184 labeled them as heretics at the Synod of Verona—an affirmation that the Fourth Lateran Council of the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed in 1214. In 1211 more than eighty Waldensians were burned as heretics, beginning several centuries of persecution that nearly destroyed them. J. B. Johnston offers this summary of the group's manner of life and practices:

When the savage persecutions of the papacy destroyed their sanctuaries, and interdicted their public assemblies for worship,... they had recourse to meetings for united prayer as the great means of support and relief under long continued and severe persecution. Ecclesiastical history records the marked attention of these early witnesses to this ordinance at different periods of their eventful history;... when the voice of public protest against Rome's idolatry and oppression was nowhere distinctly heard throughout western Christendom, we have on record an affecting testimony to the value which the remnant of these ancient confessors still set upon the social prayer-meeting. (132-33)

The Waldensians are a historical example of a group that turned to the practice of corporate prayer and made it a vital part of their identity and practice.

Like so many of those who have taken the practice seriously, the Waldensians saw themselves as a minority presence in a hostile world. Declared as heretics by the Roman Catholic Church because of their contempt for ecclesiastical power and desire to

conform their practices to the pattern of Scripture, they lived out a biblically anchored faith at a time when the Christian church, as a whole, had lost sight of its biblical moorings. One of those anchors was a deep belief in the importance and value of corporate prayer.

### **Reformation and Post-Reformation**

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe with separate reform movements taking place in Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia over the period of a few centuries. As the Reformation sought to reverse much of the ecclesiastical malpractice of the Roman Catholic Church, an emphasis on the importance of the laity and a return to some of the practices that had been pushed to the side over the years accompanied the reforms. One of the practices that reemerged was corporate prayer:

Protestantism itself is a social religion—a religion of the people;... it flings away the shackles of Papal tyranny from the conscience, puts the Bible in the hands of all, and opens for the masses free, social intercourse, and unrestricted Christian fellowship; and it points to the social prayer-meeting for its fullest enjoyment. (Johnston 139)

Johnston elaborates by offering specific insights into the various leaders of the assorted reform movements associated with the Reformation:

Luther and his contemporaries were men of prayer, and often met together for social prayer. Calvin and Zwingle [sic] were men of prayer, and mingled often with kindred spirits in social prayer. John Knox—... the champion of the prayer-meeting—moulded his Scotland and his Scottish Church with its forming power in the very incipency of his organization. (74)

The Reformation, as it gradually released the church from the formality and bureaucracy that had plagued it for years, ushered in a renewed appreciation and value on the practice of corporate prayer.

### **The First, Second, and Third Great Awakening**

The First Great Awakening, a religious revitalization movement that swept over the Atlantic world and the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, left a permanent impact on American religion. However, the movement “began to stir a few years earlier with Moravians on their knees in Germany, praying for the spread of the gospel around the world” (Banks 16). When persecutions broke out in conjunction with these various reform movements, corporate prayer served as a source of comfort and strength. For instance, “when the prelatic persecution . . . drove three hundred faithful Presbyterian ministers from their pulpits, and hireling curates were intruded upon their reluctant flocks, the value of private social prayer-meetings was again experienced” (Thompson 25). At the heart of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit was a dependence upon God that was manifest in a value and reliance upon corporate prayer.

The spiritual awakening in England, under the primary leadership of George Whitefield and John Wesley, was not only fueled to a great degree by corporate prayer but largely contributed to the expansion of the practice. Wesley, whenever he organized churches, also established *class meetings* of which corporate prayer was a prominent feature. Whitefield, “though not so methodic as Wesley, and not so successful in organizing as evangelizing, left behind, wherever he labored, the spirit of the prayer-meeting” (Johnston 156). Numerous prayer societies sprung up in Scotland, which were quite influential in the awakening that permeated that country. God’s people praying

together provided a spiritual fuel for the personal and social breakthroughs that accompanied these various reform movements.

The Second Great Awakening, which began around the year 1800, “followed an organized effort by Jonathan Edwards to unite God’s people in prayer on both sides of the Atlantic” (Banks 16). Edwards, a leading theologian in colonial America, was a Congregationalist minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, whose ministry was highly influential. His pamphlet *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, published toward the end of the First Great Awakening in 1747, made an effective case for the practice of corporate prayer and was instrumental in the establishment of prayer circles that were at the core of the awakening in colonial America in the mid-eighteenth century. Republished in the late eighteenth century in England, his pamphlet became instrumental in the formation of “prayer meetings [that] spread throughout the British Isles, particularly impacting eighteenth century revivals in Wales” (Beeke 304). In addition, it “became a major manifesto for the Second Great Awakening around the beginning of the nineteenth century ... [and] fueled other awakenings in the late 1850s” (305). Even though Edwards died in 1758, the influence of his belief in the importance of corporate prayer extended beyond his natural life and lingered well into the nineteenth century.

Corporate prayer was also at the center of the Third Great Awakening. Illustrative of its cardinal function is the account of what happened at the North Dutch Church in New York City. In 1857, America was in the middle of a strong economy and, as is so often the case during times of prosperity, morals began slipping and interest in the things of God began to wane. This condition, coupled with the polarization and divide over the

politics and morality of slavery, made for a country very much in need of revival.

Alarmed by the spiritual state of things, a layman from the North Dutch Church named Jeremiah Lanphier, who had come to Christ under the ministry of Charles G. Finney, tacked up notices across New York City, announcing a prayer meeting for businessmen over the noon hour with the first one scheduled for 23 September:

At twelve o'clock,... the door was thrown open, and [Mr. Lanphier] took his seat to await the response to the invitation which had been given. After a half hour's delay, the steps of one person were heard as he mounted the staircase. Presently another appeared and another, until the whole company amounted to six.... On the next Wednesday, September 30<sup>th</sup>, the six increased to twenty, and the subsequent week, October 7<sup>th</sup>, as many as forty were present. (Chambers 43)

After the third or fourth prayer meeting, the Panic of 1857—the world's first international economic crisis—hit. The bond market collapsed, businesses began to fail, thousands of workers lost their jobs, and Wall Street experienced a major reversal. People began calling out to God more seriously than ever, and Lanphier decided to make this prayer gathering a daily, rather than weekly, event. The response was formidable, as Talbot W. Chambers notes, “The number of attendants, although fluctuating from day to day, yet, when considered at intervals of a few days or a week, was found to be constantly increasing” (44) to the point that, in six months time, more than ten thousand businessmen were meeting daily to pray during the noon hour:

There was no eloquent orator, no noted revivalist, no display of intellectual abilities, native or acquired; nothing to gratify a refined taste, or stimulate a jaded imagination, or cater to itching ears. It was simply a gathering of men who turned aside from secular cares to consecrate an hour to prayer. (70)

A simple prayer meeting, conceived and implemented by a layman, very quickly became a movement that rapidly spread to other metropolitan areas across the country. Walter Hampel underscores its breadth and span:



A March 1858 account of the New York revival indicated its scope. Prayer meetings were still occurring at the Dutch North Church. On March 19th, news arrived of a Virginia man who organized noon time prayer in Richmond after attending the Fulton Street meetings. In several Indiana towns “the progress of the revival was distinctly marked.” Revival was occurring in Boston, Springfield, Hoboken, and numerous cities throughout America. Evidence of the revival could be found from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts. Converts were numbered in the tens of thousands. With the growing interest in the revival, church buildings were no longer the only sites of the prayer meetings. *The New York Times* reported: “Churches are crowded; bank-directors rooms become oratories; school houses are turned into chapels.” Places associated with worldliness became sites of prayer. One example was Burton’s Theatre in New York. The *Times*’ account stated: “Instead of noisy laughter, excited by play-actors, in low comedy and farce, those present listen quietly and seriously to earnest words from earnest men on the most solemn and earnest of themes.” (31-32)

Lanphier never dreamed his simple prayer meeting would take hold and gather such momentum that it would alter the religious landscape in North America. What began as a local effort to respond to the deteriorating spiritual climate ultimately became a national phenomenon replicated dozens of places across the country.

Corporate prayer swept across North America like a wildfire fueled by gusty winds and parched vegetation. Sacks summarizes the incredible impact:

The years of 1858-1859 became known as the Annus Mirabilis—Year of Miracles. During this era, powerful missionary movements were birthed and great leaders such as Dwight Moody, Andrew Murray, and William Booth came to fruitfulness. When [Lanphier] and his five prayer partners began their prayer vigil, they had no idea that God would bring an estimated one million persons into His kingdom. (189)

Although official records were not kept, “the response of God to his people was that a million Americans out of a population of thirty million were converted in less than two years. At the height of the revival, perhaps fifty thousand a week were being saved” (Franklin, *And the Place* 17). These prayer meetings and the consequent revival also spread to the British Isles, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Australia, largely fueled “by

their understanding of the theology of prayer. They believed that united prayer was more effective than the sum of individual prayer” (Craig 31). One of the inescapable conclusions that stands out from a study of the history of corporate prayer is its intimate connection with revival and spiritual breakthrough: “Whenever something significant happens in the history of the church—whenever lives are transformed and revival occurs—people are praying together” (Banks 12). Robert Young summarizes the incredible possibilities and potential for impact with these words:

It is a deeply interesting and encouraging fact, which I have taken some trouble to ascertain that, from the period when the disciples at Jerusalem, in obedience to the commands of their Lord, “continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” for “the promise of the Father” to the present time, every revival with which the church has been blessed has been preceded by the spirit of special and earnest prayer for the influence of the Holy Ghost, and the conversion of sinners; and individual conversions are continually occurring, which may be distinctly traced to the influence of intercessory prayer. (39)

The possibilities for spiritual breakthrough, community impact, and social transformation that lie latent in the practice of corporate prayer are virtually impossible to deny. The account of the Third Great Awakening provides a sense of just how pervasive and extensive the impact can be and how far the ripple effects can reach.

### **Recent Impact of Corporate Prayer**

In the approximately 150 years since the Third Great Awakening, the association between corporate prayer and spiritual breakthrough has continued, although not on as considerable a scale in North America as in other parts of the world. Charles H. Spurgeon, long-time pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle and regarded by many Christian leaders as the greatest preacher England ever produced, attributed much of his effectiveness in ministry to his people’s commitment to corporate prayer. The connection between corporate prayer and spiritual impact is continually reinforced: “The great

revivals of the twentieth century were likewise inspired by prayer. The Welsh revival of 1904-05, the revival in Riga, Latvia, in 1934, and more recent revivals in Romania and Korea were all born and nurtured in prayer” (Beeke 306). In fact, South Korea is one of the great demonstrations of the power and possibilities of corporate prayer. During the twentieth century, the country has gone from about 2 percent Christian to approximately 40 percent Christian, fueled in large part by the power of corporate prayer. Daily early morning prayer gatherings, all night prayer vigils, and retreat centers set aside for the purpose of prayer are very much an established part of the Korean church culture. Many speculate the unprecedented growth of the Christian church in Communist China is largely the product of corporate prayer carried out by the underground church.

Testimonies from areas of the world as diverse as the Horn of Africa, Cambodia, and Nepal all bear witness to the transformative, renewing spiritual power that stems from a commitment to the practice of corporate prayer.

Franklin speaks to the continuing impact of corporate prayer around the world:

Christianity is advancing in most quarters except four primary areas. If you live in North America, you know one of them. The other three are Japan, Australia, and Western Europe. Guess what one of the common denominators is everywhere Christianity marches forward? The Christians spend significant time praying *together* [original emphasis]. (*And the Place* 20)

In world areas with comparative wealth but a fading commitment to corporate prayer, the church is generally struggling. In world areas that are economically disadvantaged but in the main place high value on corporate prayer, the church is generally flourishing. This reality ought to serve as a wake-up call for the North American church and alert it to the need to reengage in this long-established practice.

Even though corporate prayer has greatly diminished as a practice in this continent as it enters the twenty-first century, it is in many ways a thoroughly American idea in line with the principles and ideals that undergird the governmental system:

The prayer-meeting has ever been the nursery of civil and religious liberty. It is an institution thoroughly democratic—an institution of the people, for the people, and administered by the people; an institution that recognizes the perfect equality of every one admitted to its privileges—and to these all have a right. It knows no aristocracy—no caste—no class. Here ... all that pray may mingle together in the enjoyment of equal rights and equal powers. (Johnston 138)

Democracy is a form of political rule in which all people have equal control over the matters that affect their interests. They are equal before the law and have equal access to power. Many of the foundational ideals that underscore a democratic form of government find concrete expression in the activity of corporate prayer. People who claim to value the ideals of liberty and equality, as well as voice reliance upon God as expressed in the motto engraved on the nation's coinage, ought to be drawn to corporate prayer. A brief survey, not only of Scripture but also the history of the church, establishes its indispensability as a vital practice.

### **Corporate Prayer Established as a Primary Pursuit by the Early Church**

Perhaps the most telling demonstration of the central role corporate prayer is designed to occupy in the church is highlighted by the actions of Jesus' earliest followers in Acts 6—a passage that details how the early Church came to choose seven leaders to oversee the equitable distribution of food to widows. The word *distribution* (v. 1) is the word *diakonia* in Greek—the word most often translated *ministry* in the New Testament. In verse 2, the leaders state it would not be right to “neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” The verb *wait on* is *diakonein* and comes from the same family of words as *diakonia* in verse one. In verses 3b-4 the word *diakonia* appears yet a

third time, when the leaders say, “We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry [*diakonia*] of the word.” Three appearances of words from the same etymological family appear in a four-verse span.

That occurrence indicates that the discussion the disciples were having was in regard to the oversight of different ministries. The motivation for the conversation and the decision to recruit seven people to oversee the distribution of food did not flow from the leaders’ desire to give more attention to their personal prayer lives, although this understanding is the way these verses have typically been interpreted. The seven were recruited to take an important ministry—the distribution of food to widows—off the hands of the apostles so they would not be distracted from their primary ministry responsibilities of (1) mobilizing the people of God to pray together and (2) preaching and teaching God’s word.

A couple of factors contribute to this conclusion. The first has to do with the context:

In verse one there is a problem with a ministry. In verse two the Apostles discuss what ministry they will and won’t do. In verses three and four they choose seven to put them in charge of the ministry to widows, while they go to the prayer and the ministry of the word. You can almost see them drawing this up on the chalkboard like a football coach. “OK team, the O’s will take the widows; the X’s will take the Word...” Nothing in this passage refers to anything personal, only ministries. (Franklin, “Priority” 4)

The second factor has to do with the syntax in the original language:

Although the word ministry does not specifically occur before the word prayer, the definite article *the* does.... They do not mean prayer in general, but have something specific in mind. The syntax creates the possibility that prayer and the word are twin ideas. (4)

The result is a connotation and meaning from the passage that is considerably different from what many people have commonly concluded.

Robert J. Knowling further weighs in on the interpretation of this passage: “The article seems to imply not only private prayer and intercession, but the public prayer of the Church” (170). The emphasis of the passage is on which ministries the apostles believed they must delegate and which ones they thought they should keep under their personal oversight. They concluded that while the feeding of the widows was no less important, they needed to release that responsibility so they could give themselves to the twin tasks of mobilizing prayer among the followers of Jesus and preaching and teaching God’s word. The inevitable conclusion would be that the early leaders of the church considered empowering and guiding the corporate prayer life of the church to be just as critical a priority as preaching and teaching the word of God. In fact, Luke’s summary in verse 7 that “the word of God spread,” “the number of disciples ... increased rapidly,” and “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” would indicate this arrangement had a positive outcome and kept spiritual momentum alive. God blessed their decision by enabling their impact on the surrounding world to continue. The early Church leaders, by not letting their commitment to mobilizing prayer fall victim to these other responsibilities, helped to create an environment where a sense of divine blessing remained upon their efforts and the fledgling church as a whole. By prioritizing corporate prayer and formulating an approach that allowed them to retain oversight of its mobilization, they helped bring about an atmosphere that allowed it to flourish and enabled this movement to continue to penetrate and impact its world.

Leading up to the crisis surrounding the distribution of goods, the various references to prayer in Acts always picture the apostles leading others in prayer rather than living out their own personal prayer lives:

When they [the apostles] entered Jerusalem to tarry for the Holy Spirit, 1:13 makes a point of listing the Apostles and notes in verse 14 that “these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.” During that eleven days of seclusion, Peter interprets the requirement of Psalms that they chose a replacement for Judas. Then they led the people in prayer (v. 24). Acts 2:41 records that 3,000 new converts were added to the church. What did they immediately do in order to disciple them? The next verse states, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Next, Peter and John went to the temple at the ninth hour of prayer. They could have gone there for two reasons. First, that hour could have been a formal time of prayer in Jewish national life, and they were simply participating. But the more likely scenario was they were meeting other believers. Acts 2:46 records that they met daily in the temple; Acts 5:12 asserts that they were in one accord in Solomon’s porch. This makes sense because it would have been one of the few places large enough to accommodate a large number of people. Acts 3:1 would naturally reflect what it would look like for those believers to continue in the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, and prayers (2:42). Finally in Acts 4:23 they report the threats of the Sanhedrin. The instinctive reaction of the people of God was to cry out to Him in prayer. In every instance we see the Apostles involved in leading prayer. Therefore these stories confirm that Acts 6:4 speaks of a corporate ministry of prayer. (Franklin, “Priority” 14-15)

The unequivocal and clear testimony of history is that corporate prayer is an essential lifeline of the people of God, a foremost means of bringing his presence to bear upon specific situations and circumstances, and a fundamental part of being a follower of Jesus.

While a number of writers over the years have pictured prayer as primarily as a personal pursuit, some understand the central role corporate prayer is designed to have in the church and have appealed to its widespread practice. In doing so, they have highlighted a number of arguments and themes as justification and support. Any review of the literature surrounding corporate prayer must identify and spell out some of those themes and the specifics of the thought process behind these arguments.

### **Corporate Prayer as an Activity Consistent with Human Nature**

A primary argument held up as validation for the practice of corporate prayer flows out of humanness. Proponents say the practice of corporate prayer is a natural outgrowth of human nature—a practical and commonsensical by-product of God’s creative design. William James sums up this belief with the words, “The reason why we *do* pray ... is simply that we cannot *help* praying” (original emphasis; 316). The impulse to pray is every bit as ingrained and entrenched as the impulse to eat, sleep, or anything else that accompanies being human.

Philip and Carol Zaleski chronicle at length prayer’s transcendence of time and culture—how people who live on different continents from different centuries and are part of different cultures with very different belief systems are drawn to this universal act. While prayer has been practiced in a variety of ways over the course of time, the fact is people from all walks of life, for as long as can be determined in history, have been drawn to the activity. This all-embracing phenomenon “cannot tell us whether there is an instinct to pray inscribed in our biological nature, but there are grounds for suspecting that prayer is as universal as language and as old as any other cultural artifact” (15). Some innate drive compels humans to pursue the practice of prayer. The authors do not approach the topic of prayer from a distinctively Christian standpoint but from one that is anthropological and sociological. They claim people are drawn to prayer because of its perceived *magical* qualities. Nevertheless, their reasoned conclusion is that the longing and desire to pray is innately woven into the very nature of being human.

### **Not Just Prayer but Corporate Prayer**

Some writers on the topic of corporate prayer not only agree with this notion but expand upon it, stating that not only is *prayer* woven into the fabric of humanity but so is



the *corporate* dimension of prayer. The practice of corporate prayer flows out of God's creation and the belief that "nothing is in its nature wholly private: it is both private and corporate" (Buttrick 249). This sentiment is echoed by Charles James Wright:

No disciple of Christ can pray as if he were solitary in a Kingdom composed of God and himself. What has been called "individualistic prayer" is a contradiction in terms. The solitariness of prayer is an encompassed solitariness—like the individual in the orchestra, and under the conductor's control. Always there is the community of persons. (151)

He summarizes his thinking by saying, "The Divine Rule is a commonwealth of persons, not an aggregate of particles" (152). To focus on the value of individual prayer and dismiss the significance of corporate prayer is to deny humanity's identity and essence.

Johnston enhances and elaborates on this idea: "The social nature, sanctified by grace, demands the society of kindred spirits sanctified by the same grace" (23). He believes that our religious nature compels us humans to seek God in prayer and our social nature compels us to seek the company of kindred spirits. When these two dispositions blend and come together, the result is the very essence of corporate prayer:

From the very nature of the fellowship of saints, and from the inward cravings of the renewed nature after its congenial enjoyment, there seems to be a dictate of reason and nature requiring some distinct ordinance of religious social worship, in which saints, as nowhere else, can specially and fully enjoy its blessed and heavenly privileges. The prayer-meeting answers to this demand of the spiritual brotherhood, with more exclusiveness and direct fitness than any other ordinance of religious worship. (24)

In a very individualistic society, this collective and corporate dimension of being human is often downplayed if not outright dismissed.

This misconception tends to find its way into the prayer habits and preferences of many people as "there are some Christians who will never be interested in any reasons for praying audibly, because they do not have an understanding of the ... value of what

takes place when we pray with another person” (Rinker 63). Proponents of corporate prayer refute and expose the fallacious nature of thinking that attaches little importance to the value of communal prayer by appealing to the unavoidably social nature of life. One of these is George Buttrick:

Prayer is private, but not altogether private. It could be altogether private only if our life were altogether individual. It will demand corporate expression as long as life is held within the corporate bond. A man can be an athlete alone, but he is a finer athlete within the team experience: in baseball the spectators and players alike look askance at “the individual performer” who nurses his batting average. A man can be a musician alone, forever playing solos, but he is an impoverished musician until he knows choral and symphonic music. A man can pray alone, and should, but his prayer also is incomplete without its comradeship. (238)

When the communal dimension of prayer is overlooked or ignored, the effectiveness of prayer is minimized.

### **The Nature of *Ecclesia***

Discounting the importance and role of corporate prayer is also incongruous with the word *ecclesia*, a word from the political realm that means *gathering* or *assembly* but that came to be used to refer to the gatherings of the earliest followers of Jesus. Without a doubt Jesus’ first followers gathered for worship and teaching, but the Bible is also very clear that many of their gatherings were for the distinct and specific purpose of prayer. Recognizing the importance of fellowship for their spiritual growth and edification, the first followers of Jesus routinely came together to support each other as well as to invite the power of God to rest upon their efforts by gathering for prayer.

An activity that was so essential and fundamental in the early days of Christianity is currently viewed in many circles as an optional and discretionary elective. A number of reasons are cited, one of the most common of which is the mundane and stale manner of implementation: “The ‘old-fashioned prayer meeting’ may have invited banishment by

intolerance and hypocrisy. The mood and method may have been wrong. But the need and impulse were not wrong: *they* [original emphasis] are in man's constitution 'from the foundation of the world'" (Buttrick 239). Just as the church is a gathering of individuals into a community that transcends the limitations of earth, so prayer also flourishes in a communal context:

The prayer of *intercession* is not complete, either as prayer or as fulfillment of our human nature, until it is also *joint* intercession.... When intercession is private it may be its own mockery: it prays for *all* but prays *alone*. It is complete only as it becomes itself an act of love, a corporate venture. (original emphasis; 248)

Buttrick is convinced that a repudiation of the practice of corporate prayer is at its core a dismissal and denial of the fundamentally social nature of humanity.

Johnston takes up the issue in his discussion of the behind-the-scenes activity that lays the groundwork for revival. He believes the impulse for revival originates initially within the heart of a spiritually tender individual—an impulse that compels him or her to pray. Because of social nature, this person is generally moved to seek out the company of kindred spirits—an endeavor that often results in the formation of a corporate prayer gathering. Johnston further believes this course of action largely explains the intimate linkage between corporate prayer and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit:

The history of revivals presents an unbroken series of facts verifying that the revival of religion and the prayer-meeting are inseparable. The prayer-meeting has always been employed as a means of revival; and has always followed as a fruit of revival. (73)

To seek a spiritual revival or breakthrough without the context and backdrop of corporate prayer is akin to trying to drive a car across town without putting gas in the tank.

### **Corporate Prayer as an Expression of One's Longing for Significance**

Dee Duke speaks of the connection between corporate prayer and human nature from a slightly different vantage point, tying the practice of corporate prayer to an innate longing for significance: "Not a single person was ever designed for mediocrity. Every one was designed for greatness" (26). As beings created in the image and likeness of God, within each person lies a passion to be a part of something great. Corporate prayer, by its very nature, unleashes possibilities and opens the door to prospects that would otherwise remain untapped. It provides a channel and outlet for the longing to participate in purposeful, significant activity embedded deep within each person. The human longing for significance and the passion to be a part of something important finds an appropriate outlet in the possibilities of corporate prayer.

A statement I have made over the years to the members of my congregation is, "What we really want to see happen here is something we can't do!" Those things that followers of Jesus most deeply desire to see transpire are impossible to achieve on their own. No one can make a person come to faith or walk in obedience to God. No one can create a sense of spiritual desire within the heart of a hardhearted neighbor or enable a rebellious child to open up to God. No one can singlehandedly bring about a sense of revival or create a spirit of unity within a local church. These lofty desires are impossible to attain or achieve in the power of the flesh. Just as a doctor can prescribe medicine or perform a procedure but cannot orchestrate healing, so human effort cannot do the kinds of things that reside in the realm of God: "If we truly see how unattainable they are, humanly speaking, it will drive us to regular prayer" (Immanuel Presbyterian Church 6). In many ways, the things for which people pray are indicators of recognized personal weakness and what they view as important. Conversely, the things for which they do not

pray are either indicative of perceived personal strength or what they view as trivial or unimportant.

### **A Biblical Account of Praying People Empowering a Significant Outcome**

A Bible story that speaks to the possibilities unleashed by corporate prayer is the account of the prayer meeting in the immediate wake of Peter's arrest and imprisonment in Acts 12. Herod had the apostle Peter apprehended and thrown in jail during a round of persecution. The church realized the gravity of the situation and came together to pray for his release: "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (v. 5). C. Peter Wagner notes the wording here "is used to indicate a higher intensity of prayer than ordinary prayer" (*Acts* 265). Some incredibly important nuances are also found in the syntax: "The modifier 'fervently' and the redundant 'to God' ... indicate the intensity with which the community importunes God on Peter's behalf" (Gaventa 183). Additionally, the adverb Luke uses is the same word, though in a slightly different form, that he uses to describe the intensity of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:44.

The people's level of response is not surprising, as a new wave of persecution had just been unleashed against the Church. In fact, Luke mentions in verse 2 how James, the brother of John and one of the leaders of the fledgling flock, had recently been executed. The story's clear insinuation is that Herod had Peter taken into custody because he saw how James' execution had ignited the support of the Jewish establishment, and he was trying to curry their favor. John Stott provides a word picture of the scene that highlights the high stakes nature of the situation:

Here then were two communities, the world and the church, arrayed against one another, each wielding an appropriate weapon. On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the

prison. On the other side, the church turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless possess. (208-09)

In response to the prayers of the powerless, an angel of the Lord visits Peter in the middle of the night. Even though he is under heavy guard and severely shackled, he is freed from the bonds that bind him and walks out of the prison undetected with an angelic escort during the night before his anticipated execution: “The lesson is obvious: A cause-and-effect relationship was achieved between the prayer of the intercessors and Peter’s release from prison” (Wagner, *Acts* 265). Corporate prayer powerfully contributed to this miraculous release, which the story explains in short order as it continues.

Peter made his way to the house of Mary, which apparently “served as the venue for extended fervent prayer [and] evidently included all-night sessions” (Larkin 185), where he knocked on the door, only for the servant girl charged with answering the door to run back into the house excitedly at the sound of his voice and leave him standing there. While those inside pronounced her out of her mind and argued over the truthfulness of her report, she stood by her story and the assemblage concluded that Peter’s guardian angel must be on the doorstep. According to Jewish tradition, the guarding angel would take on the attributes of the person, so, in their minds, Peter’s guardian angel had either arrived to bring good news or announce his death. Going to investigate, they were astonished to see Peter standing there in the flesh, and rejoicing broke out as he shared the story of his miraculous deliverance before going into hiding.

G. Campbell Morgan notes that those gathered “prayed earnestly” as evidenced by Luke’s use of the imperfect tense in verse five—a tense that conveyed the ongoing character and continuing nature of the action. He also, however, points out that they “prayed doubtingly” (299). Their prayers had an unbelieving quality to them, as

evidenced by their strenuous denials when the servant girl indicated that Peter was standing at the gate and their prayers had been answered. Morgan makes this application:

I am thankful for this story. It cheers me in my praying. I pray, and God knows I believe in Him, and I desire, and I wonder whether He can....  
These people prayed earnestly and doubtingly, and yet that force of earnest, halting prayer was mightier than Herod, and mightier than hell.  
(300)

This passage also teaches that while “God ... does things in his own sovereign way, he nevertheless does what he does through means, one of which is prayer” (Boice 209).

Those who take seriously the call to partner with God through the means of corporate prayer are setting the stage to have a hand in breakthroughs that contribute to the increase and buildup of his kingdom.

### **Corporate Prayer as a Demonstration of Love for God and Others**

A second theme used to support the practice of corporate prayer that emerges from various writings on the topic is that of love. Says Duke, “Prayer is an expression of love to God. It’s also an expression of love toward people” (43). While the phrase *I’m praying for you* is often viewed as a way to convey the perception of deep care for someone when it may or may not actually be the case, Foster views actually interceding for someone as a deep expression of love: “If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others” (191). One of the by-products of corporate prayer is that it not only enables one to experience God’s love more fully, but it also helps the person more fully sense the loving interest God has in neighboring people. Edward M. Bounds articulates this intimate linkage between love and prayer:

Compassion runs out in earnest prayer ... for those whom it feels, and has a sympathy for them.... Prayer is natural and almost spontaneous when compassion is begotten in the heart.... Christlike compassion always

moves to prayer.... Where [compassion] is most helpless to relieve the needs of others, it ... break[s] out into prayer to God for others. (128-29)

Loving another person will drive one to long for that person what is beyond his or her power to give—a condition that, in turn, will often spark prayer. In some ways the failure of the North American church to give itself to corporate prayer can be viewed as an expression of dwindling compassion and a breakdown of love.

In many circles guilt is utilized as an incentive to pray—a motivation that is used with little success. A much more effective motivation is love, for love is the very nature of God. As such, it is a product of the will rather than the emotions—true love is both the source and the result of a deliberate choice. Such love will not only drive people to God, but the expanded measure of love they receive will also flow out of them to a lost and dying world (Jones 15).

David Livingstone Rowe elaborates on the love one experiences and receives from corporate prayer when he talks about its relational effects. To him, three levels of relational connectedness transpire within the context of corporate prayer: (1) human-to-world relationship, where one learns to love the surrounding world, (2) human-to-human relationship, which is “about loving God’s people, one-anothering in joy and sorrow” (398), and (3) human-to-God relationship, where one learns to love God’s very being. Clearly, part of the genius of corporate prayer is the expanded capacity for love it unleashes in the lives of participants—a deepening love for God and those with whom one is praying as well as those in the surrounding world.

### **A Biblical Example of Love Motivating Corporate Prayer**

A biblical account where love serves as an impetus and motivation for corporate prayer comes from Acts 20. Paul was saying farewell to the leadership team of the



Ephesian church, indicating he felt a clear sense of call to go to Jerusalem in spite of their numerous arguments to the contrary. The occasion was emotional, for Paul himself had founded the church in Ephesus. Both he and the elders believed they would never see each other again until they met in heaven. Paul concluded his remarks to them with an exhortation for them to be vigilant in their responsibility to oversee the body of believers. Luke continues the story: “When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed” (v. 36). The highly emotional and poignant nature of this prayer gathering is apparent, for “in the ancient Church, prayer was normally done standing, with extended hands. Kneeling was a sign of a solemn and deeply felt petition” (Gonzalez 239). The picture portrayed was of an incredibly earnest and intense time of prayer as opposed to a quick blessing the elders pronounced over Paul before he boarded a ship to head to his next destination.

The bond of love between Paul and the Ephesian church leadership ran deep. John B. Pohill notes the use of the imperfect tense in the Greek language, which indicates that the prayer time and parting was somewhat lengthy (430). F. F. Bruce captures this feeling when, in his commentary, he translates verse 36, “And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down and prayed with them all” (419). The distinct picture is of two parties, each with a deep love for the other, placing the other before the Heavenly Father and asking him to impart and pass on to the other what they were powerless to give. The content or subject matter of the prayer is not explicitly made clear in the passage for, as Joseph A. Fitzmyer says, “We can only speculate about the content of their prayer, since Luke gives no inkling of it” (682). Even though that remains a mystery, James Montgomery Boice believes the surrounding verses offer some very instructive and helpful clues:

I suggest that if we look back carefully over the preceding paragraph, probably we have the gist of what He prayed. In verse 32 ... Paul says, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace." How did He do that? No doubt by praying for them. (349-50)

This deep and well-established relationship between Paul and the Ephesian elders culminated in a way that was natural for followers of Jesus who have a mutual love for God and each other. They purposely and intentionally turned to the Lord in prayer.

### **Another Scriptural Example of Love Motivating Corporate Prayer**

Another example of love and compassion serving as a motivating force for prayer comes from Romans 9 where Paul expresses his heartbreak over the unbelief of Israel. Even though he was the recipient of harsh treatment and periodic persecution at the hands of the Jews since his conversion to Christ, he still was interested in the religious welfare of his brothers and sisters and deeply concerned about their standing with God. In verses 2-3, he highlights the great sorrow and unceasing anguish he has in his heart, saying he would gladly be cut off and cursed from Christ for their sake. His thoughts culminate in 10:1 where he says, "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved." His love and compassion moves him to prayer, compelling him to place this entire situation before the Heavenly Father. While corporate prayer is not referenced in this passage in an overt fashion, Paul's depth of feeling about the situation, coupled with the fact he traveled with an entourage, leads me to believe he undoubtedly made Israel's standing before God a matter of prayer when he gathered together with his companions. Love for God and others manifests itself in prayer. When the love is a shared love, the resulting prayer being a shared experience is a natural consequence as well.

## **Not Just Love for God and Others but Also Love for Each Other**

An additional dimension to contemplate surfaces when one considers the connection between love and corporate prayer. While the primary purpose of corporate prayer is to implore God with petitions, its social nature means a connection is also being formed on a human level. Rosalind Rinker represents those who think these dynamics need to be understood as part of the divine design for corporate prayer. One cannot spend time in meaningful prayer with others and not come away feeling a deeper sense of love for, and connection to, them.

While the primary focus of corporate prayer is intercession about issues outside the immediate circle, certainly nothing is wrong with taking a portion of the time to petition God about personal concerns or internal issues. “When the meeting itself is planned to be an experience in giving Christian love, people will be [more] eager to attend and to participate” (Rinker 39). Relationships deepen and trust grows as people share their secret and private yearnings. The latent potential present in such gatherings is powerful: “True spiritual and even physical healing take place when redemptive love is present” (40), for “honest prayer, not theology, unites us and binds us together in love” (42). Rinker concludes by saying the context of praying together is the place “where the true bond of being brothers is forged” (44). An activity primarily aimed at empowering change in surrounding circumstances and adjacent lives has a definite personal and relational benefit for those who participate in it.

## **The Connection between a Deepening Love and Personal Spiritual Growth**

An expanded love for God and others will inevitably result in spiritual growth. One of the deeply established principles of the Bible is that spiritual growth happens not solely because of one’s intentional communication with God but also because of

interaction with the passion and enthusiasm of others. Proverbs 27:17 speaks of how people sharpen each other the way iron sharpens iron, and Hebrews 10:24-25 commands each person to “consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds” and “not give up meeting together.” Clearly “the rubbing together of lives takes us together to a level where none of us would go individually” (Franklin, “Teaching Transferable Principles” 22). Individuals need spurring on and encouragement. When entangled by discouragement and grief, they need others to surround them with comfort and support.

The payoff of this life on life contact is undeniable for, as Banks says, “When we pray with others, we benefit from the maturing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives” (57). In fact, “the prayer life of Jesus so captivated the sight and hearing of the disciples [that] it provoked their request, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’” (Arnold 25). Having that kind of window and access to the lives of other believers enables people to see Jesus in them and compels them to want to draw closer to him themselves. Banks further illustrates by referencing such an example from the life of John Wesley:

When John Wesley was traveling to Georgia as a young missionary in 1735, his ship was damaged and nearly overturned in a violent storm. A number of Moravian believers were also on the boat, and Wesley had been observing them while on the voyage.... As the storm raged, Wesley became convicted as the Moravians continued uninterrupted in worship and prayer.... [Their] faithfulness in prayer made a huge impact on Wesley’s life, and he grew deeply in spiritual maturity as a result. (57-58)

The powerful witness of the Moravian believers impacted Wesley in a deep way and served as a catalyst for his personal spiritual growth.

Johnston also speaks to the possibilities for spiritual growth that spring from the prayer meeting:

In the prayer-meeting, as nowhere else, are Christian graces thus brought together with powerful reactionary and reflective forces. Here love enkindles love—hearts burn while talking of Jesus by the way: for Jesus

will be there with them, though to eye unseen it may be. Here faith is strengthened by the testimony so simply and so sweetly brought to each other's hearts mutually by exchange of views and feelings. Here hope is confirmed by mutual review of the ground of each other's hope. Here experience is enlarged by mutual exchange of Christian experience, each saying to [the] other, "Come, hear, I will declare what the Lord hath done for my soul." (68)

Corporate prayer unleashes a wide variety of prospects for personal spiritual growth that are the by-product of involvement.

Thompson builds and expands on this idea by spelling out some of the particular manifestations such spiritual growth can take:

The prayer-meeting is a training-school for the promotion of godliness, the increase of love, the strengthening of faith, the quickening of hope, and the stirring up the mind of the brethren to renewed zeal, diligence and fidelity in the work of the Lord." (50)

The possibilities for personal spiritual growth that lie inherent within the activity of corporate prayer are truly staggering. The primary word Wright uses to express what happens to individuals who place themselves in an environment of dynamic corporate prayer is that they become *channels*:

*Channels* [original emphasis] of the Spirit of God. Channels of His Spirit within individual lives. Channels of His Spirit within the immediate society in which they live and move and have their being. Channels of His Spirit within the invisible and universal society always in process of creation, in fulfilment of a transcendent, eternal purpose." (148)

While corporate prayer is a divinely ordained means to fashion change in the lives of people and surrounding circumstances, one cannot overlook the change it facilitates in the lives of those who participate in it. The principle of finding one's life through losing it (Matt. 16:25), while not designed to apply specifically to the anticipated dividends that can be realized as a benefit of participating in corporate prayer, certainly has application for the person who wholeheartedly embraces the practice.

### **Corporate Prayer as a Source of Divine Power Sparked by Agreement**

A third theme that emerges from writings on corporate prayer surrounds the power that stems from the sense of agreement forged in the practice. John Franklin summarizes this principle about as succinctly as possible: “God in his sovereignty has determined something happens when we pray together that transcends praying separately” (*And the Place* 5). When individuals come together and pool their efforts in prayer, an impact that far exceeds their collective individual efforts is enabled and released. A synergy results from collaboration and partnership in prayer.

Watchman Nee is a prime example of thinking along these lines—viewpoints that flow out of his understanding and theology of the church:

The highest and greatest work of the church is to be the outlet of God’s will. The church becomes the outlet of God’s will through prayer.... One person cannot be God’s outlet; there must be two. The principle of two is the principle of the church, the principle of the Body of Christ. Although there are only two in this kind of prayer, the “harmony” is indispensable. (21)

In making this argument, Nee draws from a seminal passage in Matthew 18:18-20 about God doing anything requested by two people who come into agreement. This passage is a reference Sue Curran cites as being “much more than a promise of His faithfulness to those who are willing to join together ... (but) the institution of the Father’s plan to bring the church together to pray” (10). Bounds agrees, “The main, the concluding and the all powerful agency in the church is prayer” (134), and Banks points out that “the word *agree* that Jesus uses comes from the Greek word *sumphoneo*, the root of our English word *symphony*” (original emphasis; 14). The combined insights of these various individuals lead to the conclusion that the stated promise in this verse does not apply to a group of Christians who simply get together but is directed to toward people who are

coming together specifically for the purpose of prayer and who, in the course of their praying, come into a sense of harmony. It applies to a group of people who are in concert and intentional about their praying.

Nee, however, is quick to place some boundaries around this text that blunt the tendency to turn it into a blanket declaration by which God is reduced to a divine vending machine who is obligated to answer specific prayers. He says, “[This verse] does not mean that we force God to do what He does not want to do. Rather, it means that we can command God to do what He wants to do” (9). God’s people praying together can enable him to act in ways that he has previously indicated he longs to act. While people cannot force God’s hand, they can unleash his action. Says Nee, “There must be a move on earth before there is a move in heaven” (8). God is anxious to respond, but he is waiting for people to create conditions that allow for it.

While God is indeed omnipotent, Nee asserts that he needs a channel on earth through which he can manifest his omnipotence. While God obviously has a will, part of being human means having a free will, which means we possess the ability to prevent God from doing what he wants to do. He elaborates, “Although God has determined to do something, He will not do it; He has to wait for His children to be motivated and willing to express His will through their prayer before He will answer their prayer” (36). A fully omnipotent and all-powerful God has willfully and voluntarily limited his strength. At the same time he has also ordained and set in place a channel by which his people can release it—communal, harmonious prayer.

Murray picks up and expands upon the theme of the importance of agreement, citing that the process of coming to agreement has a way of shaping the nature of what is requested and asked:

It isn't enough to generally consent with anything another may ask. The object prayed for must be some special thing, a matter of distinct, united desire. The agreement must be, as in all prayer, in spirit and in truth. To such agreement exactly what we are asking for becomes very clear. We find out whether we can confidently ask for it according to God's will, and whether we are ready to believe that we have received it. (112)

Praying in agreement not only unleashes God to act in accordance with his will, but it also streamlines the petitions of those gathered. The process of coming into agreement attunes and modifies those involved to where they begin to pray more fully in accordance with his will. The series of steps necessary to forge agreement enables corporate prayer to impact and influence both God and those who are crying out to him.

Corporate prayer, says Nee, is “the church saying to God, ‘God, we want your will’” (13). However, the church can only make that statement when a coming together happens or a spirit of agreement emerges. Returning to the anchor passage in Matthew 18:18-20, Nee says, “The emphasis of the Lord Jesus here is not on asking in harmony, but on being in harmony concerning any matter and then asking concerning such matters” (17). Corporate prayer is not a matter of asking God to do what participants want him to do; it is more a matter of coming into agreement and asking him to do what he himself wants to do. When the church prays in harmony, “it is like turning on the tap; the more the tap is turned, the less the pressure becomes” (16). History is ultimately shaped, not by military officials or governmental dignitaries but by a sovereign God who puts forth his hand in power. Corporate prayer is the key that unlocks the compartment where the power resides.

### **Biblical Promises Regarding the Power of Agreement**

This principle of agreement—the power that results when God's people come together—is referenced in Ecclesiastes 4:12 when King Solomon spoke to the power of



unity by talking about how “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” In John 17, Jesus prayed that his followers would be characterized by a sense of unity so discernible and conspicuous that people who looked at them could easily perceive it. Both of these passages are apt illustrations of the possibilities that spring from the manner of unity that can be forged in corporate prayer: “Praying together is one of the ways the unity that Jesus prayed for naturally occurs as the Spirit convicts us, changes our hearts, and draws us together” (Banks 56). The very nature of praying together has a unifying effect on those who participate. One cannot pray with a group of Christian brothers or sisters and remain alienated from them.

### **Historical Voices Regarding the Power of Agreement**

Finney, one of the key figures in the Second Great Awakening and a major proponent of corporate prayer, highlights the unity forged among participants as a key validation for the practice:

One design of assembling several persons together for united prayer, is to promote union among Christians. Nothing tends more to cement hearts of Christians than praying together. Never do they love one another so well as when they witness the outpouring of each other’s hearts in prayer. Their spirituality begets a feeling of union and confidence, highly important to the prosperity of the church. It is doubtful whether Christians can ever be otherwise that united, if they are in the habit of really praying together. And where they have had hard feelings and differences among themselves, they are all done away with, by uniting in prayer. The great object is gained, if you can bring them *really to unite* [original emphasis] in prayer. If this can be done, the difficulties vanish. (114)

Johnston echoes this sentiment when he points to corporate prayer’s ability to bring people together:

The prayer-meeting in a congregation brings Christian brethren often together.... As true Christians know each other better, so will they love each other more. As they love each other more, they will feel their interests more closely identified, and the bonds that bind in one strengthened.... Here they cultivate harmony in affection, so in judgment,

mind and faith, and so live and walk together in blessed unity, preparing more and more for that perfectly blessed harmony when all shall come together in one with Christ. Experience and the divine testimony concur in confirming the truth that the prayer-meeting is the ordinary and efficient means of promoting union of divided churches. (75)

The dynamic of corporate prayer captures people's hearts and bonds them together. It fosters group solidarity and forges a kinship and union necessary for prayer that moves the heart of God. The very act has a way of forging togetherness and engineering a measure of affinity and unity that dissolves and renders void some of the petty issues that can create dissension and conflict in a body of believers.

Samuel Irenaeus Prime highlighted the characteristics of the Fulton Street noonday prayer meeting, as well as the numerous other prayer gatherings that sprung up throughout New York City in the immediately following weeks and months:

A place of prayer was no sooner opened, than Christians flocked to it, to pour out their supplications together. Christians of both sexes, or all ages, or different denominations, without the slightest regard to denominational distinctions, came together, on one common platform of brotherhood in Christ and in the bonds of Christian union sent up their united petitions to the throne of the heavenly giver. The question was never asked, "to what church does he belong?" But the question was, "does he belong to Christ?..." There was no room for sectarian jealousies.... This union of Christians in prayer struck the unbelieving world with amazement. (27-28)

In fact, Prime often referred to the Fulton Street prayer meeting as the "union prayer-meeting" because of the sense of denominational blending and harmony that characterized it. The compelling dynamic dissolved disruptive issues and neutralized contentious or quarrelsome matters. Says Hampel, "Denominational differences were considered important but secondary to the purpose of seeking God's face in prayer" (39). Denominational distinctives were not insignificant or inconsequential. They simply became subservient to the greater purpose of securing the blessing and favor of God through praying together.

The unity forged in corporate prayer expressed itself in a second meaningful way. Not only were people brought together across denominational lines, but it also addressed the long-standing clergy/laity divide. Throughout much of Christian history, this point of separation and disconnection has often been a source of division and dissension. Prime says the corporate prayer gatherings that blossomed in the wake of the Fulton Street noontime prayer meeting helped to remedy this issue:

Another feature of this work is that it has been conducted by laymen. It began with them. It continues with them. Clergymen share in the conduct, but no more than laymen, and as much as if they were laymen. They are often seen in these assemblies. But they assume no control. They voluntarily take their seats, mingle with the audience, and are in no way distinguishable from others, except it may be something peculiar in their apparel, or manners. They oftener sit silent through the meeting than otherwise. Clergymen come to the place precisely for the same reason that others do—because it is the place of *prayer* [original emphasis]. This ... has been eminently successful, and very conducive to its catholic spirit. (57-58)

In corporate prayer the clergy/laity distinction dissolves in light of the awareness that all are part of the *laos* (people) of God.

One of the recurring thrusts of Scripture is that unity among God's people not only serves as a powerful witness to those outside the community of faith but it also brings glory to God. In Ephesians 4 Paul calls on the church to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Praying together is a key way this command can be satisfied, for it visibly unites and joins the people of God together: "Our unity in prayer demonstrates the glory of God at work in our lives in a beautiful way" (Banks 54). The unity and harmony forged through corporate prayer is a winsome witness to an often skeptical and questioning world.

## Agreement as Embodied in the Metaphor of Family

Closely related to this theme of unity is the theme of family, which also has a connection to the activity of corporate prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks to the familial nature of corporate prayer:

The fact simply remains that where Christians want to live together under the Word of God they may and they should pray together to God in their own words.... Here all fear of one another, all timidity about praying freely in one's own words in the presence of others may be put aside where in all simplicity and soberness the common, brotherly prayer is lifted to God.... It is in fact the most normal thing in the common Christian life to pray together. (62)

People who pray together regularly become close and familial—an intimacy and connectedness develops. Sacks cites the results from a 1993 Gallup poll when she states, “The divorce rate among couples who go to church together regularly is 1 out of 2—the same as among unbelievers. But the divorce rate among couples who pray together daily is 1 out of 1153” (150). While the husband/wife relationship is a much different context than the corporate prayer gathering, the principle nonetheless holds: Praying together forges a familial intimacy and cohesion among those who participate. It “intensifies the fraternal spirit and brings all those who truly love the Lord Jesus Christ still nearer to each other” (Thompson 19). Corporate prayer forges caring relationships between two people who, if nurtured and sustained, can come to rival those of family in terms of their closeness and intimacy. At the same time, if people are struggling relationally, one of the ways the problem will reveal itself is in a reticence to come together for prayer. As was stated earlier, one cannot effectively pray with a Christian brother or sister while harboring ill will or malice toward another. Franklin summarizes: “Prayer rides the rails of relationship. When relational conflict exists, believers cannot pray with one another” (*And the Place* 40). Corporate prayer forges an intimacy and closeness between people

that makes being at odds with someone with whom one is praying impossible. The relationship will either be mended or one party will choose to not participate in the activity.

Glen Martin and Dian Ginter highlight this family principle when they refer to prayer as God's oil for relationships (15). Just as a family is composed of different individuals who have different personalities and different views on a variety of issues, so a local church has that same family dynamic. Such a dynamic elevates the importance of corporate prayer: "Prayer provides the lubrication so that as a church, made up of different parts, all members can fit together perfectly, working together without friction to perform a job which they could never accomplish on their own" (15). Martin and Ginter contend the *oil* of prayer, if properly applied, can help all members work together in spite of the differences.

### **Agreement as Embodied in the Metaphor of Body**

Another biblical metaphor intimately related to the idea of family and held up as a support for corporate prayer is the notion of the church as a body. Murray skillfully transitions from the family metaphor to the body metaphor:

Believers are not only members of one family, but of one Body. Just as each member of the Body depends on the other, the extent to which the Spirit can dwell in the Body depends on the union and cooperation of everyone. Christians cannot reach the full blessing God is ready to bestow through His Spirit until they seek and receive it in fellowship with each other. (112)

The same relational connection and intimacy implied in the family metaphor is also present in the body metaphor. People following Jesus and baptized by the Holy Spirit are not only adopted into a family, but they are also fashioned into a body.

Inherent in this body metaphor is the notion of interdependence. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul talks at length about this interdependence and how, even though functions vary, withdrawal and isolation are not appropriate solutions to the potential tension:

God has ordained that our obedience requires teamwork. This does not mean a believer's personal prayer life is now obsolete or has become of lesser importance, but it does imply that being a body requires we regularly encounter Him together. (Franklin, "Teaching Transferable Principles" 9)

Franklin goes on to compare focusing primarily on personal prayer to the exclusion of corporate prayer to the futility of trying to fly an airplane with one wing. Both wings are necessary to the success of the aircraft's flight: "Likewise, the new covenant with its body life demands that we practice both aspects of our relationship with God. This interdependence minimizes arrogance and strengthens love" (10). Focusing on the personal dimension of prayer to the neglect and disregard of its corporate dimension is to embrace only half of the biblical teaching regarding prayer.

### **A Scriptural Example of the Body/Family Metaphor in Action**

One of the great demonstrations of this body/family principle in action is in Acts 21 when Paul is in transit from Miletus to Jerusalem. He and his entourage stopped in the city of Tyre for a week while their ship unloaded its cargo. While there, he met up with the local Christ followers, and they, like the Ephesian elders in the previous chapter, urged him to reconsider his decision to go to Jerusalem. Paul, however, would not be dissuaded. In the voice of a firsthand account—the writer actually being a participant in the event he describes—the Bible says, "When our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray" (v. 5). Bounds zeroes in on the familial image present of the scene: "Here is a family picture of love and devotion where husbands,

wives and even children are present, and prayer is made out in the open air” (556). The presence of the wives and children, as well as the event happening on the beach, demonstrates that prayer was not confined to special times and places but could take place anywhere at anytime.

One of the interesting things about this account is that “this is the first occasion that Tyre is mentioned in the record of the Acts” (Morgan 476). Unlike the situation with the Ephesian elders a chapter earlier, this group of Christ followers in Tyre was not a collection of people with whom Paul had a long history and had developed a deep affection. The original language substantiates this observation as Ajith Fernando points out:

Paul is not acquainted with this church, for the word translated “finding” (*aneurisko*, v. 4) means “to learn the location of something by intentional searching...” [yet] in the short time of a week a warm tie of love in Christ developed between Paul’s team and the Christians in Tyre. (551)

The sense of camaraderie and family quickly emerged between Paul, his entourage, and the Christ followers in Tyre. When time came for them to go their separate ways, they did what Christ followers of that day often did—they gathered together in prayer.

### **Agreement as a Springboard for Spiritual Power**

Mark Dever says, “Corporate prayer is a wonderful acting-out of the ontological unity that we have spiritually as we literally speak with one voice to God.” The unity and agreement forged in corporate prayer gives birth to, and sets the stage for, spiritual power to be unleashed in and through the church. Murray speaks to the latent power resident in corporate prayer sparked by unity and agreement:

Most churches think their members are to gather simply to take care of and edify each other. They don’t know that God rules the world by the prayers of His saints; that prayer is the power by which Satan is conquered, and that through prayer the Church on earth has access to the

powers of the Heavenly world. They do not remember that Jesus has, by His promise, made every assembly in His Name a gate to Heaven, where His presence is to be felt, and His Power experienced by the Father fulfilling their desires. (115-16)

A self-centered and inward looking disposition prevents many people from seeing this rationale for corporate prayer. They cannot embrace its justification because of their preoccupation with personal interests. As a result of their focus on God's ministry to them as opposed to their ministry on God's behalf, they miss out on the opportunity to partner with God and participate in the outworking and demonstration of his power.

Finney speaks often of the power that comes through corporate prayer:

There are two kinds of means requisite to promote a revival; one to influence men, the other to influence God. The truth is employed to influence men, and prayer to move God. When I speak of moving God, I do not mean that God's mind is changed by prayer, or that his disposition or character is changed. But prayer produces a change in us as renders it consistent for God to do as it would not be consistent for him to do otherwise.... Prayer is an essential link in the chain of causes that lead to a revival; as much so as truth is. Some have zealously used truth to convert men, and laid very little stress on prayer ... [and] had so little success. And the reason was, that they forgot to use the other branch of the means, effectual prayer. They overlooked the fact, that truth by itself will never product the effect, without the Spirit of God. (45)

While many view the supernatural response of God to the prayers of his people as a miraculous, sovereign work on his part, Finney downplayed the idea. He believed, "Revival is not a miracle.... It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of constituted means. One of these means [is] the united prayer of Christians" (qtd. in Craig 28). Obviously some thought his views—the matter-of-fact and almost mechanical cause-and-effect relationship between prayer and revival—to be unorthodox and a bit controversial. This notion nonetheless was at the heart of most of the corporate prayer meetings that were established in the late 1850s in conjunction with the Third Great Awakening.



Banks points to the power available through corporate prayer by directing attention to Ephesians 3:20, which says God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” As splendid and magnificent as that promise is in its own right, he sounds a reminder that “[the] words *ask* and *imagine* are plural: The idea here is that we will be asking and imagining *together*” (original emphasis; 18). The Heavenly Father is waiting for people to seek him collaboratively so he can manifest his power and work in ways that reach far beyond anything they could independently dream or imagine.

The consistent and comprehensive testimony of Scripture is that God manifests his power in response to the united prayers of his people. Spurgeon points out, with some degree of irony, that while many Christians say they desire to see a sense of revival, many of those same folks grumble about their church leaders or find fault with their church’s programs rather than supporting and holding up their leaders with their intercessions and prayers. T. Michael O’Neal, Jr. weighs in as well, speaking to the folly and incongruity of such a circumstance:

Before drawing such conclusions, churches ought to acknowledge what is often the ultimate problem: the absence of God’s power.... To receive God’s power, churches should cease their grumbling and pray like Habakkuk: “O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.” (142-43)

The solution to the situation is not to make *this change* or *that change*, or to change out *this pastor* or *that key leader*. The solution is to bring the power of God to bear upon the situation. History has effectively demonstrated that one of the most effective ways to introduce God into a situation and bring his power to bear upon a circumstance is through the united, concerted prayers of his people.

The place in Scripture where this connection between corporate prayer and power shows up most profoundly is in the writings of the apostle Paul. Throughout his epistles, Paul encourages those to whom he is writing to come together and support him with their prayers. To the Romans, he challenges them to strive together with him in their prayers, believing that through them he will be delivered from his opponents and his ministry will prosper (15:30). He incites the Corinthians to pray on his behalf, believing that their prayers will play a vital role in his deliverance (2 Cor. 1:11). To the Ephesians, he intimates that the impact and success of his ministry is, to a large degree, contingent upon their prayers (6:18-19). With the Philippians, he implies their prayers are essential to the turnaround of his adverse circumstances to the extent that they actually contribute to the furtherance of the gospel (1:19). In Colossians, the united prayers of the believers are pictured as absolutely imperative for the opening of future doors of ministry (4:3). In Thessalonians, he challenges his readers not only to “pray ... that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored” (2 Thess. 3:1), but also “that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people” (v. 2). Clearly, “the prayers of the church were to him as real a factor in the work of the Kingdom as the power of God” (Murray 115). In fact, he intimately connected the two: The expansion of the kingdom and the consequent display of spiritual power were largely conditional upon the collective prayers of God’s people.

### **Corporate Prayer as a Measure of a Church’s Spiritual Condition**

A fourth theme that emerges recurrently in the limited writings on the topic of corporate prayer is the belief that corporate prayer is a legitimate gauge as to the health and well-being of a specific congregation. When people measure the success and effectiveness of a church, often times they look at criteria such as buildings, attendance,

financial giving, and expanded ministry offerings. Very rarely is the corporate prayer life of a church figured into the assessment. Franklin likens the church to a house in that the things that most contribute to its soundness and structural integrity are not immediately visible:

When building a new house, do homeowners spend extensive time trying to decide what type of foundation they want? Do they ask about color variations in the concrete or which type of pine to use for studs? Instead, their energies are spent deciding on countertops, cabinets, flooring, and wallpaper ... There's a ... reason for ignoring foundations. When you look at finished houses, *you can't see them* [original emphasis]. You see the externals.... But those externals work only when they're built on solid foundations. The same is true of prayer meetings. (*And the Place* 30-31)

Corporate prayer is a foundational activity for the local church—a largely invisible but highly influential gauge of congregational health.

The practice of corporate prayer is just as much an indicator of church health as the practice of personal prayer is an indication of individual spiritual health: “The state of vital godliness in any church ... may be inferred from its prayer-meetings, and the place they have filled at the time considered. Seasons of spiritual prosperity have been times when social prayer predominated” (Thompson 40). Johnston says, “As the existence of personal religion, and the degree of its power, in the individual may be determined by the fact, and fervor, and constancy of secret prayer, so the state of religion in any congregation may be determined by the fact of prayer-meetings, their constancy, and the spirit by which they are sustained” (71). He continues, “It has been often said—and truly—that the prayer-meeting is the pulse of the church” (72). If a medical patient lacks a pulse, the hospital personnel quickly conclude something is badly wrong. If a local church lacks a pulse, such a diagnosis certainly warrants a similar conclusion.

The Holy Spirit's assurance that Paul, formerly Saul, was praying helped a reluctant Ananias reach out to this former persecutor of the faith in the wake of his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:11). Similarly, widespread participation in corporate prayer is a telling indicator as to the health and spiritual condition of a particular body of believers. John E. DeJong reaches this conclusion in his dissertation:

The research data shows there is a positive correlation between corporate prayer and the spiritual health of a community.... Attendance at specific corporate prayer meetings [also] serves as an effective measure of the perceived spiritual health of those attending. (100)

According to DeJong "the failure of the church today is the failure to engage in prayer-intercession" (37). Laxness, negligence, and indifference in the matter of corporate prayer is a significant indication of impaired congregational health.

Although DeJong's dissertation is a somewhat recent (2004) addition to the body of knowledge on the topic of corporate prayer, his conclusions reinforce some ideas that have been in place for quite some time. Finney reached the same conclusion in the nineteenth century:

A prayer meeting is an index to the state of religion in a church. If the church neglect the prayer meetings, or come and have not the spirit of prayer, you know of course that religion is low. Let me go into the prayer meeting, and I can always see the state of religion there. (126)

He went on to say where corporate prayer is neglected, a pastor is laboring in vain and his or her efforts are not going to produce the desired results. He also cautioned leaders about making sure they are not responsible, citing that "prayer meetings are the most difficult meetings to sustain.... Unless the leader be peculiarly prepared, both in heart and mind, they will dwindle" (127). Finney believed that church leaders who complain about people not supporting the prayer meeting occasionally need to look in the mirror.

Samuel Backus also speaks to the issue of corporate prayer as a measure of a congregation's health:

Religion is not a dormant, inert principle, like latent heat in physical bodies, waiting some new agency to give it development and life; but it is in its nature intrinsically active; it is a power at work; it is the love of God carried out in its appropriate results. Religion being a great common interest, it will follow that, as this interest is prized, the different parties concerned will come together and seek its advancement; and inasmuch as the interests of religion are inseparably blended with prayer, Christians can hardly do otherwise than meet and pray. (4)

A prayer meeting that is cold and dead is a collective example of Paul's caution to Timothy about people who "have a form of godliness but deny its power" (2 Tim. 3:5). A lethargic and listless prayer meeting fits that description.

Spurgeon adds his voice to those who viewed corporate prayer as a true gauge of congregational health. Even though he pastored the prestigious Metropolitan Tabernacle, one of the largest churches in the London area, he never gauged its effectiveness by worship attendance. As he reflected on his first thirty years as the church's pastor, he voiced the following assessment:

We have not begun, we have not continued, we have not ended anything without prayer. We have plunged into it up to the hilt. We have not prayed as we should; but, still, we have prayed so as to prevail; and we wish it to be on the record that we owe our success, as a church, to the work of the Holy Spirit, principally through its leading us to pray. (qtd. in O'Neal 124)

Metropolitan Tabernacle held well-attended prayer meetings on a weekly basis, and Spurgeon's barometer of the health and vitality of the church was those corporate prayer gatherings. He also argues that a church's neglect of the prayer meeting affects the spiritual and numerical condition of the church, for it prevents the church from receiving the full power of the Holy Spirit: "How could we expect God's blessing if we were too idle to ask for it? How could we look for a Pentecost if we never met with one accord, in

one place, to wait upon the Lord?” (qtd. in O’Neal 127). The commitment to corporate prayer was a constant that remained in place at the Metropolitan Tabernacle throughout the whole of Spurgeon’s pastoral ministry.

More recently, Cymbala gets right to the point on the connection between corporate prayer and the health of a congregation: “Prayer is almost proof of a church’s normalcy” (51). In contrast to the many who measure the impact and effectiveness of a church by its size, he counters by offering a different standard of evaluation:

God nowhere asks anyone to have a large church. He only calls us to do his work, proclaiming his Word to people he loves under the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit to produce results that only he can bring about. (123)

He likens a prayerless church to parents who dress up their infant child in cute clothes and show him or her off to their friends and family members while the child is not breathing. People may remark about how cute the child looks, but in fact something is dreadfully wrong. Churches demonstrating growth or evidencing momentum at the expense of corporate prayer are similarly sick. They may look fine on the outside, but a reading of their vital signs indicates a serious problem.

Prayer is designed by God to be one of the signature characteristics of the church and one of the foundational pillars for its building and expansion. Scriptural substantiation is found in numerous places—notably Acts 2:42. A major characteristic of Acts is that Luke, the writer, inserts periodic summary statements that give a rundown of events to this point and serve as a transition from one account to the next within the narrative. Acts 2:42-47 is one such summary statement, one where Luke “show[s] us the effects of Pentecost by giving us a beautiful little cameo of the Spirit-filled church” (Stott 81). Coming on the heels of Peter’s spontaneous sermon on the day of Pentecost when

three thousand were added to their ranks, it says of the early Christians, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer” (v. 42). This verse captures in a single summary sentence the conduct, priorities, and primary style of living of Jesus’ first followers.

The use of the definite article before the word *prayer*, not readily apparent in English, suggests a reference to prayer services or meetings rather than private prayer. The fact that the word is found in the plural—literally *the prayers*—suggests these new believers, who came out of Jewish soil, were still practicing the traditions of their Jewish faith with its prescribed times of daily prayer. Evidence of this carryover is borne out in the very next chapter: “One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon” (Acts 3:1). These two men who had embraced Jesus were still upholding the rhythm of the Jewish faith and maintaining some of the formative practices acquired by a lifetime of involvement. They continued to live out the Temple-based religious practices that had come to define their lives prior to embracing the person of Jesus.

The use of the definite article in reference to prayer, however, does not eliminate or reject the notion of extemporaneous corporate prayer being part of their practice. As Pohill notes, “The reference ... is probably much broader and involves primarily their sharing in prayer together in their private house worship” (120). In other words, while those first converts continued to participate in some of the practices that had come to be a central part of their lives because their observance of Judaism, they also incorporated the practice of gathering for prayer in a way that was free from the Temple. The one clear takeaway from this snapshot of the earliest followers of Jesus is that corporate prayer was seen as a mainstay of the church—one of its underlying supports and essential

underpinnings: “Corporate prayer was not peripheral back then as it often is now. It was central” (Wagner, *Churches* 107). Cymbala poses a question that is disarming in its candor and almost eerie in its revelation: “What does it say about our churches today that God birthed the church in a prayer meeting, and prayer meetings today are almost extinct?” (72). The question is an uncomfortable one that many churches undoubtedly struggle to answer.

Verses such as Acts 2:42 highlight the appropriateness of using corporate prayer as an instrument to gauge the spiritual health and vitality of a particular body of believers—a standard that is at odds with how the lion’s share of churches in North America assess their health and well-being. People espouse various standards as the principal benchmark of congregational health and hold up numerous ingredients as the element of primary importance in congregational life. Cymbala offers this contrarian insight: “We in America have made the sermon the centerpiece of the church, something God never intended. Preachers who are really doing their job get people to come to the throne of grace” (84). Churches tend to evaluate their spiritual soundness by an unspiritual standard, one based on a flawed priority scale. And the results are not just disheartening but off track as well: “What a tragedy that . . . ministry is too often measured by numbers and building size rather than by true spiritual results” (59). When the evaluative scale is defective and distorted, the results are sure to distress and disappoint.

### **Corporate Prayer as a Tangible Expression of Dependence upon God**

A fifth theme held up as an endorsement and support for the practice of corporate prayer is the notion that corporate prayer is a definite and discernible expression of a group’s dependence upon God. Oswald Chambers says, “A great many people do not



pray because they do not feel any sense of need. The sign that the Holy Ghost is in us is that we realize, not that we are full, but that we are empty, there is a sense of absolute need” (qtd. in Verploegh 233). Daniel Henderson speaks to the intimate linkage between prayer and dependence when he says, “Prayer in its simplest definition is depending on God; ... [thus,] prayerlessness is our ‘declaration of independence’ from God” (64). Duke also addresses the topic: “Prayer is, at its root, an expression of our weakness. It is, by definition, a humbling act” (56). Prayer is how God’s people respond to him in thankfulness and praise, how God’s people cry out to him for mercy and deliverance, how God’s people call upon him to accomplish the work of his kingdom: “In short, prayer is how we actively demonstrate our utter dependence on him” (Dunlop). Leaning on God through prayer is a tangible expression of one’s utter and total dependence on him.

Jesus spoke to this idea of dependence when he said, “The Son can do nothing by himself” (John 5:19). One does not typically think of Jesus as being dependent; in fact, quite the opposite. As the Son of God, he was perhaps the most independent and autonomous person that ever lived. Banks offers this reminder: “Yet his life was marked by a dependence on God that stands in stark contrast to the maverick kind of self-reliance so highly regarded in our culture today” (37). Even though he was fully self-determining and totally unconstrained, Jesus lived a life characterized by total reliance upon his Heavenly Father. This posture of reliance and dependence is at the heart of prayer. O. Hallesby says, “True prayer is a fruit of helplessness and faith. Helplessness becomes prayer the moment that you go to Jesus and speak candidly and confidently with Him about your needs” (30). To take prayer seriously is to acknowledge a sense of inadequacy

and powerlessness—concepts not readily embraced in a culture that values autonomy and independence.

Philip Yancey says, “Prayer exposes for a nanosecond what I would prefer to ignore: my own true state of fragile dependence” (21). Part of what motivated the earliest followers of Jesus to give themselves to prayer was their deep sense of desperation and need—a realization they were up against forces and factors that were bigger and more complicated than they were. Today, in the midst of affluence and self-sufficiency, often prayer gets pushed to the sidelines. That for which people strive and that which garners God’s attention are at opposite ends of the spectrum, as Cymbala notes, “God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power” (19). To embrace the call to corporate prayer is to confront the reality of personal vulnerability and weakness first.

Natural human tendency is towards self-reliance, arrogance, and autonomy. While some authors hold up prayer as being fully consistent and in keeping with human nature, others, such as Bill Hybels, refer to it as “an unnatural activity . . . alien to our proud human nature” (7). Prayer, done rightly and sincerely, keeps this tendency towards unhealthy self-confidence in check and mandates coming to grips with a hazardous sense of pride. Corporate prayer keeps this individual proneness toward pride from being institutionalized and standardized by the broader body. In the Old Testament the Lord frequently reminded Israel not to forget him lest their hearts become proud (e.g., Deut. 6:12; 8:11, 14). Corporate prayer serves as a hedge against current-day followers of Jesus falling into that same trap.

One of the great evidences of the secularism of North American culture is the ongoing process of disestablishment and the impact it is having on the church. The

church in North America no longer enjoys the advantaged and privileged position it has occupied in years past. Its voice is being discounted, and its values are being ignored. As this cultural shift plays out, perhaps the church is coming to realize its dependence on God in ways that it has not in the recent past, and is coming to grips with the nature and the level of opposition it is facing. One can only hope it will recover a sense of the importance and possibilities of corporate prayer and give itself to the practice as relentlessly and fervently as those early believers in the book of Acts did. If it is able to do so, it will tap into a source of spiritual power that can enable it to impact today's world just as much as the early Church did theirs:

In the face of a world ignoring Christ's offer of salvation, we can either humble ourselves before God and return to his basics,... or we can go on dancing with ourselves. The potential to see local churches explode with the life of God rests in the balance. (Cymbala 113)

In a world that increasingly resembles the first century, where the church is perceived as an irrelevant entity in an indifferent or hostile environment, the need is for Jesus' followers to return to the style of life of Christ followers from the movement's early days. One of the signals that will indicate such a return is underway is when people place increasing priority on the practice of corporate prayer.

### **The Connection between Dependence and the Furtherance of God's Kingdom**

When Jesus' disciples requested he teach them how to pray more effectively, he responded by sharing with them what has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer. One of the primary requests Jesus indicated they should articulate to God was, "Your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2). Clearly, Jesus believed prayer was critical to the establishment of his kingdom. Given the fact the Lord's Prayer is "a prayer pattern designed primarily for gathered believers, not an isolated disciple in a 'prayer closet'"

(Henderson 109), the clear implication is that collective, united prayer is essential to the outworking and furtherance of the kingdom of God. While personal prayer and corporate prayer are equally important in terms of one's personal spiritual growth, corporate prayer assumes a preeminent position in the facilitation of kingdom expansion. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, no significant renewing work of God in the course of history has transpired without corporate prayer serving as a precursor.

This focus on kingdom, or perhaps more accurately the lack of focus on God's kingdom, is one of the things that undermines so many collective prayer gatherings and contributes to them being forgettable and uninspiring:

Most church prayer meetings focus only on the needs of church members. We review our lists, add requests to them, and pray, making sure to cover everything. These prayer meetings are not heavily attended, because they do not focus on kingdom things. When our prayer meetings turn from seeking added benefits for our people to seeking God, we will see more participation and a greater blessing of God in our midst. (Sacks 188)

A primary motivation for corporate prayer is to assist in the outworking of God's kingdom. But for corporate prayer to provide such assistance, those praying must not allow prayer gatherings to turn inward and become primarily about *my issues, my wants, my needs, and my desires*.

### **A Scriptural Example of Dependence Resulting in the Furtherance of God's Kingdom**

The kingdom of God moves forward on prayer. Acts 2 paints a picture of the early Church—a movement that advanced largely on the power of people's prayers but one that also faced tremendous opposition. Acts 3-4 records a great example of how God's people offset the opposition they encountered by their collective prayers.

Chapter 3 begins when Peter and John, en route to the Temple, pass by a beggar and perform a miracle of healing in his life. The surrounding people are amazed, but the Temple establishment is incensed because Peter and John point to the crucified and resurrected Jesus as the source of power behind this otherwise unexplainable act. The two men are apprehended, imprisoned, and called before the Jewish leadership where they are threatened and warned but ultimately released. Upon their release they returned to the company of believers, who ostensibly had gathered to pray for their deliverance from the Sanhedrin, and report their experiences. The Bible says, “When they [those gathered to pray] heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God” (v. 24). In other words, the prayer meeting did not break up when the two men arrived in answer to the prayers of those who had been interceding on their behalf. Rather, it kept on going “because the response of the believers is to utter a prayer that deals precisely with the subjects of [the] threats” (Gonzalez 62) that Peter and John had shared. The account continues, highlighting some of the substance and content of the longest recorded prayer in the book of Acts. It wraps up by saying, “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (v. 31). These two men, rather than being troubled and disturbed by their life-threatening ordeal, are empowered to continue to speak out at the risk of their personal safety. The collaborative prayers and support of their brothers and sisters in the faith are largely responsible.

The picture of corporate prayer acquired from the prayer meeting in Acts 4 is that of “one person pray[ing] and the whole company giv[ing] audible assent” (Fernando 168). Luke again uses the word *together*, *homothymadon*, which points to the powerful sense of harmony and unity amongst those gathered as they prayed. *Homothymadon* “is a

compound word from *homos* meaning ‘same or together,’ and *thomos* meaning ‘passion, heat, or glow.’ Joining these concepts together, the word can be understood as the same burning of heart, or same heart passion” (Franklin, *And the Place* 48). In other words, these people gathered for prayer were a meaningfully connected and genuinely unified people. The time of prayer ends with the threefold indication (1) that “the place was shaken” (Acts 4:31)—a symbol that “in the Old Testament ... was a sign for a theophany, that is, a manifestation of God in a visible form” (Fernando 170) and “a sign to the disciples of the presence of God” (172); (2) that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:31)—not a second Pentecost, but a “renewed awareness of the Spirit’s power and presence in their life and witness [that] was not an ephemeral ecstatic manifestation, but a fresh endowment of power for witness that would continue” (Pohill 150); and, (3) that “they ... spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31)—“an experience of being inspired, of speaking with a spontaneity and boldness which transcended normal speech” (Dunn 58). Clearly the writer of Acts wants to convey that corporate prayer was a primary force behind the impact of the fledgling church.

### **The Upper Room Principle**

For the reasons detailed in Acts 4:31, one must never underestimate the importance of coming together in prayer to accomplish God’s purposes. It was essential for Christ followers two thousand years ago, and it is equally essential for Christ followers today. In fact Sacks, borrowing a term from Terry Tekyl, highlights a principle called the *Upper Room Principle*:

When God gives a great task, He expects us to seek Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength before we endeavor to do that task, because we must realize completely that His Spirit, not our might or power, will accomplish the work. (18)

Just as was the case in the Acts 2 when the followers of Jesus prayed and the Holy Spirit descended on them and enabled them to participate in the miracle of Pentecost, and just as was the case in Acts 4 when the place was shaken in response to the prayers of the believers, so again God manifests his presence amongst his followers in response to their collective prayers.

Banks speaks to the fundamental relationship between corporate prayer and the continuing advance of God's kingdom:

The relationship between prayer and the kingdom's progress is solidly scriptural. Jesus instructed us to "Ask the Lord of the harvest ... to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:38). God's Word reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). It also tells us that "though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Prayer is a strategic weapon in our arsenal. (110)

God's longing for his kingdom to make headway and eventually envelop people from every tribe, continent, ethnic background and social class is fueled to a great degree by the corporate prayer efforts of those currently affiliated with it.

One of the realities that easily becomes lost in a naturalistic culture is the realization that life is lived in an atmosphere of continual and constant spiritual war. At any given time, battles of cosmic proportion are happening all around. People's eternal destiny is at stake. The well-being of their souls is hanging in the balance. Such a circumstance demands a response on the part of God's people, for, as Sacks says, "It seems that corporate praying provides an opportunity for God to fulfill kingdom promises that don't happen by any other means" (177). It is identified as an essential part of the

wardrobe all believers are called upon to wear when Paul encourages followers of Jesus in Ephesians 6 to “put on the full armor of God” (v. 11).

### **Corporate Prayer as a Means of Acquiring Divine Wisdom and Guidance**

A sixth and final theme that surfaces in the limited literature on corporate prayer and serves as an endorsement for its practice is its use as a means of acquiring divine wisdom and guidance. Corporate prayer was important for the early Church as it sought God’s wisdom for its internal affairs, such as choosing leaders. In Acts 1:24, when the early followers of Jesus are trying to fill the vacancy created by Judas’ apostasy and departure from their circle, a selection process to determine who should step into that void ensued. When they had narrowed the candidates to two individuals, verse 24 says, “Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen.’” They viewed the decision as so significant and important they dared not make it without a sense of God’s guidance and direction.

The words *they prayed* pictures prayer as a group undertaking, a corporate endeavor. Given that the group could not agree or arrive at a place of consensus up until that point, they invoked God’s direction in their choice (Barnes, “Acts—Chapter 1”). As they considered the decision before them, they realized “the decision does not lie with them as to who will replace Judas, just as they had nothing to say about the selection of the original Twelve” (Fitzmyer 227). Their response was to come together and pray, seeking Jesus’ choice in the matter: “For though Jesus was gone, he was still accessible to them by prayer and was acknowledged as having a knowledge of hearts which they lacked” (Stott 58-59). They would never have dreamed of making such a significant and weighty decision without coming together in prayer.



## **A Second Example of Corporate Prayer Utilized as a Source of Guidance**

The leadership selection process throughout the book of Acts is saturated in corporate prayer. It emerges again in chapter thirteen during a brief look into the church in Antioch. The vignette provided of the Antiochene fellowship leads to the belief that “waiting before the Lord in worship and prayer [was] a common experience for them” (Wagner, *Acts* 287), and during one of these sessions God’s Spirit broke in and instructed the congregation to release Paul and Barnabas for a special work—an action they readily did. The section concludes by saying, “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (v. 3). The clarity and assurance of God’s divine leadership, even though the proposition was cutting-edge and the specific nature of the call was somewhat ambiguous, was the direct result of people spending time together in prayer and arriving at a unified and kindred frame of mind.

As was the case in Acts 1:24, this picture of the church coming together in corporate prayer centers around the need for guidance and direction related to choosing leaders. However, a couple of notable differences are discernible. First, the chapter one account involves the filling of a vacancy, but the account in chapter thirteen involves the creation of a vacancy, at least from the standpoint of the congregation in Antioch. Second, what happens after the time of prayer concludes is very different. Where the issue was settled in chapter one through the drawing of lots and the selection of Matthias, in chapter thirteen you have a “picture of the Spirit of God able to make known His will perfectly to an assembly ... [and] the picture of an assembly able to discover His will without doubt, without uncertainty” (Morgan 307). The reaction and responses of the two groups are very different, for, as Everett F. Harrison notes, “The response of the congregation [in chapter thirteen is] made without doubt or question, but with complete

and cheerful compliance” (216). In chapter one—prior to the arrival of Holy Spirit at Pentecost—the followers of Jesus prayed and then determined God’s leadership by drawing lots. In Acts 13 prayer alone was sufficient; the additional step of drawing lots was not necessary. As Bounds points out, “Here was the Holy Spirit directing a prayerful church obedient to the divine leadership, and this condition of things brought forth the very largest possible results in the mission of these two men of God” (552). The gathered believers were so confident and sure of God’s guidance in the wake of their time spent in prayer that they immediately commissioned Paul and Barnabas and released them to answer God’s call.

Albert Barnes comments on the role that prayer played in this passage:

The enterprise was a new one . . . full of danger and hardships. The primitive church felt the need of divine direction and aid in the great work. Two missionaries were to be sent forth among strangers, to be exposed to perils by sea and land; and the commencement of the enterprise demanded *prayer* [original emphasis]. (“Acts—Chapter 13”)

What began in prayer, namely, the modern missionary movement, has been sustained and empowered by it as well. As Fernando notes, “The history of missions is replete with great leaps forward that took place when people got together to pray” (380). Prayer started the missionary movement almost two thousand years ago, and prayer is essential to sustain it.

### **A Third Example of Corporate Prayer Utilized as a Source of Guidance**

The book of Acts gives yet a third instance of the early followers of Jesus turning to corporate prayer as a source of divine wisdom and guidance. As Paul and Barnabas are making their way back to Antioch at the completion of their first missionary journey, Acts 14:23 says they “appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.” While Paul and

Barnabas undoubtedly had conversations about the qualifications of various individuals for these important posts, they depended greatly on hearing God's voice through prayer regarding the people the Holy Spirit had gifted and chosen to lead the churches (Wagner, *Acts* 328). The decision about church leadership was too important to be made hastily or impulsively, so they intentionally prayed as a group before making any decisions or announcements: "Just as the missionaries had been sent forth from Antioch with prayer and fasting, so with prayer and fasting the elders of the Galatian churches were committed to the Lord" (Stott 234). Again, the decision surrounding leadership was seen as so critical they dared not make it without seeking and availing themselves to God's guidance first.

The reference to corporate prayer in Acts 14 occurs within the context of the several summaries Luke uses throughout the book to string the various sections of the narrative together. Prayer is a recurring theme in the course of those summaries. The clear implication is that one of the prime elements woven into the lives of Jesus' first followers, and into the very fabric of the bodies of believers they established, was the notion that coming together to pray was an essential ingredient in how they should manifest their faith. A practical application that springs from this particular passage is the reminder that "eldership was a spiritual ministry of the most vital kind. Their teaching, spiritual governance and exercise of discipline could be undertaken only with the same total dependence on the Lord that characterized their abiding belief in him for salvation" (Larkin 217). Leaders today should exercise and carry out their leadership with that same sense of reliance and dependence upon the Lord. Perhaps the primary evidence of such reliance is a commitment to the practice of corporate prayer. As Jaroslav Pelikan notes regarding this passage, "The precise meaning of the title 'elder' is left unspecified,...

[but] what is specified is the central function of prayer” (169). Regardless of a person’s title, label, or standing, one never rises above the need to turn to prayer as an appropriate response to life’s challenges and complexities.

### **An Example from the Old Testament**

Turning to corporate prayer as a means of divine wisdom and guidance is utilized not only by the first followers of Jesus, but by those in the Old Testament as well. A great example of this application is found in the book of Nehemiah. While in exile, Nehemiah heard reports of the rundown condition of his homeland. His immediate reaction was to pray, and God responded with appropriate guidance, encouraging him to approach the king about leaving his responsibilities so he could journey to Jerusalem and address the situation. Once on site, Nehemiah gathered those who returned with him and led them to come together to pray (Neh. 4:8-9). In the wake of that prayer gathering, they sensed the leadership of God to break the people into two groups—one that would work on the wall and the other that would guard the workers. The implication from the story is clear: Insight into how best to proceed came from spending time in prayer. Banks reiterates this point when he says, “The best kind of action begins with prayer and remains prayerful throughout” (69). The guidance for how to proceed flowed from time spent together in prayer, and the rebuilding effort concluded much more quickly than anticipated in spite of opposition because of the continuing prayer effort.

### **Guidelines for Leading an Effective Corporate Prayer Gathering**

Understanding some of the justifications and rationales for corporate prayer is one thing, but mobilizing people to do it is altogether something else. Having a sense of the *whys* of corporate prayer is very different from possessing the skill set to lead such a gathering so it can have a spiritual impact. A person needs more than understanding in

order to mobilize vibrant corporate prayer. One additional area of focus that emerged from the literature had to do with the leadership skills necessary to empower dynamic and compelling corporate prayer. If corporate prayer is going to thrive and be a source of life and vigor in a local church, the leader must bring some unique skills and competencies to the table. Over a hundred years ago, John F. Cowan wrote, “The trouble is that so many seem to believe that we may leave our brains on the hat-rack when we go to the prayer meeting; prayer is so pious an act that [it] will take care of itself without an expenditure of gray matter” (25). Obviously corporate prayer is not so pious an act it will automatically take care of itself. For it to be an agent of divine power and spiritual breakthrough, effective and capable leadership is essential. Any review of the topic of effective corporate prayer must spend time examining a few basic guidelines that can help leaders avoid the lackluster and lifeless reputation corporate prayer has acquired over the years and enable it to become the influential and dynamic enterprise God has in mind.

Many pastors have had individuals approach them and justify their lack of participation in corporate prayer by saying they will be praying on their own. While God obviously hears and honors individual prayers, the fact remains “the vast majority of people pray privately according to what they see modeled publicly. Therefore, if a pastor wants his people to have dynamic personal prayer lives, he needs to model dynamic corporate prayer” (Franklin, “Teaching Transferable Principles” 24). If the corporate prayer life of the church is anemic, it does not inspire confidence that an individual who has been disciplined by that church will have the necessary skills to pray effectively on his or her own. People require instruction, and often the best way to teach is not by dispensing information but by modeling behavior. God gave the church individuals with

spiritual gifts of leadership and teaching because people need to be led and taught. For that reason, one of the most important sets of skills a Christian leader must develop is the ability to lead a corporate prayer gathering effectively. This ability can either quench or fan into flame the activity of the Holy Spirit.

The identified need for leadership does not mean, however, that the pastor ought to provide personal leadership to every corporate prayer gathering. Cowan argues that “the minister can do better work in developing leaders than he can in leading meetings” (28) and that too much *ministerialishness* can kill the spirit of prayer: “The prayer-meeting that smells too much of the seminary and lexicon is doomed. It must be ‘depulpitized’ before it can be vitalized” (31). He contends that the minister should provide leadership on certain occasions, that “there are some occasions when the white plume of the chieftain should be seen in the van.... The minister who keeps himself from becoming an ‘old song’ in his prayer-meeting is a masterful leader” (28-29). Lay leadership, particularly skilled, rotating lay leadership, introduces variety that can breathe life into the setting and prevent it from becoming monotonous and pedestrian.

The resources on the topic of facilitating effective corporate prayer gatherings are limited. Most books I discovered on the topic did not refer to the skills needed to facilitate an effective gathering specifically for corporate prayer but to the pastor’s role in leading prayer within public worship services—a reality that falls outside the definition of corporate prayer set out in Chapter 1. Part of the reason corporate prayer is struggling in North America is because clergy do not feel adequately trained and competent to lead. DeJong indicates that while pastors tend to agree with the idea that corporate prayer is essential, “interviews ... with a number of pastors [from] diverse religious backgrounds reveal that only a few teach, model, and engage in the practice of corporate, guided,

listening prayer” (12). Given Wagner’s belief that “*the prayer ministry of the local church will rise or fall on the leadership role of the pastor*” (original emphasis; *Churches* 84), the result is a situation that has disintegrated largely due to a lack of leadership. As Craig notes, “United prayer meetings require good leadership to initiate and sustain them” (32). Until leaders rise to the challenge and fill that void, corporate prayer will continue to suffer.

Backus believes the expertise and aptitude necessary to facilitate effective corporate prayer stems from a different set of skills than what makes for effective service in other arenas of ministry:

I am constrained to believe, that rightly and skilfully to conduct the exercises of a prayer-meeting requires rare qualifications; more rare than is commonly supposed. Even ministers more often fail here, than in any other pastoral gift. They deem the thing so plain and so easy that they never learn to do it well. (54)

Turning to the same *ministerial toolbox* and pulling out some of the same tools they rely on in other realms and spheres of ministry may not serve pastors well in enabling and empowering corporate prayer.

Cowan spells out the need for a different approach in a very clear and picturesque way while highlighting some of the potential pitfalls:

The prayer-meeting should be a very human meeting.... Here are human beings, with human infirmities and yearnings, just from a human atmosphere, seeking divine compassion and help in their human frailty. It makes all the difference whether the leader puts himself alongside them, as a brother who understands their week-day life, and yearns with human pity to point them to the One who can help, or whether he forgets the humanness of the situation, and elevates himself on his theological or philosophical stilts, away above his people. The trouble with some minister-led prayer-meetings is that the minister’s vocabulary, the trend of his thinking, are a story or two above the pews in which the people sit, and no elevator is running.... The [manner] with which the minister leads the prayer-meeting is often the unconscious executioner of all the unborn prayers that were springing from the hearts of the worshippers.” (34-36)

In some ways, effective leadership in corporate prayer requires the pastor to step back from the role and position of pastor and engage with others as a fellow struggler. It requires a level of exposure, openness, and vulnerability that is not always comfortable.

Dwight L. Moody says, “I have noticed ... that in traveling up and down the country, and after mingling with a great many ministers, that it is not the man that can preach the best that is the most successful, but the man that knows how to get his people together to pray” (qtd. in Thompson 42-43). Until leaders develop the necessary skills to empower compelling corporate prayer gatherings, pastors will continue to perpetuate a flawed model, and this dynamic activity will remain a comparatively anemic practice.

### **Common Corporate Prayer Hazards**

Part of the reason leadership is essential is because of the numerous hazards that can undermine a spiritual atmosphere in a corporate prayer gathering. The most prevalent dangers center around the participants’ prayers. Backus spells out a variety of prayer pitfalls of which leaders should be aware. First is historic prayer that involves “sentimental moralizing on passing or past events” (68). Second is didactic or doctrinal prayer where “some portion of theological truth [comes] before the mind,... [but] it neither pleases or edifies” (68). Third, he warns against suggestive or argumentative prayer where a person will suggest thoughts and considerations to God as though they are new to him (68-69) or plead and argue as if he is trying to force God to do what the pray-er wants (69). Fourth, he cautions against meditative prayer that involves “topics of thought and reflection [being] brought forward,... which proceed from no particular desire and aim at no result” (69). Fifth, he alerts leaders to preaching prayer, which he describes as prayer “made up of argument and exhortation, on points of doctrine or duty, really meant for hearers though in form addressed to God” (70). Sixth, unduly eloquent or



poetic prayers that are overwrought with flowery language and are more about the admiration and applause of others than the answer and response of God (70) can sidetrack a gathering. Seventh, experimental prayer, which is the term he uses for prayers that unnecessarily dwell on the particulars of the situation to where the basic request gets lost, can send a corporate prayer gathering down a ruinous path. Because of the potential for each of these types of prayer to derail a corporate prayer gathering, coupled with the fact that Satan is active and would like nothing more than to render corporate prayer ineffective, wise, spiritually sensitive, and skilled leadership is necessary for corporate prayer to flourish and thrive.

### **The Uniqueness of Leading Corporate Prayer**

While a knowledge and awareness of some basic skills and techniques can contribute to the effectiveness of a corporate prayer gathering, a caution must also be sounded. Cymbala speaks a word of appropriate warning:

The format of a prayer meeting is not nearly as important as its essence—touching the Almighty, crying out to God with one’s whole being. I’ve been in noisy prayer meetings that were mainly a show. I have been with groups in times of silent prayer that were deeply spiritual. The atmosphere of the meeting may vary; what matters most is that we encounter the God of the universe, and not just each other. (30)

His point is quite simple: A bank of skills cannot produce a spiritual environment, and a mechanical set of techniques cannot create a mood conducive to the presence of the Holy Spirit. What happens in a corporate prayer meeting is not merely a social phenomenon; it is a spiritual gathering. A bidirectional sense of connection is taking place. Connection is not just happening with each other on a horizontal plane, but it is also happening with God on a vertical plane. Thus, before identifying and exploring some specific principles

and guidelines that assist in the effective guidance of a corporate prayer gathering, the life and character of the person providing the leadership must be examined.

Sacks spells out a number of essentials: (1) a sense of divine call, (2) a healthy personal prayer life, (3) spiritual maturity, (4) leadership gifts, and (5) adequate time (37-42). While many of these qualifications are not unique to the person who would lead a corporate prayer ministry but would apply to anyone serving in a variety of different capacities, the fact remains that effective leadership in the arena of corporate prayer requires not only a mature character but also competent leadership.

Finney reiterates the importance of effective leadership in a corporate prayer gathering:

When there is an unhappy want of confidence in the leader, there is no hope of any good. Whatever the cause may be, whether he is to blame or not, the very fact that *he* [original emphasis] leads the meeting will cast a damp over it, and prevent all good." (119)

His statement does not mean that the only person qualified to lead a corporate prayer gathering be someone of immaculate and flawless character. If such were the case, corporate prayer would rarely be implemented: "Some imperfect mortals must lead meetings, and must lead them successfully.... The self-righteousness of the Pharisee is a worse element of weakness than the blundering impulsiveness of a Peter" (Cowan 59).

The important ingredients are sincerity and earnestness: "There is more sympathy between an average audience and the leader who is human in blundering and erring, than there is between the average prayer-meeting audience and the leader who is a perfect paragon of propriety" (60). The bottom line, however, is that effective guidance is essential if the gathering is to realize its possibilities. Human foibles, personal biases, and

personality quirks can slip in and undermine the effectiveness of a corporate prayer gathering unless one is vigilant.

Miglioratti, however, highlights the distinction between leadership and facilitation and says that effective guidance of a corporate prayer gathering is more a matter of facilitation than leadership. As it relates to prayer, leadership is more often about doing the praying—when one is asked to *lead* in prayer, he or she is typically expected to verbalize the prayer in that setting. Facilitation, on the contrary, is about providing encouragement and opportunities for others to pray (Fuqua 29). Leadership relates to casting vision, setting clear direction, and providing compelling action steps. Leaders are like symphony conductors—determining the tempo and standing front and center for all to see and follow. Facilitation, in contrast, is a much different enterprise that requires a much different approach:

[Facilitators must] have a clear focus and have prepared an anticipated format but are constantly submissive to the leading of the Holy Spirit ... They perceive themselves as an assistant to the Holy Facilitator, seeking the mind of Christ then guiding, even redirecting, the praying in that direction.” (Miglioratti 315)

The mental mind-set necessary in a situation where one is serving as a *facilitator* is very different than the mind-set of a *leader*. Dennis Fuqua says, “The most important *human* factor in dynamic corporate prayer is the facilitator and his/her ability to cooperate with the Lord so that people really are able to connect with God” (original emphasis; 44). In one sense, effective facilitation requires an ability to enter in and create an atmosphere conducive to authentic and genuine prayer. In another sense, it requires an ability to step back from the situation and sense the movement of the Holy Spirit among the group. In some ways these two objectives appear to be mutually exclusive, but they must be held in balance in the interest of effective facilitation. This understood tension sets the scene for

a brief examination of four basic skills necessary to empower effective, heartfelt prayer within a group assembled for that purpose.

### **Establishing a Focus on God**

God has invaded the universe in which we live. Jesus' arrival on planet Earth affirms God's desire that every person might know and encounter him. For that reason, the first essential skill is the ability of the leader/facilitator to create an environment that maximizes the gathering's potential to help people focus on God. Fuqua says, "The primary purpose of dynamic corporate prayer is that people might encounter God" (107). As to what is realized by such an encounter or what it means, Banks offers a practical bit of advice drawn from the life of Jesus: "Just as Jesus withdrew His disciples to a quiet place and Paul met his companions outside of Philippi to pray, the space where you meet should be as free from distractions as possible" (89). Making the setting free from distraction involves everything from being aware of its feel—lighting, competing noise, sound amplification—to reading the prayer dynamic (i.e., Is the silence happening right now because people are contemplating and listening to God, or is it an indication that this particular topic of prayer has been completed?). In many ways it involves successfully navigating a balance between two equally dangerous and misleading extremes: "Facilitators should neither quench the Spirit (saying no to a new leading because they are not sensitive) nor grieve the Spirit (moving in a direction not intended by the Spirit or moving prematurely)" (Miglioratti 317). As mentioned earlier, the facilitator needs to multitask. While being a praying participant, he or she also needs to be something of an observer in order to sense the engagement of the people as well as the leading of the Holy Spirit.

One of the oft-overlooked skills necessary for effective leadership has to do with the transparency of the facilitator. While the facilitator needs to manifest an obvious openness and vulnerability, he or she also needs to maintain appropriate caution. Banks warns about leaders projecting their own discouragement onto the group, praying a complaint and using the gathering as a forum to air grievances, or using the setting as an avenue “to teach, preach, or attempt to assert your opinions upon others. Remember that you are addressing God, not people. Avoid praying in a way that you would not pray if alone with God” (145). While leaders must be genuine and transparent in the way they conduct themselves, they must also bear in mind they are providing a model for everyone else in the group. For that reason, they should ensure the prayers they pray are faith-filled and focus primarily on the ability of God rather than the problem or the difficulty.

Finney believes the primary role of the facilitator is to help people concentrate, to create in those present a sense of being in the presence of God. If a specific passage of Scripture is particularly applicable and serves to help people focus, he or she should feel free to use it. However, the leader should not feel compelled to use it as a matter of convention or custom or procedure. Neither should he or she select such a lengthy and drawn-out passage that draws participants’ minds away from a focus on God. He reiterates this same point as it relates to singing:

*A great deal of singing often injures a prayer meeting. The agonizing spirit of prayer does not lead people to sing.... Singing is the natural expression of feelings that are joyful and cheerful. The spirit of prayer is not a spirit of joy. It is a spirit of travail, and agony of soul. (original emphasis; 122)*

While singing at the outset of the gathering may help people voice their praise, or initially concentrate, or contribute to an awareness of God’s presence, its use should be judicious. An ingredient that some believe would augment the atmosphere can, in fact, diminish it.

One of the problems leaders often face is that many of their people do not have a heart for praying. Backus suggests this problem is often the result of people not giving adequate focus on the character of God and downplaying or dismissing his present-ness and attentiveness to life needs and circumstances. Franklin suggests an effective way to combat this reality is to develop a small group for informal mentoring. This kind of group can help establish a focus on God with the larger group because their presence “will carry ... excitement into the prayer meeting, and their enthusiasm will begin to influence others” (*And the Place* 180). Such a focus may take time to establish, for no shortcuts exist. Effective corporate prayer will not happen until the leader/facilitator is able to establish a focus on God within the group.

### **Helping People Become of One Accord**

As a facilitator a second key skill is the ability of the person providing guidance to discern and relate the *here-and-now reason* for that particular time and place of praying. Finney touches upon this key element of corporate prayer facilitation: “The design of the prayer meeting should be to bring Christians to the point, to pray for a definite object” (116). Wandering and meandering prayer that drifts aimlessly and easily gets sidetracked is the saboteur of effective and meaningful corporate prayer.

Guiding people to become of one accord is more difficult with a larger group. While such guidance should never provide a rationale for restricting the size of a group or encouraging a lesser base of participation, the knowledge that the effectiveness of corporate prayer is not dependent upon numbers is heartening. As Franklin says, “Throughout the Bible and history, the sheer weight of numbers never determined some critical mass needed to tip the hand of God” (*And the Place* 32). The key ingredient is unity, going from being on a variety of personal agendas to being on God’s agenda.

Corporate prayer, when done appropriately, should serve a unifying purpose, for “the strength of corporate prayer lies in the unified purpose of the whole group” (Sacks 176). Corporate prayer, however, can become incredibly divisive with detrimental results when it becomes a mechanism for voicing personal discontent and unhappiness or when it becomes a medium for the expression of pride on either the leader’s or participants’ part. Part of the leader/facilitator’s job is to be sensitive to “the motions of the Spirit of God” (Finney 124) and to make sure that prayers “never spring from a motive to impress others with our spirituality” (Banks 145). In fact, Finney goes so far as to say, “An illy conducted prayer meeting often does more hurt than good” (126). Corporate prayer, while a practice pregnant with positive possibilities, is also a pursuit that can lead down a perilous path if not led and facilitated wisely.

Finney also elaborates on this idea of the leader/facilitator maintaining an appropriate guardedness and exercising caution in regards to the various dictums and directives of a specific prayer meeting:

Introducing *subjects of controversy* into prayer will defeat a prayer meeting. Nothing of a controversial nature should be introduced into prayer, unless it is the object of the meeting *to settle that thing*. Otherwise, let Christians come together in their prayer meetings, on the broad ground of offering united prayer for a common object. And let controversies be settled somewhere else. (original emphasis; 123-24)

While the transparency and genuineness of the leader/facilitator in his or her praying is essential to the effectiveness of a particular prayer gathering, he or she also needs to be wise. Raising the wrong topic in the wrong way can quickly send it in a negative direction. In addition to being judicious about his or her own words, promptly and lovingly getting the meeting back on track if another participant heads off in a detrimental direction is an essential ingredient of effective leadership/facilitation.

Dever reinforces this notion with a reminder that when one is praying aloud in a corporate prayer gathering, he or she is talking not only to God but to the others gathered as well: “If you’re praying out loud, you’re talking to them in part.... If you’re opening your mouth and asking us to close ours, then you are in part speaking to us.” A practical way for leaders, and all participants for that matter, to exercise appropriate caution and keep from imposing their personal ideas on the gathering in an unhealthy fashion is for each person to frame his or her prayers in terms of *we* not *I*. The use of *we* is a reminder that each one is not merely representing him or herself before the Lord, but is also representing the rest of those present and will help prevent issues that have the potential to undermine unity and dampen the sense of God’s presence from emerging.

Along these lines, Sacks talks about the need for facilitators of corporate prayer gatherings to maintain an eternal perspective. When people come together to pray, they need to be reminded, “They are there to change the world through their prayers. This keeps the group’s focus from being too narrow or self-centered and opens the door to true one-accord praying” (182). Praying that settles for less than changing the world is praying that devalues the promises of God and fails to embrace the innate potential and unrealized possibilities that are present when people come together to pray.

Another practical guideline to enable participants in corporate prayer gatherings to become of one accord is for the leader to provide a topic or structure that will guide the gathering. The idea is not to be so tight or restrictive as to prescribe what individual participants will pray about, but to establish appropriate parameters and boundaries that will help to develop a sense of harmony and solidarity amongst those present. Thompson provides a practical example:



Suppose the subject to be, 'Christ the Light of the World.' One speaker may be led to present the physical analogies of the sun, as the source of light, heat and chemical power, and then pass from that to consider the moral condition of the heathen world without the light of the Sun of Righteousness. Another speaker may be led to present Christ as the light of the world that reveals the Father; that fills it with the warmth of divine love, and becomes the source of all holy and heavenly activities. Another may present the duty of preaching the Gospel to the heathen, as shown by those contrasts of light and darkness. And another, finally, may dwell upon those passages of Scripture which present Christ as the light of heaven. He is the light of the present world, and he will also be the light of the world to come.

In this way the prayer-meeting will ... be kept from running into "ruts and set phrases," which ... eventually become old and tiresome. (86-87)

Effective facilitation is a balancing act. One needs to have sufficient discernment and spiritual sensitivity to provide effective guidance and give the gathering a sense of focus without being overly directive so it loses the communal and participatory dynamic essential to its effectiveness.

The challenge of trying to maintain this balance is a particularly difficult one as Jonathan Graf believes much of what transpires under the umbrella of corporate prayer does not qualify or meet the criteria for such. In his mind, "[m]ost prayer that takes place in church settings is *not* corporate prayer. It is more often individual prayer in a corporate setting.... True corporate prayer seeks God's face *as one body in one voice about one thing*" (original emphasis). To pray corporately actually involves setting personal agendas aside and coming together as a group around a central focus. A key role of the leader/facilitator is to help establish such a focus and bring about a sense of oneness in a very gentle but determined fashion.

Backus agrees, underscoring the importance of the group coming together in a sense of oneness and harmony in their praying:

It is a mockery to talk about agreement in prayer, where fifty, or a hundred things, however good in themselves, are jumbled together, without any

order; being not only unknown to the hearers, but as is often the case, unpremeditated, by the speaker himself. Christ never meant such unpremeditated, multifarious, miscellaneous praying when He said, "If two of you shall agree on earth, as touching anything ye shall ask, it shall be done for them, of your Father who is in Heaven." (64)

Allowing room for the Holy Spirit to guide and praying as one about the things that are on God's heart helps a group truly enter into the communal aspect of corporate prayer.

The leader/facilitator has a responsibility both to have a plan as well as to lead the gathering in a manner that is sensitive to the movement and prompting of the Holy Spirit:

We never ought to appoint or to attend a prayer-meeting, without having before us some desired and expected result, which can be conceived of in thought, and expressed in words. Otherwise, any good that may be gained can be nothing more than what is called a "lucky accident"; a thing of rare occurrence, and never to be trusted. (22-23)

Just as an archer should have a target in view before pulling back the string and releasing an arrow, so the leader/facilitator of a corporate prayer gathering should have an objective or goal in mind. To fail in this regard is to open the door to haphazard and indiscriminate praying, which is typically counterproductive.

Finney speaks often of random and arbitrary praying as a hindrance to effective corporate prayer. A way to combat this obstacle involves the leader/facilitator highlighting a biblical promise or principle as a point of focus—encouraging participants to pray along a specific theme or motif or to use a verse as an invitation for participants to pray about a need that somehow connects to it. Finney believed such suggestively unassuming guidance provided participants with the ground of encouragement to expect answers to their prayers:

If there is any indication of Providence, or any promise, or any principle in the Divine government, that affords a ground of faith, let him [the leader/facilitator] call it [the Scriptural promise] to mind, not let them [those gathered] be talking out of their own hearts at random. (116)

Too much Scripture can cause a gathering to misplace its focus, but too little can prevent it from ever emerging. The appropriate use of Scripture is a wonderful way to unite hearts and instill agenda harmony. The need is for the leader/facilitator to do enough to provide appropriate direction, thus avoiding the hazard of praying erratically or without hope of a divine response. Finney speaks of that potential pitfall:

One reason why prayer meetings mostly accomplish so little is because there is so little common sense exercised about them. Instead of looking round for some solid footing on which to repose their faith, they just come together and pour forth their words, and neither know nor care whether they have any reason to expect an answer. (117)

Finney believed if a group was going to pray concerning a matter about which some doubt existed in regards to the ground of faith, they should be shown the reason for believing their prayers will be heard and answered. Not only does the Bible give guidance in this regard, but so does the assembling of God's people in prayer. If, as the Bible states, the Holy Spirit is in the midst of two or three people who come together under the banner of Jesus, then those present can count on the guidance he provides to bring focus and a measure of centering to the praying that happens in that setting.

### **Eliciting a Broad Base of Participation**

Charles H. Spurgeon highlights a third guideline for effective corporate prayer with the following practical advice to those who would provide leadership or guidance to such a gathering:

Persuade all the brethren to pray aloud. If the younger and less-instructed members shrink from the privilege, tell them they are not to speak to man, but to God. Assure them that it does us all good to hear their groans and ineffectual attempts at utterance.... If a child may not talk at all till it can speak fluent English, will it ever learn to speak well? There should be a process of education going on continually, by which all the members of the church shall be able to contribute of their experiences and gifts; and in such a course of development, the first hesitating, stumbling,

ungrammatical prayer of a confused Christian may be worth more to the church than the best prayer of the most eloquent pastor.

The behavior he encourages and the principle he advocates centers around the leader/facilitator's ability to elicit a broad base of participation.

Related to this notion of encouraging breadth of participation is the ability of the leader/facilitator to encourage participants to keep their prayers short. Finney says participants in a corporate prayer gathering should be encouraged to "keep to the point, and pray for what they came to pray for, and not follow the imagination of their own foolish hearts all over the universe" (118). He was of the opinion that persons who pray drawn-out, lengthy prayers in a prayer meeting do not do so because they possess a spirit of prayer but because they lack it. Lengthy praying is just as defeating to the sense of blessing that can arise from corporate prayer as a situation where everyone refuses to pray aloud. In the latter, participants will have difficulty sensing the blessing of God because no one is willing to speak up and serve as a catalyst. In the former, the difficulty will come because a single voice is monopolizing the proceedings. As Sacks says bluntly, "Spiritual ball hogs are not team players" (181). The key is for each person to keep his or her individual prayers brief so the group's prayer can keep moving along. In fact, "a good rule of thumb is that the *larger* the group, the *shorter* the prayers of each person should be" (original emphasis; 180). When many participate and no one monopolizes, the setting is ripe for a sense of God's presence to be experienced by all involved.

Spurgeon reinforces this same emphasis on each person keeping his or her individual prayers short:

Let the brethren labour after brevity. If each person will offer the petition most laid upon his heart by the Holy Spirit, and then make room for another, the evening will be far more profitable.... Compare the subjects of prayer to so many nails; it will be better for a petitioner to drive one

nail home with repeated blows, than to deal one ineffectual tap to them one after another. Let as many as possible take part in the utterance of the church's desires.... Better to have six pleading earnestly, than two drowsily; far better for the whole meeting that the many wants should be represented experimentally by many intercessors, than formally by two or three. As a general rule, meetings in which no prayer exceeds ten minutes, and the most are under five, will exhibit the most fervour and life; in fact, length is a deathblow to earnestness, and brevity is an assistant to zeal. (10)

As a general rule, the broader the base of participation the more life and vitality a specific gathering will possess. The challenge of the leader/facilitator is to help those who are more inhibited and intimidated to speak up and encourage those who are more comfortable or vocal to scale back their involvement so others can participate.

Perhaps the greater of those two challenges is getting some people to speak up and participate, as there will “always be a considerable percentage of Christians who will consider their religious experiences their private property, and who will prefer to obey exclusively the injunction, ‘When thou prayest enter thy closet’” (Cowan 120). However, their unwillingness to engage verbally essentially reduces prayer to the responsibility of a gifted few—an action that not only denies the notion that prayer is the function of every believer but also tends to move things in the direction of prayerlessness (Jones 5). Simply sharing this insight is a good first step in helping those present feel comfortable speaking aloud. Drawing out the participation of others, encouraging the contributions of all present, and creating an environment that feels safe to those battling timidity or hesitancy can foster a positive spirit in a corporate prayer gathering. An effective leader/facilitator walks the line between the extremes of encouraging people to participate and pressuring them to do so. People pressured to pray against their will can squelch a gathering, but so can failing to encourage those who are tentative or nervous. An effective leader/facilitator

must be able to find that occasionally elusive and evasive middle ground and help the group sidestep both snares.

### **Being Open and Maintaining Flexibility**

A fourth guideline for empowering effective corporate prayer centers around having a plan in place but maintaining a sense of flexibility that allows the leader to draw in those present. While corporate prayer can serve as a laboratory where those who are uncomfortable or insecure in prayer can be encouraged to stretch outside their comfort zone, the fact remains the setting requires a skilled leader to flourish:

Loving, spiritually sensitive leadership is vital for effective praying together, to gently correct missteps and encourage prayer that is considerate of others and keeps the glory of God as its goal. *Because praying together is a lost art, people need to be taught how to pray together.* (original emphasis; Banks 91)

A leader needs to approach a gathering having some things thought out, but he or she also needs to hold these things loosely in order to maintain a sense of spontaneity. Cowan expands on this idea:

It scarcely need be added that the real prayer-meeting leader will himself be Spirit-led. No leader's plans should be so cut-and-dried as not to be flexible and obedient to the promptings of the Spirit that come after the leader has done his best to prepare. The Spirit will not supply the lack of our own brains and common sense; He will not help the lazy leader. But he will lead the alert, consecrated leader. (57)

A willingness to make plans but not be so wed to them that you can not flex or adjust in light of the Holy Spirit's desires and preferences is a necessary skill to facilitate corporate prayer effectively.

Backus speaks of this same ability as essential for the successful implementation and guidance of corporate prayer:

If we rightly judge, the great requisites are, a nice and quick perception of times and circumstances, and a skill in drawing out minds in such a way

that they shall not feel conscious of any external influence. Much is said about using freedom in social meetings, and all feel the value of it; and yet this freedom, duly regulated, is seldom obtained. We generally find formal stiffness, or wild disorder.... The great secret lies in [the leader] throwing out the right thought, at the right time, and in the right way, so that all shall at once catch hold of it, as a suggestion of their own minds, and feel an instant desire to hear and talk freely about it. (54-55)

In many ways, this *skill* is not so much a *skill* as it is a matter of gifting—the gift of discernment. One who would provide effective leadership to a corporate prayer gathering must possess the discernment necessary to know what to do and when to do it.

Corporate prayer facilitation is more art than science, and providing effective leadership more about spiritual sensitivity than mastering specific methods or techniques. Finney said the spiritually sensitive and discerning leader must be insightful and judicious:

[The leader] can see the movements of Providence, and can feel the Spirit of God, and understand what he is leading them to pray for, so as to time his subjects, and take advantage of the state of feeling among Christians. He will not overthrow all the feeling in a meeting by introducing other things that are incongruous or ill-timed. He has spiritual discernment to understand the leadings of the Spirit, and his workings in those who pray, and to follow on as the Spirit leads. (120)

Freedom and flexibility are essentials if the prayer gathering is to have a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence. If the plan or structure is so rigid that it cannot be altered, it can functionally inhibit rather than promote the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### Summary

In review, the six themes that emerged from a review of literature on the topic of corporate prayer and served as a skeletal structure for this synopsis were

1. Corporate prayer as an activity consistent with human nature,
2. Corporate prayer as a demonstration of love for God and others,
3. Corporate prayer as a source of divine power sparked by agreement,

4. Corporate prayer as a measure of a church's spiritual condition,
5. Corporate prayer as a tangible expression of dependence upon God, and
6. Corporate prayer as a means of acquiring divine wisdom and guidance.

The four basic guidelines for the effective leadership of a corporate prayer gathering that emerged as nonnegotiable absolutes were

1. Establishing a focus upon God,
2. Helping people become of one accord,
3. Eliciting a broad base of participation, and
4. Being open and maintaining flexibility.

### **Research Design**

The design of the research was phenomenological in nature with three different types of non-probability sampling employed to identify the research subjects. I used judicious, or purposive, sampling to begin the process of identifying appropriate churches and pastoral team members. I then used snowball sampling to expand the list of potential participants, and convenience sampling factored into the process as individuals agreed or declined to participate in the study.

As phenomenological research involves the qualitative analysis of narrative data, the method of analysis must be quite different from more traditional or quantitative methods of research. Janet Waters clarifies, "The first principle of analysis of phenomenological data is to use an emergent strategy, to allow the method of analysis to follow the nature of the data itself." Appropriate data for analysis came through administering an intentionally open-ended set of questions called the beliefs and values extraction protocol to each participant. I transcribed and converted the narrative data from each interview into electronic documents for the purpose of analysis and coding.



The analysis of the data involved three iterations of coding: (1) open coding, where I identified and named the various themes that emerged from the data, (2) axial coding, where I sought to identify relationships and connections among themes, and (3) selective coding, where I identified and connected the remaining themes to the core category or central phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

A dearth of the practice of corporate prayer exists in the North American church. Something viewed as an essential lifeline to the first followers of Jesus is seen in many places as an unnecessary tradition or optional proceeding. The apostles in Acts 6 perceived it as a ministry responsibility every bit as important as preaching and teaching the word of God. Although the recipient of sporadic and intermittent attention throughout Christian history, a sense of spiritual power and divine renewal emerges whenever people take it seriously. A variety of persuasive and convincing justifications for the practice have been provided, and a number of practical guidelines for its effective implementation have been offered. However, it continues to struggle to gain traction in the North American context.

This research project was administered and carried out against this backdrop in an attempt to understand the underlying congregational beliefs and values that make for the effective implementation of corporate prayer in the North American context. Perhaps churches that successfully engage their congregants share a particular theological tenet. Perhaps they are composed of a higher percentage of recent converts. Perhaps calendars are liberated from a variety of competing activities because church programming is controlled. Perhaps a socioeconomic component causes people to feel a heightened sense of desperation. Perhaps something as basic as the vision and passion of the pastor is

responsible. The hope of this research was to gain insights into the successful implementation of this practice that will empower an enhanced effectiveness, and ultimately introduce a sense of renewal, into the North American church.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem and Purpose

A lack of alignment exists between the practice of corporate prayer as portrayed in the Bible, particularly the book of Acts, and the level of participation this activity receives in the typical North American church. The purpose of this study was to identify common beliefs and values present in exemplar churches in the arena of corporate prayer, and how those beliefs and values were transferred and converted into specific practices that allowed a high percentage of congregants of these churches to follow more fully the example pictured in the early Church.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify threads of commonality relating to the underlying beliefs, values, and life experiences from the pastoral team members of these exemplar churches that allow them to implement corporate prayer initiatives that generate widespread participation and involvement by their congregants. The lack of corporate prayer is a widespread problem, but some outlier churches are able to mobilize a movement of corporate prayer successfully within their congregational lives. This study sought to unearth some of the specific beliefs, values, and practices that enable these outlier churches to succeed where so many churches struggle.

#### Research Questions and/or Hypotheses

Four questions guided the research for this study.

##### Research Question #1

What key beliefs and foundational values are present in local churches that effectively implement corporate prayer that most contribute to its elevated priority?

Given that the nature of this research had to do with the background and experience of these pastoral team members and how some key beliefs and values came to be adopted by their respective congregations, the obvious place to begin was by asking them to identify those beliefs and values as best they understood them. While the researcher in a phenomenological study may pick up on other latent beliefs and values in a person's understanding that influence his or her behavior, the obvious starting point was to ask the participants for their own understanding of the underlying belief and value system that contributed to their churches' effectiveness in the arena of corporate prayer. The first research question sought to explore and investigate this matter.

### **Research Question #2**

How did pastoral team members arrive at these beliefs and values, and what specific life experiences contributed to their embracing of them?

Every member of the vocational clergy is the beneficiary of teachers, mentors, and colleagues who have poured into their lives and helped to shape their thinking. In addition, they are also indelibly marked, for good or evil, by the various episodes and incidents they have had the privilege or misfortune of experiencing along the pathway of life. Given that a primary objective of a phenomenological study is to plumb the life experience of an individual or group, Research Question #2 was designed to get at those life experiences and to see if some commonality of experience contributed to the formation of the beliefs and values identified in Research Question #1.

### **Research Question #3**

How have those beliefs and values been conveyed and transmitted so they have become shared congregational beliefs and values?

Exemplar congregations in the practice of corporate prayer do not become such because the leaders have a particular set of beliefs and values. Exemplar congregations become such because those beliefs and values that resonate so deeply in the lives of the pastoral team members are ultimately embraced by the broader congregation. Research Question #3 was designed to explore the process of transmission, marking those key beliefs and values identified in Research Question #1 that became collective beliefs and values.

#### **Research Question #4**

What specific activities or practices, based on those beliefs and values, have been implemented that have proven effective in generating broad-based congregational involvement in corporate prayer?

Once beliefs and values are transmitted and have become identified as an adopted set of beliefs and values by a group, specific systems, structures, and activities must be put in place to allow people to act upon those beliefs and values and to realize them in real life. Research Question #4 sought to identify some of the particular, concrete practices that were implemented that allowed the beliefs and values identified in Research Question #1 to be actualized and put into action.

#### **Population and Participants**

In the course of identifying resources for this study, I made contact with individuals who have special interest in corporate prayer—men and women who have written books or articles on the topic, who have contributed to edited resources dedicated to the topic, or who are employed by a denominational or parachurch organization with specific job responsibilities in the area of prayer mobilization. In explaining the thrust of this study, I asked for recommendations of churches they would consider exemplar

congregations. I then contacted each of these churches and asked if a pastoral team member would be willing to be interviewed for this study. I also asked if they had recommendations of other churches that ought to be contacted, which turned up a few more possibilities. After determining a list of willing participants, I attempted to include churches of varying sizes and varying theological persuasions and denominational affiliations that were located in various regions of the continent.

In keeping with the snowball convenience sampling method, I continued to gather interview subjects until themes began to saturate emerging analytical categories. By nature of this approach, I could not provide a target number of interviewees but only offer criteria for satisfaction. When new themes ceased to emerge in the interview and data collection process, I made a studied judgment to close the data collection phase and proceed to data analysis. In keeping with the best confirmatory practices of research, I reserved the right to return to participants for interpretation of analytical materials from their point of view. Table 3.1 contains a list of those who agreed to participate in this research and some brief information about the ministry setting where they serve.

**Table 3.1. Research Participants**

<b>Church</b>	<b>Title of Person Interviewed</b>	<b>Region of Continent</b>	<b>Denominational Affiliation</b>	<b>Size Classification</b>
#1	Staff pastor	Southwest United States	Nondenominational	Megachurch
#2	Lead pastor	Great Lakes Region	Reformed Church	250-500
#3	Solo pastor	Pacific Northwest	Baptist	150-250
#4	Staff pastor	South Central United States	United Methodist	Megachurch
#5	Lead pastor	South Central United States	Nazarene	250-500
#6	Lead pastor	Pacific Northwest	Baptist	1,250-1,500
#7	Staff pastor	West Coast	Mennonite Brethren	500-750
#8	Solo pastor	Southeastern United States	Church of Christ	<100
#9	Lead pastor	Great Lakes Region	Converge Worldwide Movement	500-750
#10	Lead pastor	Canada	Christian Missionary Alliance	1,000-1,250
#11	Staff pastor	South Central United States	Nondenominational	Megachurch
#12	Lead pastor	Upper Midwest	Baptist	250-500
#13	Solo pastor	Southeastern United States	Baptist	<100

### **Design of the Study**

This research relied upon a qualitative design that was phenomenological in nature, so that those involved could reflect upon and describe their lived experience. I conducted interviews with the pastoral team members of the various exemplar churches using the beliefs and values extraction interview protocol, which was semi-structured so as not to be overly directive in nature. The goal was to give them an opportunity to dig into their ministry experiences and personal backgrounds in ways that would unearth insights surrounding their deeply held beliefs and values that would help to explain how

they personally, and their churches corporately, came to embrace and live out this vital practice.

During June-July 2012 I identified the exemplar churches and conducted interviews from August-October of that same year. In total I conducted thirteen interviews—nine by telephone and four by e-mail according to the preference of the interviewee. For those who chose to participate by phone, I recorded and transcribed the interview, placing the transcript in a binder to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the data as well as incorporating it into a software program for the purpose of coding and analysis. Three of those who chose to participate by e-mail responded by referencing supplemental data sources—two directed me to magazine articles they had written, and one to a sermon on the church's Web site, which detailed their vision for corporate prayer. I also transcribed these documents, added them to the journal, and included them among the documents to be analyzed. In total, sixteen documents formed the research corpus—nine phone conversation transcripts, four e-mail exchanges, two magazine articles, and one sermon transcription.

### **Instrumentation**

The research propositions helped to form the actual interview questions in the beliefs and values extraction protocol in hopes the answers would either support or refute those ideas. However, the questions were open-ended by design so preconceived notions and ideas would not taint the responses, and so each interviewee could speak from his or her experience. The means for collecting the data was through personal contact with pastoral team members from the respective churches. Some contacts were by means of e-mail with a list of questions with their typed responses placed into a document for further



analysis. Others interactions were by phone with the conversation recorded and then transcribed into a document that could be analyzed.

### **Expert Review**

In order to verify that the beliefs and values extraction protocol would address the information required by my purpose statement, I submitted it for review to three individuals with a background in research and assessment: (1) my faculty mentor, (2) a layperson from a previous pastorate who served as a consultant for a private faith-based university and conducted a number of research initiatives at the request of the Vice Provost for Academic Administration, and (3) a family member who currently serves as Director of Assessment for a major state university in Texas. I incorporated the modifications suggested by these individuals into its use.

### **Variables**

Phenomenological research is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. Its goal is to gather information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation. Because of this nature of research design, a variety of variables can enter into the research and influence the results. Some of the most conspicuous ones include the life and educational experience of each interview subject, the types of previous pastoral experience he or she has had, and the denominational affiliation and resulting theological framework each one brought to this study. While life experience cannot be controlled (indeed the purpose of a phenomenological study is, in part, to explore the relevant life experience and extract implications), I made every effort to control the latter by selecting interview subjects who represented a breadth of theological frameworks and denominations.

In every instance, the list of questions used to guide the format of the interview was the same. Obviously each conversation is unique, so I asked appropriate follow-up or clarifying questions that sought to bring understanding or to dig deeper into the answers provided. However, I followed the same basic protocol to obtain the information from each individual. Additionally, I converted every conversation or correspondence into a document that was similar in form for the purposes of coding and analysis.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Because the data I was seeking was more subjective in nature than data being sought with other research methodologies, I allowed the interviewees to select from two alternatives for their interviews according to their personal preference (i.e., e-mail with follow-up phone call if needed or phone conversation). Given that each interview was recorded and would ultimately be translated into a text document for coding and analysis, sufficient safeguards were deemed to be in place to ensure the reliability of the data. I addressed validity concerns by submitting the questions on the beliefs and values extraction interview protocol to an expert review involving three individuals who had a background in research practices and methods and by implementing the minor revisions they suggested.

### **Data Collection**

The initial challenge associated with this research had to do with identifying the various exemplar churches for this study. Because no statistical measure or standard can be applied, I had to rely on the opinions of experts in the field of prayer mobilization. As a result, I utilized a variety of non-probability sampling techniques to assemble the study participants. I made initial contacts through purposive sampling. I began by conducting an Internet search on *corporate prayer* and looking for magazine articles and books

written on the topic as well as searched Web sites dedicated to the topic of prayer mobilization. From that effort I compiled a list of prospective individuals to contact, some of with whom I was able to communicate. I then utilized snowball sampling, asking each individual I was able to get in touch with for (1) other experts in the field of prayer whom I might contact, and (2) churches with which they were familiar that they considered exemplary in the practice of corporate prayer. For those who provided additional personal contacts, I followed up by contacting these individuals and asking them the same two questions. For those who recommended specific churches, I added those churches to a document of possible congregations and pastors for inclusion in the study.

After I assembled a list of potential churches to use in my study, I contacted them individually by e-mail (on a number of occasions I had to call to get e-mail contact information) and then sent a personalized e-mail to each pastoral team member asking if he or she would be open to participating in the research. At this point convenience sampling was employed, as some individuals did not reply or chose not to participate.

Once I had a list of churches that were committed to participating, I contacted each one again to set up a time for the personal interview. I also allowed them to participate either by e-mail or phone conversation. I recorded all the phone conversations and transcribed the dialogue for coding and analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of analysis began with converting the data from each online contact or phone conversation into a document for the purpose of further analysis. I also assembled a binder that contained a transcript of each contact or conversation. After multiple readings of each transcribed conversation and reaching a place where I felt

sufficiently comfortable with the material, the data then proceeded through three steps of coding.

The first step was open coding, which refers to “the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data” (Strauss and Corbin 62). In a phenomenological study, concepts are the basic units of analysis. One can count raw data, but one cannot easily talk about phenomena until they are classified as concepts. For that reason the first step in analysis was to conceptualize the data. Open coding involved dismantling the observations from the narrative of each interview paragraph by paragraph and sentence by sentence and giving each incident or idea a name that represents a particular phenomenon. The purpose of open coding was to distill the vast amount of data into a manageable number of concepts in order to make appropriate deductions and comparisons. I came up with eighty-four distinct concepts as a result of my open coding.

The second step was axial coding. Where open coding sought to fracture the data into bits by identifying categories and subcategories, axial coding “puts those data back together in new ways by *making connections between a category and its subcategories* [original emphasis]” (Strauss and Corbin 97). In axial coding, the focus is on examining the conditions that give rise to a certain category, the context in which it is embedded, the strategies by which it is handled or managed, and the results of those various strategies. The purpose of axial coding was to determine any relationships or connections that existed between concepts. As a result of axial coding, I came up with nine of these categories or, as I called them, code clusters.

The third and final step was selective coding, which, as Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin explain, is not much different than axial coding. It is just done at a higher and

more abstract level of analysis (117). Through the selective coding process, I assembled these nine code clusters into four distinct code sets that allowed me to integrate the various subcategories into a comprehensive picture of reality that was not only lucid and logical but also grounded. A specific breakdown of these codes, code clusters, and code sets is spelled out in detail in Appendix D. Against this backdrop I sought to identify a central phenomenon that became the basis for the grounded theory that is laid out and explained in Chapter 5.

After completing these three types of coding and arriving at a provisional central phenomenon and unifying story line, I submitted the catalogued results to examination by the individuals who participated in the expert review. Their insights and suggestions factored into the final product and contributed to the deductions and conclusions reached in this dissertation.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Each person interviewed for this study expressed his or her consent by replying to the invitational e-mail and agreeing to participate. In that e-mail, he or she was informed that the purpose of the study was merely to extract aggregate themes that emerged from the data and that no specifics would be conveyed so that the individual, or the particular church, could be identified. I also set up a folder on my personal laptop that required a login password so that the transcribed data would be safe and could not be accessed by the general public. Implementing these simple procedures assured participants they could be open and candid in their responses, thus helping ensure the genuineness of the data they provided.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Problem and Purpose

In an online article on the subject matter of trends present in healthy local churches, Thom Rainer—author, researcher, speaker, and current president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources—says a key characteristic is “intentional and prioritized” (3) corporate prayer. He goes on to state that in these churches “the leadership regularly emphasizes the importance and priority of prayer” (3) and they are “led regularly in times of corporate prayer” (3). Without a doubt, Rainer is of the opinion that the practice of corporate prayer lends itself to the spiritual soundness and well-being of a local church. In addition, he has evidently seen it effectively implemented with sufficient frequency to cite it as a key characteristic.

For the most part, the establishment of a culture of corporate prayer has proven difficult for the North American church. Due in large part to a culture characterized by individualism, secularism, and naturalism, many pastoral leaders have found that mobilizing their people to come together for collective prayer is an exceptionally hard thing to do. However, mobilizing their people is not an impossible and unachievable task, for Rainer would not have highlighted corporate prayer as a significant constituent of congregational health if it were not being effectively implemented in a number of places. This study sought to identify some of those places and uncover the underlying beliefs and values that undergird the successful implementation of this time-honored practice. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify threads of commonality relating to the underlying beliefs, values, and life experiences from the pastoral team members of

exemplar churches that allow them to implement corporate prayer initiatives that generate widespread participation and involvement by their congregants.

### **Participants**

I identified and approached individuals from thirty local churches across the continent about participating in this study. Of those thirty, individuals from thirteen churches responded and agreed to participate—ten men and three women. Eleven of these churches were recommended to me by men or women who have denominational responsibilities in the arena of prayer mobilization or serve in a parachurch ministry primarily dedicated to empowering effective prayer at the local church level. The other two came from survey participants who recommended a fellow pastor or a local congregation that shared a similar emphasis on, and commitment to, corporate prayer. Five of the individuals serve as the lead pastor in a congregation with multiple staff, three serve as solo pastors, and the other five are staff pastors serving under lead pastors with job titles and specific responsibilities in the area of prayer mobilization.

### **Research Question #1**

The initial focus of this study surrounded the question, “What key beliefs and foundational values are present in local churches that effectively implement corporate prayer that most contribute to its elevated priority?”

A key theme that emerged quickly centered around a sense of desperation and brokenness during a prior chapter of ministry that many of these leaders shared. Of the thirteen individuals interviewed, nine cited it as a key factor. In fact, the theme of being at the perceived end of oneself and needing a breakthrough from God, which I indicated with the code *desperation*, was the code I used most frequently in the attitudinal essentials code cluster (see Appendix E for a complete listing of the codes employed in

this research and their frequency of use). A number of those interviewed pointed to their personal distress as a foundational element that served to shape the beliefs that prompted their church's current emphasis on corporate prayer. The lack of success in earthly terms, the frustration over giving themselves wholeheartedly to their calling and seeing minimal results coupled with the resultant feelings of burnout, and the pain of continually dealing with congregational strife were all cited as elements that helped to create a deep sense of desperation in their lives. Typical of this scenario was the words of one lead pastor who explained his progression into a prayer-focused ministry:

I describe it a whole lot more like being slowly shoved into a corner. The Spirit of God and the realities of ministry just increasingly removing all of the things that you think you might try to improve things, or cause the church to grow, or make things better, or whatever, and coming to the end of all those solutions or attempts and realizing they really aren't working and being brought to the end of yourself and saying, "OK, maybe the first thing—not just one of the things, but the first thing—needs to be prayerfulness that precedes and invades and saturates all ministries."

The sense of heartache and desperation evidenced in this statement is reflective of a theme repeatedly voiced in the interviews.

Some of the pastors spoke of reaching a place of such frustration that they were ready to throw in the towel and walk away from ministry altogether. Said one regarding a conversation that occurred just over a dozen years ago following a number of years of fruitless pastoral ministry, "I told my wife, 'This church has got *Ichabod* written on it. There's just no move of the Spirit, there's no freedom, and the people are leaving.' And I said, 'I think we're probably done.'" Another said, "I was ... fried from ministry. Everything I'd tried had gone wrong, lots of disunity, three church splits. I felt like a total failure and was getting ready to go back into my previous career." A third pastor, speaking about the current focus on corporate prayer in his congregation, said, "A lot of



the emphasis here ... started with me in my first church that didn't go well—it wasn't growing [and] doing much.” The majority of the pastors I interviewed, pastors who are currently leading vibrant, praying churches, did not lead their congregations down the path of implementing corporate prayer because of a deeply held theological conviction they strategically and intentionally implemented. On the contrary, their churches took on this flavor and character out of a sense of personal brokenness and desperation. A sense of personal brokenness compelled these leaders to do some investigation into what the Bible had to say about the power of prayer which resulted in a supplementary awakening where their conviction as to the value and necessity of corporate prayer became firmer and more settled.

Research participants cited three additional beliefs and values that, as I reflect upon their life experience, all flow out of this sense of desperation to which a number of them gave voice. The first is a divine impression or prompting, as eight of the thirteen participants spoke to a very clear and tangible sense God would have them not only personally move in the direction of enhanced prayerfulness but that he would also have them lead their congregations to become a praying church as well. Said one staff pastor of the sense of calling on the life of the lead pastor under whom she has served for a dozen years, “This is a vision that truly God has written on his heart. He feels like it's a mandate. It is literally written into his spiritual job description before the Lord.” Another pastor spoke of a memorable encounter with God during his season of desperation and brokenness:

I heard God's voice call me and say, “I love you, I forgive you, but I want you to go home and ... start a prayer meeting in your church....” I felt very convicted that the Lord didn't want me to add anything new other than Sunday morning and Tuesday night prayer meeting.

A third reiterated the same theme: “Prayer is not something we do at [name of church]; it is who we are called to be. The calling God has placed on our church family is to be a House of Prayer.” Clearly, the majority of the churches explored as part of this research are not pursuing the development of becoming a praying church solely because the pastor believes it is a good idea or a worthy concept. They are doing so for higher and nobler reasons. These leaders believe it is a moral imperative—a specific task—to which God has explicitly called them.

A second theme interviewees voiced quite regularly drew together around the importance of persistence—the ability to keep going and not become frustrated or embittered about the fact corporate prayer is not easily implemented and progress is slow and, at times, almost imperceptible. Nine of the thirteen individuals interviewed said something about the need for persistence, and eleven of thirteen cited the slow pace of change as the primary obstacle or perceived hindrance to the implementation of a praying culture. In fact, twice as many participants spoke to the challenges surrounding the slow pace of implementation as any other issue, and they raised that issue about 40 percent more often. Peppered throughout the transcripts were statements such as, “I work hard at inspiring our people to pray”; “it’s been a tough road”; “you just have to keep going”; “I’ve just persisted over the years”; “it’s been a journey filled with highs and lows, setbacks and mistakes.” One pastor who returned to the pastorate almost five years ago after serving for a number of years in a denominational capacity in the arena of prayer mobilization expressed the challenge of implementing a praying culture this way:

It is one thing to teach this “on the road” to pastors and leaders, and quite another to bring it to the life of a local church busy with many things and set in its ways. I have found it to be a considerable challenge. I emphasize it over and over and over again, and still recognize that there are adults who will not participate.

Another pastor, with a considerably longer tenure at his church, reflected upon the challenge of trying to lead his congregation to embrace the value of corporate prayer:

The interesting thing is in spite of thirty-two years of preaching and praying and teaching on the subject, there isn't a huge number of people that participate. Early on I definitely went through a frustration phase. But I now forget about the frustration and rejoice with the people who are there to pray and leave the outcome to God.

One of the pastors, in a somewhat comical fashion, spoke to the ongoing challenge of trying to get his key leaders to embrace the cultural shift he is attempting to instill: "It's just relentless determination to say, 'Our leaders and our staff are going to be examples in prayer, and ... by God's grace, I'm going to outlive them.'" Without a doubt, an underlying value that contributes to the effective implementation of corporate prayer is a spirit of perseverance, a holy stubbornness, and the refusal to quit in spite of the seeming glacial rate of progress at times.

A third underlying value of which a number of the interviewees spoke to was an experimental mind-set—a willingness to take action toward the goal of becoming a praying church even though much about the dynamics and logistics of effective corporate prayer they had yet to figure out. Robert E. Quinn speaks of adaptive confidence as the "willing[ness] to enter certain situations because we have a higher purpose and we are confident that we can learn and adapt as we move forward" (151). Certainly the leaders in this study possessed this trait. Instead of being frozen by uncertainty or doubt, they moved forward in the belief the best way forward did not involve sitting down and developing elaborate plans as to how to proceed, but simply jumping in and being willing to build the wagon as the journey progressed. The themes in the attitudinal essentials code cluster indicated by the codes *learningbydoing* and *roomforimprovement*, that is, (1)

the perception getting people actually to pray made for more effective learning than merely teaching on the topic, and (2) the sense that the congregation had a long ways to go in terms of establishing a culture of corporate prayer, were referenced by eight different participants a total of twenty times. An examination of the chart in Appendix E shows only five of thirteen participants addressed each theme. Given the fact only two interviewees overlapped and spoke to both themes, then six of the remaining eleven respondents spoke to one theme or the other.

Regarding the idea of the corporate prayer gathering being a laboratory where learning takes place, one of the staff pastors said this exploratory mind-set is a particular point of emphasis in her congregation: “We have put into the prayer meeting that it’s a place where you learn.” Another said, “You can teach so much on prayer, but the bottom line is that most of the time we learn how to pray by praying.” A third pastor cited a quote from Samuel Chadwick, one of his heroes in championing the practice of prayer: “You learn how to pray by being much in prayer.” The pastor elaborates on this quote saying, “The more your church prays, the more you learn how to pray, just like you would singing or anything else.” Just as one cannot learn to swim until he or she jumps into the pool, so one learns corporate prayer best by being in a setting where it is happening.

Even though the churches that participated in this research are much further along than the average North American congregation in the process of implementing a culture of corporate prayer, I did not pick up on a hint of smugness or sufficiency or satisfaction in the interviews. Conversely, the majority of those interviewed indicated that the process of developing a praying culture is a journey that encompasses many steps and that much work was ahead. Said the staff pastor from a church highlighted as a respected example

of a praying congregation in a notable publication a few years ago, “We have a long way to go in the area of prayer. I would not say we are a house of prayer yet in the sense Jesus had in mind.” A second pastor said, “We’re being intentional, but we’re a long ways away yet from where I really believe God is leading us.” Perhaps this tension between a congregation’s prayer-deprived past and the prayer-immersed future the leader is striving to enable can best be summarized by a pastor who said, “I don’t feel like we have arrived. I just would say, ‘We’re in process.’ We’re nowhere near where I want us to be and think we need to be. But we’re nowhere near where we used to be, which is the grace of God.” While these leaders were pleased with and grateful for the inroads and positive strides that had been made, they also recognized the need to keep moving forward and not be content with the status quo.

In connection with this research question, those interviewed spoke to some key values that not only highlighted the challenge of initiating and implementing corporate prayer but also the difficulty of nurturing and sustaining it. These leaders did not necessarily hold these beliefs and values when they began the journey and started to lead their respective churches in the direction of becoming a praying church; instead, they emerged and became apparent as a result of doing hard work, becoming involved in the activity, and seeing its fruit.

One of them was growth—both spiritual growth and organizational growth. One pastor, citing the fruit of corporate prayer, shared the written testimony of a layperson in his church:

I wish my writing could reflect the passion and deep feelings I have experienced since I have become involved in the prayer ministry. My eyes have been opened and God has allowed me to see His world in a whole new way and to experience prayer to a much different level than I ever felt was possible.

Another shared a similar account, also from a layperson: “Over time my prayer life has gotten healthier and my walk with God deeper. My walk with God is so much more intimate, and personal, and real!” Clearly one of the primary benefits of involvement in corporate prayer is its capacity to serve as an agent of spiritual formation and stimulate substantive growth in the lives of those who participate.

On the organizational side, a pastor who has served his congregation for more than a quarter of a century said that a key event that helped establish a culture of prayer in his church was a specific prayer emphasis leading up to Easter Sunday a number of years ago:

We were running about 180 in church at that time, and we had over four hundred for Easter show up, which was more than we’d ever had. That experience of people coming together and praying for ten days straight for our Easter service ... turned out really well in the sense of the number of people that came, the service itself, and the response from those who showed up. Those who participated in that prayer event became “believers” as it were and really became devoted to prayer.

Another, who serves as a solo pastor, says his congregation’s emphasis on prayer has produced tangible results: “We have led our association in baptisms for the past four consecutive years. We have seen an increase in tithes and offerings, more active in doing missions, and I believe less internal turmoil in our church.” The tangible results of corporate prayer have helped to solidify its status as an important and valued activity in these congregations.

This final point in the previous pastor’s remark highlights a second underlying value that sustains corporate prayer—the belief that a commitment to corporate prayer produces an enhanced sense of congregational unity. Six of those interviewed touched on corporate prayer as something that engenders a sense of harmony and solidarity within

the church body. One respondent said, “You can’t pray with people that you don’t like.” Something about the activity of corporate prayer melds hearts in ways that make it very difficult to initiate a conflict or enter into a fracas with fellow participants or congregants. One pastor spoke to the difference in atmosphere at his church saying, “We’ve not had the disruptions and the fusses and people demanding their own way ... like we used to have. Prayer has changed all that.” Another pastor, citing the specific blessings that flow from a commitment to prayer, said:

One of them, for example, is unity. And that became our big one, because that’s what we were lacking for a number of years. And now that’s sort of our main strength. Why do we have it? It’s because we pray. And the more we pray, the more we’ll have.

The sense of congregational harmony and kinship that emerged from a focus on corporate prayer was a positive by-product often mentioned by interviewees.

Another underlying belief present in the words of a number of participants was the value they placed on the church as an agent of life change and the role they believed corporate prayer played in that process. Eight of the thirteen respondents voiced a clear connection between the priority of corporate prayer and an atmosphere within the church that facilitates transformed lives. One staff pastor who has been a part of her congregation since its inception said, “It was in our hearts to develop a culture of response within our church—preaching for life change and calling people to respond. Our church’s focus is evangelism and discipleship, and it’s impossible to do this without praying.” Another pastor talked about the hidden and undergirding values that fuel his desire to lead his congregation to become a praying church:

I’d say probably the central key value is that nothing of any life transforming substance is going to happen apart from prayer. The planning of a worship service, the planning of some ministry event, the recruiting coordination, the orchestration of every weekend, every day ministry life

has to be bathed in some context of a continuous prayerfulness, asking God to move and shape and direct and lead and invade everything that we're trying to do. If we do an event that's great but not saturated with His presence, then all we've done is a fun event. We haven't really changed anybody's life. I think the central value is nothing life transforming will ever happen apart from God's Spirit moving, and prayer is what releases that.

The belief corporate prayer is a tremendous support to the task of creating an atmosphere where lives can be changed was a recurring theme among those interviewed.

To sum up, the most common beliefs and values articulated as rationale for an intentional focus on corporate prayer many times traced back to a sense of desperation in the life of the pastor. This reality, coupled with a relentless spirit of perseverance once he or she made a decision to try to embed prayer in the church, lies at the base of these men and women. As to what sustains the practice of corporate prayer, a spirit of flexibility—a willingness to learn by doing, to adapt to changing circumstances, and to not be content with the status quo—is critical. These notions, coupled with an awareness of some of the distinct blessings and benefits that stem from a commitment to prayer—spiritual and organizational growth, congregational unity, and the ability to serve as an effective agent of positive life change—kept these leaders from neglecting this practice and letting it get lost in the countless assignments and areas of focus that accompany pastoral ministry.

### **Research Question #2**

The second point this study sought to explore surrounded the question, “How did pastoral team members arrive at these beliefs and values, and what specific life experiences contributed to their embracing of them?” In many ways, the code cluster formative influences gives an in-depth and exhaustive account of the various themes and topics raised in connection with this research question (see Table 4.1).



**Table 4.1. Formative Influences Code Cluster (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of Total Uses</b>	<b>n</b>
book	13	6
capturedbyculture	3	3
divineprompting	19	8
exampleofJesus	5	4
historicaexamples	2	1
mentor	15	8
parentalinfluence	2	2
prayersummit	8	3
scripture	35	11
watershed	21	11

Eleven of the thirteen research participants cited Scripture as the primary determinant or factor that influenced them in their belief in the value of corporate prayer. One pastor spoke of doing an extended study of a harmony of the gospels a number of years ago. As part of that process he looked into the life of Christ and noticed the huge disconnect between what he saw in Jesus' prayer life and his own. As he pressed into this emphasis, he became convinced God was not merely speaking to him about his own personal relationship, but speaking a word of his congregation as well. This conclusion, in part, fueled his dedication to corporate prayer. Another, seeing the recurring practice in Scripture of God leading his people into pivotal encounters with him, became convinced such encounters are equally valid for today and that corporate prayer is a divinely appointed and scripturally authenticated means of facilitating them. A number of research participants pointed to specific verses of Scripture, or particular stories from Scripture, similar to what I highlighted in Chapter 1 when I articulated a biblical and theological foundation for the practice of corporate prayer. One staff pastor summed up her church's

commitment to the practice of corporate prayer quite succinctly: “We think corporate prayer is important because that’s what God commands us to do. His disciples’ church practiced it, and history confirms it.” Insights gained and promises extracted from the authoritative words of Scripture undoubtedly served to buttress the value and attention given to the activity.

Those who pointed to Scripture as a foundation for corporate prayer were quick to assert that the Bible does not treat the topic in an arbitrary or passing fashion. They believed the topic is ever present. Said one pastor regarding the Bible’s saturation with the topic of corporate prayer, “When you really emphasize it and study it, you see that it’s just everywhere in Scripture.” A second pastor said, “Of course, I saw it everywhere in the Scriptures.” A third pastor echoed this belief in a rock-solid scriptural foundation for corporate prayer when she said, “Our church’s priority on prayer stems primarily from the Bible.” A fourth, speaking about her church’s calling to be a House of Prayer, said, “This is who we are. The Bible is very clear about it. It’s a directive straight from Scripture.” The majority of those interviewed found Scripture to be an irrefutable and undeniable support for the practice from which they could not escape.

As to why the topic of corporate prayer could be so clearly evident to these leaders while so many contemporary North Americans overlook or miss it, one pastor offered an insightful illustration:

It’s like a pastor friend of mine whose son was in a tragic ski accident. Just the week before he had preached a message on suffering. He told me, “When you go through a time of suffering, all of a sudden you become much more aware of the times in which God speaks about suffering in His Word.”

The pastor went on to say the same reality holds true as it relates to the topic of corporate prayer. When one’s eyes and ears are opened and aware, one realizes just how pervasive

and inescapable an emphasis it is in God's Word. The widespread failure of professing North American Christians to notice and embrace the testimony of Scripture as it relates to corporate prayer may be an indication of just how much followers of Jesus on this continent have placed their collective attention elsewhere.

A second key in the background of a commitment to corporate prayer, well behind Scripture in terms of the frequency of mention but parallel with it in terms of the number of participants who spoke to it, surrounded a matter touched on in the discussion of Research Question #1—a personal watershed experience of some sort. As was the case with Scripture, eleven of the thirteen research participants identified this ingredient as a key influence in their commitment to corporate prayer—a circumstance that is not surprising given the number of individuals who spoke to a sense of desperation in response to the first Research Question. Logic and common sense almost dictate that those who were previously at a place of desperation and have successfully moved past it so they are currently providing effective congregational leadership toward the goal of becoming a praying church are doing so on the foundation of a memorable experience or encounter with God that was remarkable in its impact.

One of the pastors mentioned earlier as being ready to walk away from ministry altogether told of his attendance at a corporate prayer gathering at the invitation of a friend during that time of desperation and brokenness in his life:

That night I walked in to what I would consider my own Isaiah-six-I-saw-the-Lord. The manifest presence of God was so thick I felt an arresting of God's presence, God's Spirit on me. And for the next two hours, I was in a prayer meeting, but I was really in the throne room. I was at the burning bush. I was on holy ground, and I couldn't even stand up. The weight of God's glory was so heavy I just fell back on my seat and wept. And I wept my ministry away. That one prayer meeting did more to shape and inform my heart and my mind—intellectually, mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually—than eight years of seminary and college. One moment in His

presence did more for me than all [my] years of training.... I mean, I had a download from heaven.

A second pastor, in words that were not nearly as dramatic, spoke of a similar experience in his life that was equally impactful:

One of the things that triggered our emphasis on corporate prayer was a split we had back in 1992. I had been here about ten years or so and we had a split, and those are always painful. Not long after that we began this emphasis on corporate prayer.

A third pastor spoke to the watershed experience that birthed his passion for corporate prayer, characterizing it as a follow-up to a similar encounter he had with God a number of years before where the primary focus was his personal prayer life:

Two things happened in succession that could be watershed moments in continuing that journey. I attended a ... workshop at a Missions Conference ... where George Otis was speaking. And he introduced me—this was 1992—to the whole concept of the 10/40 window at that time and the unreached people groups. And then in 1993, very early in 1993, speaking at the [name of event], David Bryant actually led us in a Concert of Prayer. So, with Otis challenging us on the unreached people groups and David Bryant modeling for me how to lead a group of people in Concerts of Prayer, that kind of ignited my earlier attempts and took it to a whole new level.

Another staff pastor testified to the influence of a three-month sabbatical leave her senior pastor took that was oriented around visiting places of prayer—the World Prayer Center in Colorado Springs, the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, and the Brooklyn Tabernacle were among the included destinations. She said, “When he came back from that, he came back with a vision—not only that this church is to [continue to] be a House of Prayer for all nations, but he felt like God was calling him to another level.” She then proceeded to share some of the visionary efforts and initiatives her church has launched in the wake of his experience. Clearly the breadth and range of responses demonstrates

that the personal life experience of the individual is a key factor in corporate prayer being embraced as a prioritized value.

A particular watershed experience that three individuals referenced and to which I assigned its own code is that of prayer summits—an initiative launched by Joe Aldrich of Multnomah Bible College in the late 1980s that sought to pull together pastors within a given geographical area for three to four days of intense, focused prayer. While only three of the interviewees referenced it, the level of impact it had on each of their lives was so significant it is worthy of mention. One of the pastors, another who indicated he was beaten and weary and at a place where he was thinking about walking away from ministry altogether, referred to the prayer summit he attended during that difficult season as a “life-changer for me.” Another pastor spoke of a similarly impactful experience at the first prayer summit he attended:

I went to my first prayer summit being overextended and realizing that programs were not changing people—that there was a reality in my own life that I was burdened and, as a result of that, God began to break me. So here I am at this Prayer Summit, two days into it, and I just started weeping uncontrollably for probably half an hour or forty-five minutes—the state of my soul, the state of how I was living the Christian life, the state of how I was doing ministry, and I realized I really didn’t know how to pray ... that I did not really understand the kind of relationship that Jesus had with his father that he was inviting us into as well ... and understanding that prayer really is ministry—it is the ministry, it’s how God does His work.

Regarding the continuing influence and effect of prayer summits in his life, he went on to say, “Since I had my first encounter in 1998 I have not missed a summit yet.” Clearly one of the events God uses to facilitate a zeal and enthusiasm for corporate prayer is a memorable exposure to a setting where it is facilitated and carried out in a very healthy, wholesome, and God-honoring fashion.

A couple of additional themes deserve mention in relation to the process by which a commitment to corporate prayer takes root in the life of a pastor or staff member. The first has to do with the influence of a mentor. While speculation exists that a primary reason for a listless commitment to corporate prayer in North America stems from the lack of effective mentors, eight of the thirteen individuals in this study identified a mentor as having had a significant impact on his or her life in relation to corporate prayer. While a number of different individuals were identified—a few whose names I was familiar with but most whose names I was not—the presence of someone who could impart insight through periodic but recurring life-on-life contact, model leadership in the arena of corporate prayer, and be there to provide resources and answer questions was invaluable. One of the churches included in this study was a three-year-old a church plant led by a pastor who had previously served at a church identified in a major publication a few years ago as being a church that prayed effectively. Regarding the implementation of a praying culture in his new work, he said, “I knew I had a stacked deck of starting a church with being on staff as an associate for fifteen years—seeing it, experiencing it, and then tweaking it to fit the culture I was in.” The mentoring influence of his previous lead pastor and the imprint of being a part of a congregation where corporate prayer was valued and practiced made an indelible impression on his ministry and leadership. It also enabled him to embed a culture of corporate prayer into this new church from the very outset much more easily.

A second influence worthy of mention is that of printed materials and books. Almost half—six—of those interviewed cited a specific book, or a specific author, as being instrumental to their embracing the importance and value of corporate prayer. Participants singled out R. A. Torrey, E. M. Bounds, Paul Billheimer, John White, David

Bryant, Eugene Peterson, Jim Cymbala, and Andrew Murray as writers whose words spoke to their hearts and helped ignite within them a passion for corporate prayer.

Two individuals gave significant credit for their current commitment to corporate prayer to the fact they were fortunate enough to step into churches that had praying cultures. They became caught up and engulfed in these cultures suffused with prayer that captured their hearts and spirits. While this chain of circumstances can occasionally happen, the information from this study seems to indicate that, more often than not, the opposite is how things usually work. Typically, God uses an individual to influence and impact the heart of an organization rather than using the organization to impact and influence the heart of an individual. While the latter is certainly not outside the realm of possibility, the overwhelming majority of those who participated in this study indicated that the former is the sequence of cause and effect they experienced.

### **Research Question #3**

A third area of inquiry this study sought to address surrounded the question, “How have those beliefs and values been conveyed and transmitted so they have become shared congregational beliefs and values?”

In examining the various responses to this question, the assorted comments can be broken down into two groupings—(1) personal behaviors and (2) organizational behaviors. Certain ways these pastors conducted themselves, and certain things they did, helped these values take root and lodge within the hearts of congregants. Additionally, specific practices they sought to implement and establish within the church helped reinforce them as well. In particular the code cluster leadership skills speaks to the nature and highlights the frequency of responses that most clearly addresses the various means by which personal values infiltrate and penetrate an organization (see Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2. Leadership Skills Code Cluster (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of Total Uses</b>	<b>n</b>
coaching	3	2
communication	25	7
culturebuilding	12	7
expectationsofleaders	8	4
goal	2	2
identifiedvalue	19	10
influencer	7	6
infusion	21	8
pastoralleadership	26	11
personalmodeling	24	10
personalpassion	17	11
pulpit	26	10
relationships	10	5
strategic	27	10
teaching	39	10
visiontransference	14	9

Clearly, two of the key ingredients in helping the broader body embrace these personally held beliefs and values had to do with (1) teaching on the topic, as well as (2) consciously using the pulpit to highlight and reinforce the vision. Although a number of respondents spoke of corporate prayer as being something they learned by doing and that significant knowledge resulted from their willingness to immerse themselves in the practice even though they were unclear about how to proceed, that conclusion is not to suggest this *learning* was at the exclusion of formal instruction on the topic. The participants in this study would concur with William Willimon's belief in the transformative nature of education and that one of the primary things leaders can do in



order to transform their organizations is teach (217). Without a doubt, the overwhelming majority of those I interviewed spoke of the importance of providing commonsensical instruction on corporate prayer—in the words of one pastor helping people “pick it up both by osmosis and practical instruction.”

As to the preferred delivery system for such instruction, the approach varied widely. One church invited congregants to attend quarterly schools of prayer. Another offered recurring small groups centered on the topic of prayer. Another spoke of developing seminar curriculum that coincided with periodic four to eight-week special prayer emphases. A few churches indicated they hosted annual events with special guests who would teach on prayer. Another couple of pastors talked about how they wove it into their newcomers’ or membership classes. Another said prayer was a staple of the leadership training he did with his church board and key leaders. In fact, one pastor with a lengthy tenure at his congregation told of an encounter he had a number of years ago: “A young preacher asked me one time, ‘How did you get prayer into your congregation?’ and I said, ‘For the first ten years I just taught on it.’” The clear consensus of the men and women that participated in this study is that although corporate prayer can be carried out in a variety of ways, a key ingredient in helping their values surrounding its importance work their way into the life of the church requires a great deal of teaching and practical instruction on the topic.

Closely connected to the importance of teaching was the strategic use of the pulpit as ten of the thirteen participants spoke to this specific activity as a key element in the transference of values. The individuals interviewed for this study by and large viewed the preaching task as an opportunity to be leveraged in order to sculpt and shape the collective values of the congregation. One pastor, who characterized himself an

expositional preacher that systematically preaches through books of the Bible, talked about intentionally highlighting and bringing visibility to passages that deal with prayer as opposed to glossing them over and treating them in a passing fashion. Another talked about how he tries, regardless of the topic, to weave in points of application that reinforce the importance and significance of prayer. Another spoke of “going to the Word and letting them [his congregants] see biblical models, not only that they should pray, but how to pray, and what to pray.” Yet another talked of how specific seasons in the church’s life lend themselves to explicit preaching on the subject of prayer, but that he also tries to reinforce it from the text implicitly whenever it is there for the taking. A number of those interviewed talked about how their church periodically schedules special prayer emphases, and they will typically take the one or two Sundays leading up to that emphasis to preach on prayer. In fact, one of the pastors who utilizes this approach said, “I don’t give that away. I have two other guys that preach for me off and on, but I don’t give those Sundays away.” The clear judgment of this research is that the pulpit is an incredible weapon in the arsenal of the pastor who wants to influence the values of his or her church. If prayer is a genuine and deeply held personal value in the life of the pastor, it will ultimately find its way into the pulpit.

In addition to casting the vision for congregational prayer through the teaching and preaching role, three additional pastoral behaviors emerged as being essential to helping the personal value for corporate prayer become a shared value. The first centered around pastoral leadership—a reality articulated by one pastor who said, “Prayer passion comes from the top,” and another who, in relation to the challenge of mobilizing his church for prayer, said, “I’ve found that it’s basically got to come from me if I want the result. I’ve got to step up.” Eleven of the thirteen individuals interviewed broached the

theme of leadership and suggested that the challenge of mobilizing corporate prayer is so great that it will not happen apart from effective leadership by the pastor. He or she cannot delegate or parcel out this responsibility. One staff pastor offered this compelling insight during the course of her interview:

I really don't know how you integrate—implement or integrate—a prayer movement in the church aside from a Senior Pastor's leadership. I'm the Prayer Pastor on staff and I have a certain level of influence. But I couldn't do what I do, or even have the influence that I have, if [name of her Lead Pastor] wasn't already forging that ground and opening those doors and creating that environment.

Certainly pieces of the pie can be handed off and addressed by someone other than the lead pastor. In fact, all but one of those interviewed talked about the importance of raising up people who can oversee a particular facet and help carry the load. Sprinkled throughout the various transcripts were statements such as, “There's a team that gives leadership to that particular meeting,” and “Key people make it work,” and “We have several wonderful servant ministers who will not rest till this thing rocks.” The challenge of establishing and implementing a praying culture will never realize its full potential without buy-in and support from key laity. At the same time, the nature of the task is so demanding and difficult that it also requires consistent and skilled leadership from the primary leader.

Intimately connected to the theme of pastoral leadership are the twin issues of personal passion and personal modeling. In fact, one can easily make the case that these two ingredients should not be viewed as separate aspects disconnected from leadership but as components or elements that are part of the fabric of effective leadership. Eleven and ten, respectively, of those interviewed referenced the zeal and enthusiasm necessary for corporate prayer to gain traction within the church as well as the challenge of serving

as an appropriate example. On the topic of personal passion, one pastor recalls the difference his congregation saw in him when he returned from the watershed experience of his first prayer summit: “They saw in me a new resolve—new commitment—and decided to follow it.” Another reiterated that theme: “One of the things that helped this church here, and I think this has got to be a key to it, [is the fact] I was so sold on prayer.” On the theme of modeling, one staff pastor cited it as “the place where the rubber hits the road because I personally have experienced ... that so much more is caught than taught.” Another offered this very blunt assessment: “One key essential that must be stated is this—a devotion to prayer must be believed and championed and modeled at the highest levels of leadership in a local church or else it will not happen. Period.” If pastors want to help congregations more closely resemble the church pictured in the book of Acts, particularly as it relates to their commitment to corporate prayer, they must bring personal strength and intensity to the task as well as be shining examples of the values they are seeking to instill.

The research participants, in addition to highlighting some key pastoral behaviors, also mentioned a number of beneficial organizational behaviors as well. Perhaps the most practical was communication, constantly reinforcing the value and importance of corporate prayer before the congregation, keeping people informed, and generally doing whatever necessary to keep this activity that can often be relegated to the shadows of the church visible and out in the open. While only seven of the interviewees touched on the topic, those who did spoke to it with such intensity and vigor that it merits inclusion as part of this study’s findings. One respondent said, “How to get the word out is a chief concern. [At my church] every ministry is vying for stage time. So finding alternate methods of getting the word out is crucial.” A second pastor, referencing the

visibility he tries to generate for his church's periodic prayer emphases, said, "I send letters. We do announcements. We do video clips. I preach sermons. We have people give testimonies. We do everything we can to sell that event and get people to come." Other churches talked about utilizing podcasts, daily or weekly e-blasts, scrolling announcements on the video screen as people gather for worship, and finding ways to communicate and make congregants aware of significant answers to prayer. As in 1 Corinthians 9:22 where Paul says he "became all things to all people so that by all possible means [he] might save some," the need is for communication that uses all possible means so that as many people as possible might be impacted.

A second organizational behavior that was highlighted, and the single behavior that was most frequently referenced, centered around the church's need to be strategic and intentional about how it implements and carries out prayer initiatives. Ten of the thirteen people interviewed touched on this issue as being a paramount concern. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, a number of pitfalls and hazards can cripple and sabotage a prayer gathering, sucking the life out of it and rendering it an undertaking to be endured as opposed to an experience to be relished. Approaching corporate prayer in a strategic and purposeful fashion can go a long ways toward enabling the latter and minimizing the former. One pastor talked about his role, as the facilitator of prayer, as providing "intentionality from the standpoint of direction." Similar adjectives other respondents used to refer to how they facilitate and administer times of corporate prayer included the words "orchestrated," "directed," "guided," and "structured." Said one pastor, "[When people] come and experience strategic, measured prayer, they get hooked." Prayer thrusts that are disorganized and haphazard are the ones that not only quash momentum but also tend to leave people feeling frustrated and discouraged.

Respondents also spoke of finding ways to introduce and implant elements of corporate prayer into other church activities as a key practice that helped the value of corporate prayer take hold. The word *infusion* became the code to identify this phenomenon. I pinpointed twenty-one times that eight of the research participants introduced an idea or brought up some particular thing their churches did that would fit this description. While a number of participants mentioned a variety of ways they incorporate aspects of corporate prayer into the primary Sunday worship service, the practice of infusion certainly was not limited to the weekend worship experience. Elders' meetings, finance team meetings, planning meetings, worship team rehearsals, counseling sessions, youth group gatherings, and recovery programs were all specifically mentioned by various respondents as settings where components of corporate prayer could be, and were, introduced into the mix. As one respondent said, "Prayer goes on in every other ministry, and it should. For this helps cement it as part of our congregational DNA." A key to embedding a culture of corporate prayer in the life of a congregation centered around finding ways to import and implant snippets of it into other church programming and activities.

A fourth organizational behavior worth noting had to do with formally making corporate prayer an identified congregational value. Ten research participants touched on this theme nineteen times. One pastor talked about how incorporating corporate prayer into the church's core values sent a message to the congregation that the emphasis on it is "not just merely aspirational [but] actually where this church is headed—we are seeking to be a praying church." He indicated that making it an identified value gave him permission to champion and implement some initiatives and efforts more aggressively that he knew many of his congregants would view as ancillary or nonessential. While

identifying corporate prayer as a congregational core value did nothing specifically to enable the practice—corporate prayer does not automatically emerge because a congregation opts to make it an identified value and says, “This is what is important to us”—it lent legitimacy to the effort and conveyed a sense of empowerment and endorsement. The process of corporate prayer becoming an identified value helped it move from being something viewed as resting at the periphery of the church to something that was part of the mainstream.

Listen to the words of a staff pastor who began serving at her current church a few years after it launched regarding the matter of corporate prayer being an identified value:

Prayer has always been a value, but I think over the years God has clarified it and solidified it and matured it. When we say we value being a House of Prayer, in the early years it was a very young thing in all of us and we really didn't know what that meant and looked like. As God has grown us and matured us as individuals and pastors, that also has happened in the church as well. It has definitely always been, from the inception of the church, a value—a high value. But I think over the years it has become the rebar in the foundation. It's woven through. It's the thing nobody sees but it's there, holding the whole structure, the whole body together so to speak. It's just grown and matured.

All of the participating churches in this research would undoubtedly say her words express their longing and desire—that prayer be the rebar, the ingredient woven into the foundation, that supports the structure and holds it together. However, if such an embedding is going to happen, pastors must effectively transmit key values so they can begin to take root in the lives of the congregants. This research identified some essential behaviors for pastors—practical teaching on the topic, leveraging the power of the pulpit, and providing competent leadership by championing the cause, raising up key people who can take a portion of the responsibility, and being a passionate advocate and a worthy role model. Other behaviors pay dividends as well—behaviors that do not so

much fall upon the pastor to do as to see that they are implemented and carried out by the organization. The place to start is by intentionally seeking to maintain the visibility of corporate prayer by relentlessly communicating its importance using as wide a variety of means and methods as possible. Efforts must also be made to rescue it from irrelevance and inconsequence by being intentional about how it is administered, making it a central part of the ministry fabric by finding creative ways to weave it into other church programming and conveying a sense of legitimacy by formally embracing it as an identified congregational value.

#### **Research Question #4**

The final research question surrounded the logistics and effective implementation of corporate prayer: What specific activities or practices, based on those beliefs and values, have been implemented that have proven effective in generating broad-based congregational involvement in corporate prayer?

Before exploring the specific practices and techniques participants highlighted in the course of their interview or e-mail exchange, a caveat is in order. This final research question sought to uncover the various methods of doing corporate prayer that resulted in *broad-based congregational involvement*. From my dialogue with these churches, I believe none of them would characterize themselves as having *broad-based* involvement, certainly not as broad as they would like or as they believe would be pleasing to God. Even though a number of individuals in the prayer mobilization movement identified the churches included in this study and singled them out as being *exemplar churches*, the base of participation in corporate prayer in many of these congregations is still fractional at best. One pastor said, “I usually tell pastors ... if you can get 10 percent of your congregation as a core praying group, that’s probably going to be about the average of



what you can expect.” A 10 percent rate of involvement certainly does not qualify as *broad-based* by most objective standards. Said another, “I came to the conclusion after a period of time that [corporate prayer] is one effort that cannot be judged by numbers.” Another respondent elaborated, saying, “We are cautious to measure prayer or activity in prayer by growing numbers of participation; rather, it is by experiencing the hand of God alive and living in people’s lives.” The term *broad-based* needs some context as it relates to this study.

In addition, my use of the term in the research question may demonstrate a flaw in my thinking—the belief that success in corporate prayer is about generating widespread participation and growing numbers. While momentum and energy can undoubtedly come from increasing numbers, the fact is these research participants suggested that corporate prayer is much more about creating an atmosphere and having a greater sense of God’s manifest presence in the life of the church than it is about counting people and tracking attendance trends. Only one person that participated in this study mentioned anything having to do with setting goals regarding the number of people involved or the number of hours directed toward corporate prayer.

If a congregation attempting to mobilize corporate prayer has people in attendance at a specific gathering who really do not want to be there and are reticent to engage, it can squelch the atmosphere. Conversely, having new people who may be a bit intimidated by the setting and a bit halting and awkward in their involvement can instill life and vitality. Their genuineness of heart—because God is coming alive in their lives and they long to see a greater outpouring of his power—can bring excitement to that gathering even though their participation may be somewhat minimal or clumsy. People attending a corporate prayer setting out of a sense of duty and obligation creates a much

different atmosphere than people attending out of desire and aspiration for God.

Corporate prayer is much more about the heart and spiritual tenacity of those involved than it is about the numbers of people present, how comfortable they feel in that setting, or the fluency with which they pray. The purpose for establishing a variety of corporate prayer contexts and settings is to provide an appropriate outlet for people within the congregation who have a heart that longs to experience God in his fullness and see Him make a tangible difference in their community and world.

Six research participants spoke of intentional steps they take to make involvement easier for the person for who may feel intimidated in a guided corporate prayer gathering because it is foreign and unfamiliar to them. One pastor spoke briefly about trying to provide “easy entry points” and another about making their gatherings “organic” rather than starchy and stuffy. Another said he intentionally explains what is going on and how things work so new folks can understand and feel more comfortable participating. Another talked about the casual feel of his church’s prayer gatherings saying, “It’s not like super formal. We kind of interact; it’s like a phone call with God, but it’s not like it’s so formal that nobody can laugh or cry or say something or get up and get a cup of coffee.” Another spoke of granting visitors or first-time attendees permission to sit back and observe quietly by saying something along the lines of, “You don’t have to do this. You may be uncomfortable, so you can just listen. Or you can just talk to God yourself.” Even in spite of these various attempts to eliminate the threat and make corporate prayer gatherings friendlier for the new attendee, the participants in this study would say that the level of involvement is a bit disappointing from a numbers perspective. While it is certainly a core part of the church’s character and identity, it does not generate as broad a base of involvement and participation as they would like.

Based upon the varied responses of the participants in this study there was no general agreement or undisputed consensus on how best to implement corporate prayer. Some interviewees spoke of corporate prayer gatherings that happened on a weekly basis (11 of 13), some monthly (8 of 13), some annually (6 of 13), and some of special emphases that happen on a quarterly or periodic basis (11 of 13). Obviously, the more infrequent the gathering the greater the level of planning and preparation that went into it. In addition, the larger the church the greater the variety of corporate prayer offerings they made available to congregants. Then again, many of these congregations had a staff member whose primary job responsibility was to enable and empower prayer within the life of the church. All in all eight of the thirteen participants referenced the multiplicity of corporate prayer options they provide as if to reinforce that corporate prayer is not a uniform endeavor to be implemented in a consistent fashion across the board but, rather, a malleable activity that is best tailored to the dynamics of each situation.

In addition, participants referenced small group prayer gatherings, open prayer gatherings for the entire church, and multiple church or community-wide gatherings for the city or county. They spoke of mobilizing prayer vigils and prayer chains, training and deploying teams that periodically engaged in prayer-walking the community, and taking prayer excursions—trips and outings where prayer is the primary focus. They spoke of prayer groups that gathered during the morning hours, some that met in the afternoon, some that came together during the evening hours, and some that prayed through the night. Some efforts met on weekdays and others on weekends. Some met in conjunction with other church activities and some were stand-alone events. As a result of the varied and diverse expressions of corporate prayer shared by participants, I concluded no *right*

or *best* or *favorite* or *most effective* way to implement corporate prayer exists. It works best when it is customized to fit the specific realities of a particular setting.

As I reflect on the assessments and feedback I received from the participants in this research, I did observe some common, underlying principles and practices of these various corporate prayer initiatives that were broad in scope. First, effective corporate prayer gatherings were not prayer-request driven but very much had an external or kingdom focus. As one pastor said about the weekly corporate prayer gathering at his church, “This is not your grandma’s prayer meeting. We approach it as a battle ground with territory to be taken for the kingdom.” Only four of the thirteen people interviewed mentioned anything about receiving or inviting people to submit prayer requests. This small level of response is not to say these churches do not value or care about the concerns of their congregants and do not want to be bothered by them—in fact, a few churches use prayer requests submitted by congregants as a means of infusing elements of corporate prayer into their Sunday worship service and helping break down the intimidation factor. However, this research clearly demonstrates that submitted prayer requests from congregants did not form the bedrock or the foundation of the corporate prayer gathering. If personal needs and requests were to be prayed about, typically it occurred after a time of praise and a season of prayer on issues that were more external and kingdom focused. Praying about a variety of personal requests would be the place where a particular prayer gathering might end up, but it would not be where the gathering started or how it spent the bulk of its time.

Second, just as these corporate prayer gatherings were not request driven so they also were not event driven. Previously I shared the experience of leading my congregation in prayer in the wake of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 as an

example of an event-driven prayer gathering. The misfortune and tragedy of that catastrophic day served as the primary motivation for a gathering to be scheduled and for people to participate. The individuals who participated in this study did not tie their efforts to mobilize corporate prayer to particular events or occurrences. They did not wait for something to happen in their community or world and then say, “OK, let’s get together and pray!” To say that these churches were not driven by events in their attempt to implement corporate prayer is not to suggest or imply these churches did not occasionally mobilize corporate prayer gatherings in connection with special events. Participants spoke of coordinating prayer gatherings in the wake of an auto accident involving a key layperson, a flood that ravaged their community, election day or Independence Day, and the start of the school year. However, their underlying reason for calling their churches to prayer was not tied to particular events or community happenings. The foundation for prayer had to do with a deeply held set of beliefs and values these leaders embraced on the inside—beliefs that, as was cited earlier, were often forged out of the adversity of their personal brokenness and had been ratified not only by Scripture but by tangible fruit, undeniable answers, changed lives, and enhanced unity. The foundation and motivation for prayer was not something supplied from the outside but an unshakable conviction that rested deep on the inside of these men and women. The way these churches implemented and carried out corporate prayer made it very much a proactive, rather than a reactive, enterprise.

Third, one of the primary ways these churches communicated the value and importance of corporate prayer was by periodically clearing the church calendar and suspending other programming to make room for it. While only three participants specifically raised the issue of placing church programming on hold in order to allow

corporate prayer to exist in an unobstructed and unopposed fashion, I got the distinct impression the reason other participants did not speak to the matter was because they viewed it as the accepted and customary way the church functioned. They understood that clearing the calendar as much as possible was a reflexive and instinctive step they could take that helped establish and augment the perceived value of corporate prayer. One pastor who has an annual prayer emphasis in his church shortly after the first of the year said, "Every January, the first full week in January, we shut down everything here. There's no meetings, there's nothing that happens other than prayer." Another pastor who coordinates three major prayer thrusts in his church every year said, "When we do anything corporately, the whole church comes to pray. There are no other ministries going on that week. When we gather as a church, that means we all gather." These leaders made intentional efforts to highlight the priority of corporate prayer by minimizing other church programming that ran head-to-head with it. They attempted to convey its importance by scheduling it at times when the church calendar was free of conflicts, or removing and rescheduling conflicts that did exist.

Obviously in a larger church with a higher level of activity, for any specific ministry or event to exist unchallenged or without opposition is a very difficult thing to realize. That could explain, in part, why the larger churches that were a part of this study tended to offer a wider array of opportunities and outlets for corporate prayer. Just as most congregations attempt to schedule their worship services at times when nothing else is going on, an action that says, "This event is important," so the congregations in this study attempted to stress the significance and importance of corporate prayer by eliminating conflicts from the calendar. Those efforts to suspend other programming,

place it on a brief hiatus, and schedule corporate prayer at times when nothing else was planned sent a message that not only is this practice vital but it is also priority.

Fourth, one of the clear associations that emerged from the various interviews had to do with the connection between the pastor's personal prayer life and the vibrancy and enthusiasm of corporate prayer in the church. In the code cluster accompanying practices, this theme was the second in terms of its frequency of mention, behind only the need for corporate prayer gatherings to maintain an external focus, as well as second in terms of the number of participants who spoke to it. Illustrative of the thick connection between the pastor's personal prayer life and the church's corporate prayer life are the words of one pastor who told of an experience early in his ministry that flowed out of his reading and challenged his approach to life and ministry:

There slowly began to build in my heart the conviction that the pastor's personal prayer life was absolutely crucial and foundational to any true success measured in biblical terms. It hit me like a sledgehammer that while I was effective in studying the Bible and preaching, and while I could pray in public—and I don't mean pray for show, I mean heartfelt, effective prayers—that my personal prayer life was practically zero.

He went on to share this watershed experience not only revolutionized his personal life but also formed the platform for his work of mobilizing corporate prayer in the church. He continued: "At both the personal as well as the corporate level, prayer is absolutely foundational." The connection between the pastor's personal prayer life and the corporate prayer life of the church is compelling. To attempt to implement something within the life of a congregation that is not happening in a meaningful way within the life of the leader is an exercise fraught with contradiction and incongruity.

The message of the gospel has an amazing ability to adapt to a variety of cultural realities and settings. Similarly, corporate prayer has a built-in flexibility that allows it to

be customized to different realities and settings as well. Even though all thirteen churches in this study are situated in North America and face some common cultural factors, each one also faces unique challenges and distinctives that make the specifics of their location unique. This study certainly reinforced that reality in light of the myriad of different methods and means used to mobilize corporate prayer. All of these churches deal with a broad cultural atmosphere characterized at some level by individualism, secularism, and naturalism—a reality that makes the implementation of corporate prayer an extremely difficult thing to do. Nonetheless, these churches challenge and chip away at those cultural factors because of some underlying principles and practices they embrace—the belief that corporate prayer should not be request driven but kingdom driven, that participation is proactive rather than reactive, that clearing the church calendar as much as possible elevates its importance, and that an intimate connection exists between the health of the pastor’s personal prayer life and the vibrancy of corporate prayer in the church.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

While one can draw a number of relevant insights and axioms from the data associated with this research, the following three conclusions are at the heart of what this study revealed:

- A pastor or leader’s commitment to and passion for corporate prayer is at least initially driven as much, if not more, by his or her life experiences as by a key scriptural understanding or theological conviction;



- Vibrant corporate prayer will not be implemented in the local church, and the tide of a culture characterized by individualism, secularism, and naturalism will not be overcome apart from skilled and effective pastoral leadership; and,
- Many of the results pastors long to see in their churches from their ministry efforts—enhanced congregational unity, the tangible evidence of changed lives, and a discernible sense of spiritual growth—are results that interviewees indicated come from an intentional and effective emphasis on corporate prayer.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Major Findings

Both the Bible and Christian history regard corporate prayer as a valuable and beneficial way for God's people to bring his presence to bear upon life circumstances. Scripture and experience affirm this practice as an effective means of accessing God's power and assisting in the progress of his kingdom. In North America, with a highly individualistic culture, this practice has been greatly downplayed and devalued. Instead of being a widespread custom followed intuitively and characteristically by Jesus' disciples, it has become one of two things—a sporadic practice exercised in scattered locations or an emergency provision turned to in critical or crisis-type circumstances. It is not the vital lifeline and instinctive exercise it was for the earliest Christians and those throughout history who testify to its potency as a source of spiritual power and its efficacy as a precursor for renewal and spiritual breakthrough.

Individualism, however, is not the only cultural factor present in North America that works against the value and downplays the significance of corporate prayer. Secularism—the notion that religious belief is fundamentally irrelevant—and naturalism—the belief that every phenomenon has an ultimate explanation apart from a supernatural source—have also cast a shadow across the cultural landscape. While these values are at absolute odds with kingdom values, people who live in a culture where these presuppositions are firmly in place are inevitably imprinted. The result is a setting in which the majority of churches and ministry leaders do not prioritize a practice that has been a significant factor in virtually every meaningful renewing work of God throughout history. While most people would testify to a belief in the benefit and value of prayer, the

effort and attention given to the development of a culture of corporate prayer in most congregations is lacking.

However, a few congregations dotting the landscape have successfully overcome, or are overcoming, this adverse cultural current and have implemented, or are implementing, a culture where corporate prayer is valued and practiced with a sense of intention and commitment. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify threads of commonality relating to the underlying beliefs, values, and life experiences from the pastoral team members of exemplar churches that allow them to implement corporate prayer initiatives that generate widespread participation and involvement by their congregants. The aim of this research was to unearth insights that could perhaps explain the ability of these congregations to transcend the cultural tide. For that reason a phenomenological approach was used—one designed to explore the lived experiences and worldviews of pastoral leaders within a select group of exemplar churches and uncover relevant points of overlap and shared assumptions or premises.

Because phenomenological research is a highly subjective methodology that lacks the certainty and definiteness of a quantitative approach, its findings have limited generalizability. As indicated previously, the primary objective of phenomenological research is much more to illuminate and enlighten than it is to certify or convince. While the findings of this study are limited in terms of their prescriptive impact, phenomenological research is adept at discovering insights that challenge prevailing wisdom and exposing beliefs and ideas that typically go without being said and exist behind the scenes in a person's life. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien speak to the concealment of one's worldview which phenomenological research is adept at unearthing:

The majority of our worldview, like the majority of an iceberg, is below the water line. The part we notice ... is really only the visible tip. The majority of these powerful, shaping influences lurk below the surface, out of plain sight. (12)

Phenomenological research seeks to draw out these underlying influences and provide insight into a person's motivations. In this study of pastors and leaders of churches intentionally striving to implement a culture of corporate prayer, three notable insights emerged.

### **Commitment to Corporate Prayer Driven by Personal Experience**

The first noteworthy finding had to do with the life experience of the pastoral team members and that their initial commitment to corporate prayer was driven more by a sense of pain, personal brokenness, or perceived desperation than by a key scriptural understanding or theological belief. The overwhelming majority of research participants spoke to a watershed experience or episode of brokenness during an earlier chapter in their lives. These personal crossroads, and the subsequent enlightenment that came from them, served as catalysts for the current priority they attach to their efforts to establish a praying culture. Any theological conviction or scriptural endorsement for the practice of corporate prayer rode on the coattails of their personal experience—experiences that were often arresting and momentous in their impact.

In Chapter 1, I speculated that a meaningful connection between corporate prayer and the personal experience of the pastor would exist. On numerous occasions, my personal experience has not only led me to the Bible in search of truth but also sent me there with fresh eyes shaped by a recent happening. Personal brokenness or a perceived sense of desperation has motivated me to look for answers or insights so I can successfully avoid what I just went through and never have to experience it again. The

same phenomenon is very common in history—both events referenced in the Bible as well as events subsequent. People experience something traumatic and come to the end of themselves, recognize the desperateness of their plight, and turn to prayer. The ancient Hebrews often found themselves at risk from a neighboring nation or in the wake of a disaster and turned to prayer. Jesus' minimally resourced first followers possessed a vision for world impact in a culture powerfully aligned against them and turned to prayer. Groups of Christians throughout history have turned to prayer to experience something of God they knew they were powerless to cause or create on their own. In numerous instances, a sense of personal or collective desperation and brokenness is a precursor to a breakthrough in which an enhanced commitment to prayer emerges from the landscape as a vital practice to implement going forward.

The study indicated this sensation was a common experience in the lives of these pastors as well. Related to the significance they place on corporate prayer, a profound feeling of being desperate and having no other options drove them to a place of receptivity and openness to the power and possibilities of prayer. While many have consequently searched the Scriptures and can articulate a very convincing rationale for the practice—a rationale confirmed by Christian history—their initial excursion into the arena was much more the product of personal experience than a particular scriptural insight or theological conviction. The values that today sustain and support the practice were, for the most part, only present in embryonic form when the commitment to the practice began. Corporate prayer began out of a sense of desperation and brokenness before God. Their commitment to the practice was life experience driven more than values driven.

Chapter 2 talks about the history of corporate prayer and reinforces and supplements this finding in many ways. A great number of the champions of corporate prayer throughout history were individuals or groups that experienced their share of brokenness and pain. The difficulty of their life circumstances undoubtedly contributed to their commitment to corporate prayer, turning to it in hopes of discovering resources for life they did not possess. The Waldensians and the various firebrands at the heart of the Protestant Reformation were people of corporate prayer as well as people who experienced a significant amount of difficulty and hardship. The explosion of corporate prayer that ushered in the Third Great Awakening in the mid-nineteenth century can be explained, at least in part, by the difficulties many people experienced because of the Panic of 1857. The finding that personal brokenness and pain is a significant motivator for a commitment to corporate prayer is not at all surprising in light of the forces and factors that have contributed to its regression and resurgence over the years.

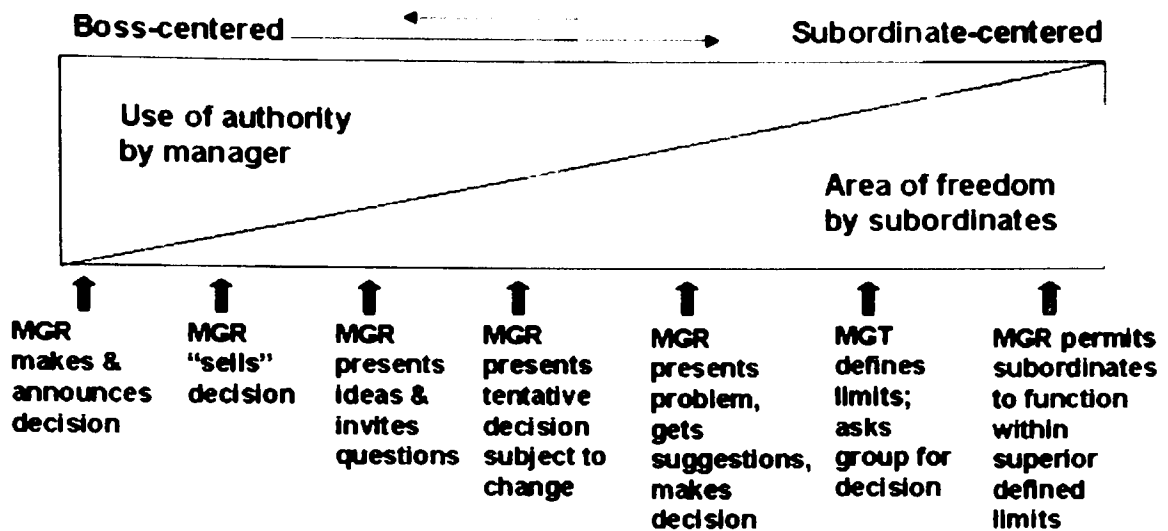
### **The Need for Effective Pastoral Leadership**

The second noteworthy finding had to do with the importance of intentional, relentless, and effective pastoral leadership to the establishment of a culture that values and prioritizes corporate prayer. Because of the variety of cultural factors that diminish its perceived value as well as create a problematic climate for its implementation, pastors need to be unyielding, undaunted, and unflinching in their efforts to establish a culture conducive to its practice. The need is for a leadership style that is less democratic and more directive. One of the pastors interviewed spoke to the need to be more direct and intentional in his leadership when he recounted reading the book *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr.:

[The authors] articulated the difference between what they call transformational leadership and transactional leadership. And one of the comments they made about transformational leadership stuck with me. They said, “For transformational leaders, there is no audience too small, no occasion too insignificant, to hammer away those values.” So I decided that I will do that when it comes to the whole issue of prayer.

This image of *hammering away values* is important to bear in mind as it relates to overcoming the cultural challenges and effectively moving a congregation toward an intentional and willful commitment to corporate prayer.

Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H. Schmidt developed a continuum of leadership behaviors available to those in positions of organizational oversight according to the degree of authority used by the leader. On the left-hand side of Figure 5.1, the leader gives little consideration to what others may think or feel about the decision. On the right-hand side, however, he or she allows others the freedom to make decisions within established parameters. In relation to the challenge of developing a culture of corporate prayer, the clear conclusion of research participants was that leaders needed to use a style that maintains, rather than releases, a high degree of control. While the leader must never conduct himself or herself in a fashion that is so autocratic that he or she alienates followers, the leader must possess an inexhaustible engagement, an untiring enthusiasm, and a relentless resolve in order to bring about change.



**Figure 5.1. Continuum of leadership behavior.**

A sizable section of Chapter 2 dealt with the topic of effective leadership as it relates to corporate prayer—key principles to bear in mind, aspirations to pursue, approaches to use, and objectives to strive for that will help facilitate positive results and minimize feelings of tedium and lifelessness in the minds of participants. It features a discussion on the unique skills, understandings, and insights needed to guide and implement corporate prayer effectively in the local church context. The blend and mix of required skills and abilities is demanding and considerable. Then again, corporate prayer would be practiced on a much more widespread and extensive basis than it is if it was easily implemented. The fact it is practiced on a somewhat random and arbitrary basis is a testament to how difficult it is to establish. The fact it struggles to gain traction and is applied somewhat sporadically speaks to how essential skilled and effective leadership is to the process of implementation.

Miglioratti makes a key distinction between the roles of leader and facilitator, indicating that the task of the leader during specific corporate prayer gatherings is more one of facilitating than leading in the traditional sense (315). Participants in this study



repeatedly spoke to the need for steady and unyielding leadership and painted the style of leadership necessary to create a culture of corporate prayer as more in line with the stereotypical understanding of leadership. Backus expresses his belief that the skill set necessary to facilitate effective prayer is different than the skill set required for other prototypical areas of pastoral service (94). As I try to make sense of these various and potentially conflicting inputs, I conclude that two different sets of skills are needed to implement corporate prayer effectively. The first skill set, one that is more directive in approach, is needed when working through the myriad of issues that accompany the challenge of instilling cultural change within the local church. The second skill set, one that is more collaborative and requires the input of others, is needed when facilitating prayer gatherings that impart a sense of spiritual vitality and excitement. When examined through this lens, I realize the research participants were right on target when they spoke of the constancy and intensity of leadership required and how difficult the task of creating a culture of corporate prayer really is.

### **Spiritual Results from the Implementation of Corporate Prayer**

A third noteworthy finding from my research indicates that a major outgrowth of corporate prayer shows up in the enhanced health of the congregation and the bolstered spiritual maturity of participants. This finding is right in step with the content associated with some of the major themes included in the literature review. First, corporate prayer is a divinely ordained means of fashioning positive change not only in surrounding circumstances but also in the lives of those who participate. Second, a sense of power is forged through agreement, resulting in a sense of unity that stems from corporate prayer. This unity works with the Christian metaphors of *body* and *family* as inherent in both metaphors is an implied unity. A disjointed body or a divided family is not functioning as

intended. This finding, which indicated positive spiritual returns as a result of involvement in corporate prayer, did not plow new ground or uncover fresh insights as much as it substantiated and confirmed the past observations of others.

On the basis of anecdotal evidence, I believe the North American church is in a day where congregational unity is increasingly elusive and congregational health is increasingly difficult to establish and maintain. As the North American culture is shifting from a modernist to a postmodernist orientation, the church is in many places struggling to adjust. In addition postmodernism, with its underlying skepticism and belief that competing social interests and subgroups are engaged in a nonstop battle to assemble and acquire power, creates a potentially volatile and explosive environment that is unfavorable to church harmony and congregational unity. If Person A sees Person B doing something that Person A does not like, and if Person A thinks Person B is doing it in order to amplify his or her influence or expand his or her base of power, Person A often resists and opposes Person B so Person A can seize or embrace that power for himself or herself. Such a response on the part of Person A invites Person B to retaliate in an attempt to settle the score. In this eye-for-an-eye type of atmosphere, dialogue can easily devolve into the rhetoric of blame and accusation where each party responds to the other with criticism and condemnation (Thiselton 135). The postmodern world, with its devaluation of rational dialogue in favor of the rhetoric of force, is like a time bomb at risk of detonating at any time. I believe we are seeing evidence of these contentious dynamics and power struggles as many congregations are becoming embroiled in intense, bitter conflict. Pastors, who find themselves caught in the crossfire, are leaving ministry at an alarming rate. In such a potentially eruptive atmosphere, corporate prayer offers the hope of fostering unity within the life of a congregation by binding together the hearts of

those who pray. People whose hearts are bound together tend to practice communication patterns that foster health and relate to other congregants and leadership in ways that promote harmony. However, because corporate prayer demands such relentless and determined attention, one cannot wait until signs of disunity appear before making an effort to implement it. Leaders need to view corporate prayer as a proactive, rather than a reactive, hedge against congregational division and dissension.

### **Reflections on Research Propositions**

In Chapter 1 I spelled out five presuppositions or underlying assumptions I brought to this inquiry. Based on my curiosity surrounding the effective implementation of corporate prayer, I speculated as to the discoveries and insights this study would uncover.

#### **Indelibly Marked by a Remarkable Incident**

First, I surmised that each church that effectively implements corporate prayer would be led by an individual who had personally encountered the power of prayer through a remarkable incident of some sort. Without a doubt this presupposition was solidly confirmed. Eleven of thirteen research participants referenced a personal watershed experience as a key formative influence that helped establish and build their commitment to corporate prayer. As stated in Chapter 4, one of the major findings of this study was that the life experience of these individuals was as much or more a factor in their current commitment to corporate prayer as any scriptural endorsement or theological tenet.

#### **The Pastor as Primary Influencer of the Church**

I also surmised that churches that effectively implement corporate prayer would be led by pastors or pastoral teams that have become the primary influencer or

influencers in the church. The biggest surprise that emerged from the research had to do with the pastoral tenure of those who agreed to participate in this study. Of the thirteen churches included in this study, the current senior pastor was also the founding pastor in four of them. Of those four, one has been serving in his congregation for fifteen years, two are just shy of twenty years, and the other is in his fourth year of a church plant after previously enjoying a fifteen-year tenure on staff at this sending church. Two of the additional pastors, while they did not start their churches, inherited churches that were down to a handful of members and in danger of ceasing operation when they arrived. Their denominational superior told them the churches would probably shut down if they could not begin to see growth. Of those two, one has now been with his congregation for almost fourteen years and the other for just over thirty years. Of the thirteen churches that were a part of this study, six continue to be led by the pastor who planted or restarted the congregation.

Of the remaining seven pastors who stepped into an established congregation, one is in his thirty-second year at his current church, another has been lead pastor for sixteen years after sixteen years on staff (and nine years as an active layperson before that), and another has been pastoring his church for fourteen years after thirteen years on staff. Two of the remaining four pastors are close to celebrating a decade of service to their current congregations. Through no intention or design, this study clearly drew from a group of pastors who have enjoyed much longer than normal tenures in their respective congregations. While this state of affairs has the potential to skew the data, an obvious question results: Is this extended pastoral tenure a happenstance occurrence or not? In other words, had this research involved thirteen different churches, would I have discovered most of them were led by an individual with an exceptionally long tenure,

who was the founding pastor, or who was the man or woman who successfully rebirthed a declining church that was down to a few discouraged attendees?

The unexpected finding surrounding the unusually long tenures of many of those who participated in this study certainly speaks to this presupposition, as multiple years of faithful service in the same congregation typically affords the pastor a considerable measure of influence. Considering the background and length of service most of the participants in this research have in their respective congregations, I believe they, for the most part, have become the primary influencers in their congregations and acquired what Quinn calls a sense of voice (59). The fact they acquired this level of influence also contributes to the earlier discussion about the need for intentional, relentless, and effective leadership as well as a style that is more hands-on and directive in approach. I believe pastors who have served their congregations for as long as the pastors of most of the exemplar churches in this study have developed a sense of voice so they can function in this fashion—something that perhaps is not as easily accomplished when a pastor is in the earlier years of his or her tenure.

One thing that is certainly hinted at in this study is that a meaningful connection exists between a lengthy pastoral tenure and the exemplary practice of corporate prayer. While not every pastor that remains in his or her congregation for a longer than average period of time is going to necessarily lead his or her congregation toward a heightened commitment to corporate prayer, something about an exceptionally long pastoral tenure creates a climate conducive to the development of such a culture. If churches are to going to become more adept and accomplished at the practice of corporate prayer, a residual issue that must be addressed surrounds encouraging longer tenures on the part of pastors.

For I do not believe a widespread return to this practice can take root and lodge in the North American church if pastors are transitioning every three to five years.

### **The Highly Effective, Evangelistic Church**

A third proposition I brought to this research had to do with the evangelistic effectiveness of the various exemplar churches. I thought people who have more recently felt the desperation and hopelessness of a life estranged from God would be more likely to make a meaningful commitment to an activity that invites his power to be active in people's lives. In the interest of not stepping outside the assumptive brackets associated with this research, I tried to be nondirective and intentionally did not ask about this issue in the interviews, as I wanted to see if the topic would emerge naturally. Without a doubt, the association between corporate prayer and evangelistic effectiveness was a recurring theme in the literature. Transformed lives resulting from times of awakening—awakenings fueled to a large degree by corporate prayer—was a very frequent and common theme. Writers such as Finney and Murray speak at length about the power of corporate prayer and its behind-the-scenes presence as a precursor to spiritual breakthrough and renewal. One research participant, who serves in a highly urban setting, indicated that when his church began to become a place of prayer that God “filled it up with addicts, with gang bangers and street hoodlums, and broken, hurting women with children that didn't have husbands—just the most motley bunch you can imagine.” He also talked about how their Sunday services had an atmosphere of conviction: “People began to walk off the street [and would] go to the altars during the time of worship and be delivered from stuff—I mean, God was setting people free under His own anointing and conviction.” His remarks certainly indicate a connection between corporate prayer and evangelism. However, they vary from my presupposition in that the cause and effect were

inverted. In his experience corporate prayer was the antecedent reality and evangelism was the result. My research proposition, however, surmised that corporate prayer would be the consequent result of a previous evangelistic effectiveness. While my research pointed to some sort of connection between corporate prayer and evangelism, it neither confirmed nor denied this proposition because it was not addressed as directly as I would have liked.

### **Theology of the Holy Spirit and Commitment to Life Change**

My fourth research proposition expressed my belief that churches that prioritize and practice effective corporate prayer have a robust theology of the Holy Spirit and are committed to being agents of positive life change. While this study did not explore the beliefs of participants regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in any detail, participants repeatedly made a connection between the practice of corporate prayer, spiritual growth, and positive life change. One respondent, who has been with her church since its inception, said the desire to “develop a culture of response within our church—preaching for life change and calling people to respond” has and continues to undergird their commitment to corporate prayer. Pastors and pastoral team leaders were overwhelmingly convinced that a commitment to corporate prayer produced tangible specific results in their congregations—enhanced unity, transformed lives, deepened levels of faith, and heightened spiritual maturity. While such results are difficult if not impossible to measure and quantify objectively, ten of the thirteen individuals who participated in this study indicated corporate prayer had a markedly positive impact on the atmosphere of their churches as well as specific individual lives by making a statement I classified with either the code *spiritualgrowth* or *lifechange*.

My research aligned with this presupposition in part, as the atmosphere and fruit of corporate prayer contributed to the churches' longings to be agents of positive life change. While it would be a leap to assume that churches with a high commitment to life change also have a healthy and vibrant theology of the Holy Spirit, I do not believe it to be an unreasonable or unwarranted leap. However, such a leap is unwarranted on the basis and findings of this research simply because overt language regarding the role and person of the Holy Spirit did not emerge from the interviews.

### **Socioeconomic Standing of Participants**

My fifth and final research proposition had to do with the socioeconomic makeup of the congregation. I hypothesized that churches that do an exemplary job of implementing corporate prayer would be populated by a higher percentage of people from lower income brackets. The thought process behind this premise is that poorer people feel more uncertain and insecure, and that sense of desperation and vulnerability leads them to embrace corporate prayer much more readily than folks whose lives are marked by abundance and comfort. The life circumstances of those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum drive them to prayer much more frequently than people who are wealthier. In retrospect, I realize a phenomenological methodology targeted primarily at exploring the life experience of selected pastors and pastoral team members would not necessarily yield insights regarding the socioeconomic status of the people in the congregation. Given that my only contact with these churches was through telephone or e-mail and that I conducted no demographic analysis of these exemplar churches or the communities in which they were located, I cannot speak with authority in regards to this presupposition. A quantitative approach that utilized surveys and questionnaires would be more appropriate and suited to trying to gain this information.



### Implications of the Findings

A number of relevant implications can be extracted and distilled from the findings of this study as it relates to embedding a culture of corporate prayer within the life of a North American congregation:

- The personal brokenness and pain of the pastor is a powerful tool God wishes to harness and leverage in order to make the pastor more dependent on him and become a stimulus for greater kingdom productivity. The repeated use of the code *desperation* in the attitudinal essentials code cluster as well as the frequent use of the code *watershed* in the formative influences code cluster substantiate this assertion (see Appendix E).
- The strategic use of the pulpit and a commitment to continuous and pertinent teaching are essential tools for the pastor who wishes to implement a culture of corporate prayer. The fact that teaching was the most frequently employed of all eighty-four codes extracted from the data speaks powerfully to this fact (see the Leadership Skills table in Appendix E). In addition, the recurring use of the code *pulpit* in that same code cluster underscores the importance of leveraging the preaching task if one wishes to implant a culture of corporate prayer in the local church.
- When a pastor is attempting to implement change that is largely at odds with the prevailing cultural tide, progress is often very slow and he or she benefits greatly from an extended tenure and a commitment to remain in that setting. Perseverance is essential to ingraining a culture of corporate prayer in the life of a specific body of believers. My usage of the code *persistence* almost as much as the code *desperation* in the Attitudinal Essentials table of Appendix E as well as the fact that the code *slowpace*

was used 75 percent more often than the next highest code in the perceived obstacles code cluster serves as ratification.

- The power of corporate prayer does not derive from the number of participants but from the unity it forges among participants and the spiritual growth it engenders in the lives of those who take part in the activity. The repeated insistence of interview participants in response to Research Question #4 in Chapter 4 to this end reinforces the implication that effectiveness in corporate prayer is not numbers based.

- While personal prayer often is viewed as an extemporaneous and impromptu communication with God, corporate prayer must be implemented with a sense of strategy and intentionality if it is going to convey a sense of vitality and life. The recurrent use of the code *strategic* in the leadership skills code cluster points to the fact corporate prayer requires a level of planning and preparation not necessary for personal or individual prayer (see Appendix E).

- While some underlying principles and precepts contribute to the effective implementation of corporate prayer, no best way to put it into practice exists. Like the message of the gospel itself, corporate prayer has a built-in versatility that enables pastors to implement it in a number of different ways. The fact that a number of different codes were employed in the involvement methods code cluster and that eight participants mentioned that their congregation provides multiple opportunities to pray strengthens the argument that no preferred or favorite or generally agreed upon way to do it prevails (see Appendix E).

- The breadth and range of leadership skills required to effect cultural change and establish corporate prayer as an integral part of a congregation's beliefs and values

requires that leadership training and cultural diagnosis skills be a prioritized part of the ministry preparation process. The use of the code *pastoralleadership* half again as often as any other code in the pastoral issues code cluster validates the need for skilled and competent leadership. Given the exceptional level of leadership required to embed the practice of corporate prayer into a congregation situated in a cultural context characterized by values at odds with the practice, attention should be given to developing the necessary leadership skills during the formal training process (see Appendix E).

- For corporate prayer to become a vital and invigorating activity, leaders must help participants move beyond the typical preoccupation with personal needs and concerns and give specific attention to issues and affairs in the surrounding community, society, and world. The clear emergence of the code *externalfocus* in the accompanying practices code cluster serves as solid justification towards this end (see Appendix E). When Jesus encouraged his followers to “[a]sk the Lord of the harvest to ... send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2), he was encouraging such an outward orientation. Effective corporate prayer in twenty-first century North America must have that same external focal point.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

While this study confirmed some presuppositions and provided insight into a number of questions, it also raised an additional bank of questions and put forward some issues that could form the foundation for future studies. As I mentioned earlier, two of the research propositions I spelled out at the beginning of this study were not addressed to a large degree. I believe the question of whether a discernible connection exists between the prevailing socioeconomic standing of a local church and its involvement in the

practice of corporate prayer would make for an interesting study. Are churches where the per capita standard of living is lower more prone to participate in corporate prayer than churches with a higher standard? Common sense suggests that people who live a more precarious existence financially would feel a higher sense of desperation and be drawn to prayer. A study that explores this question could be intriguing, for the feelings of desperation that often drive people toward prayer can also come from sources other than one's financial well-being.

In addition, the question of whether a connection exists between the evangelistic effectiveness of a local church and the vibrancy of its commitment to corporate prayer would be interesting to explore. Reasonableness could easily put forward that people who have previously and more recently felt the deep sense of desperation that comes from being spiritually lost would be more prone to invest themselves in an activity that invites God's power to be active in the lives of others. However, just because that notion seems plausible does not mean that it in fact aligns with current reality. A study focused around that question is one that I believe would be worthy of investigation.

I believe another compelling study could be focused on the question of how a pastor in the earlier years of his or her service to a congregation attempts to implement cultural change as compared to a pastor who has been serving in a specific setting for an extended period of time. Obviously, the long-term pastor has acquired a level of trust that the newer pastor can only hope someday to amass. However, if a congregation needs something that is only entrusted to a pastor after a certain length of time to change the culture, the prospect of pastors being able to implement a praying culture in the early years of their tenure becomes much more problematic. Just as a number of church leaders in the missional movement are wondering whether an established church is capable of

making a shift and becoming missional in its orientation, so many pastors committed to developing a praying culture may conclude that trying to transition an established congregation into a house of prayer is a pointless exercise. They may determine their best hope for success in this regard is to start a congregation where they can build a commitment to corporate prayer into the culture from the ground level.

### **Postscript**

This study did not yield the kinds of unexpected insights that frequently emerge from the research process. The findings, for the most part, substantiated and confirmed the suspicions and notions I had on the front end as well as past conclusions from men and women familiar with the practice of corporate prayer. Given that my research propositions were largely the product of my personal life experience and observations, I came away from this exploration into the lives of these men and women with the awareness of a significant overlap and similarity in life experience. The joys I have seen are joys they have seen. The obstacles I have encountered are obstacles they have encountered. The issues I have faced are issues they have faced. The challenges I have confronted are challenges many of them have wrestled with as well.

However, the fact that a number of unforeseen and surprising insights did not emerge is not to suggest that I come away from this process disappointed or unchanged. While I am at a place in my ministry where I do not have twenty or twenty-five years to give to a specific body of believers, I am resolved that I am going to use the time and energy I have to facilitate a culture of corporate prayer in the places I serve. I may not have sufficient time for it to become as established or ingrained as I would like, but I can certainly lay a foundation and establish a beachhead in the remaining years I have in active pastoral ministry. Perhaps a door might open so I can someday transition into a

setting where, instead of giving myself to the challenge of developing a culture of prayer in a local church, I can give myself to the challenge of developing men and women who will, in turn, give themselves to this arduous but invigorating task. Perhaps the remaining years of my ministry life will be spent empowering God-called men and women who will embrace the challenge and take up the mantle of developing a culture of corporate prayer.

Three things I can state with absolute certainty. First, I believe this study will change the way I pray. As was mentioned earlier, I believe the increasingly postmodern orientation of society will introduce a great deal of conflict into local churches, particularly congregations that are tied to a ministry approach targeted toward the rapidly fading modernist culture. I fear as postmodernism increasingly takes hold and conflict erupts, many pastors will find themselves in the line of fire and experience the kind of pain, brokenness, and desperation that many of the pastoral leaders in this study voiced. I will be praying that these pastors will not allow this experience to cause them to retreat from pastoral ministry but that God will leverage their brokenness and use it to develop in their hearts a burning desire to lead their congregations to become houses of prayer and that this movement will be the occasion for a spiritual awakening on this continent. North America has been the beneficiary of a few spiritual awakenings over the course of its history. I will be praying, and believing, that the time is ripe for it to experience another one.

Second, I believe this study will change the way I read the Bible. One of the landmark scriptural insights for me stemmed from my investigation of Acts 6 and the conclusion that the apostles viewed mobilizing corporate prayer and teaching God's word as being priorities of equal importance. For years, whenever I have read the Bible, the questions, "How can I effectively teach this?" and, "How can I persuasively preach this?"

have been lurking in the back of my mind. I really believe, from now on, some additional questions will become a part of my thinking: “How can we pray this?” and, “How can I apply this passage in ways that will lead my people to pray in accordance with God’s kingdom?”

Third, this study will change the way I live out my faith. I will never be content with a feeble, arid, innocuous, and prayerless living out of my relationship with Jesus, both in my own life as well as the body of believers to which I belong. I believe something much more vibrant, dynamic, and full of life than many North American congregations are experiencing is available and waiting to be actualized. I also believe the purposed and willful practice of corporate prayer is an indispensable and essential key to experiencing it. I will not settle for dull and listless when I know that vigorous and potent is available.

## APPENDIX A

### E-MAIL TO PARACHURCH/DENOMINATIONAL MINISTRY LEADERS

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky as well as Lead Pastor at the Lakeside Community Church of the Nazarene in Hastings, Nebraska.

My purpose for contacting you is to perhaps secure your assistance in the research for my dissertation in the arena of corporate prayer.

My study centers around identifying churches that are effective at mobilizing their laity in the arena of corporate prayer. I hope to conduct interviews with either the pastor or the prayer coordinator of these churches. From these interviews, I am seeking to identify threads of commonality in terms of beliefs and values that run through these churches and set them apart. I hope the findings will prove helpful in discovering some essential factors that contribute to the successful implementation of corporate prayer in the local church context.

Would you be so kind as to pass along to me names of congregations and contact information of pastors and/or their prayer coordinators that I could contact to see if they'd be willing to consent to an interview and assist with my research? Please know I will treat them with the utmost respect and protect their privacy. No church or individual will be identified other than by a number I assign them for the purpose of data collection and analysis.

I am hoping to gain a sampling of churches that represent a number of denominational affiliations, sizes, and are located in various regions of the country. Your assistance will be incredibly helpful. Also—if you know of other individuals I could contact who might be able to provide additional recommendations, please pass their names along.

If you could get back to me by e-mail at your earliest convenience at [e-mail address] I would appreciate it. And—if it would be helpful to talk to me for any reason, please feel free to call me on my cell phone at [number].

Thank you so much,

John Whitsett



## APPENDIX B

### E-MAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky as well as Lead Pastor at the Lakeside Community Church of the Nazarene in Hastings, Nebraska.

My purpose for contacting you is to perhaps secure your assistance in the research for my dissertation in the arena of corporate prayer.

My study centers around identifying churches that are effective at mobilizing their laity in this time-honored, biblically sanctioned practice. I hope to conduct interviews with either the pastor or the prayer coordinator of these churches. From these interviews, I am seeking to identify threads of commonality in terms of beliefs and values that run through these churches and set them apart. I hope the findings will prove helpful in discovering some essential factors that contribute to the successful implementation of corporate prayer in the local church context in North America.

Your name was given to me by \_\_\_\_\_ as an individual I should potentially contact. So—let me ask you: Would you be so kind as to set aside about 20-30 minutes of your time so I can conduct an interview with you? If so, there are one of two ways we can do this: (1) We can set a phone appointment where I can ask you the 4-5 brief questions that form the foundation of my research. I would, however, need to record the conversation so it can be transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. (2) I can e-mail you the questions, and you can send me an e-mail response. If you choose to go this second route I would obviously love for you to be as detailed as you can in your responses.

If you are willing to participate, I am perfectly comfortable with proceeding in either fashion.

Please know if you agree to participate, I will respect and protect your privacy. None of your contact information will be permanently kept or passed along to a third party. Also—no church or individual will be identified in my dissertation other than by a number I assign them for the purposes of data collection and analysis.

If you could get back to me by e-mail at your earliest convenience at [e-mail address] I would appreciate it. And—if it would be helpful to talk to me for any reason, please feel free to call me on my cell phone at [number].

One other question—if you know of other congregations and pastors who are doing an exemplary job of mobilizing their laity in the practice of corporate prayer, would you be so kind as to pass their name and contact information along to me? My belief is that those who are intentionally leading their congregations in a specific direction are best equipped to know of others who are doing it as well. I would like to send them a letter like this one

and perhaps include them in my research. The more information and input I receive from churches that are exemplary in this practice, the stronger the findings and conclusions will be.

Thank you so much for your help. I genuinely appreciate it.

Blessings,

John Whitsett

## APPENDIX C

### BELIEF AND VALUES EXTRACTION PROTOCOL

#### Research Question #1

What key beliefs and foundational values are present in local churches that effectively implement corporate prayer that most contribute to its elevated priority?

- *To what do you attribute the attention directed to corporate prayer and the elevated priority it receives in the life of your congregation? What undergirding beliefs/ideas/convictions can you point to that help explain its heightened prominence? In your view is this focus primarily drawn from Scriptural counsel, practical experience, a popular author, or ... ?*

#### Research Question #2

How did pastoral team members arrive at these beliefs and values, and what specific life experiences contributed to their embracing of them?

- *What can you point to that explains how these beliefs came to be? What happened, or what took place, that helped to form and establish them? When did your faith community begin to highly value (and seriously practice) corporate prayer? What were the turning points or markers along the road that let you know something had changed?*

#### Research Question #3

How have those beliefs and values been conveyed and transmitted so they have become shared congregational beliefs and values?

- *What intentional steps have you taken to help the congregation at large embrace these beliefs? What specific initiatives did you put in place, and what specific actions have you engaged in, that contributed to a broader sense of congregational acceptance and buy-in? Do you use any type of metrics to measure or quantify the level of adult participation in this practice? Have you measured a change in the percentage of adults who participate in corporate prayer? If so, in what direction is this change moving? How quickly or slowly?*

#### Research Question #4

What specific activities or practices, based on those beliefs and values, have been implemented that have proven effective in generating broad-based congregational involvement in corporate prayer?

- *How do you keep those beliefs alive? What have you done to prevent them from dropping off the radar screen and help people that are new to the life of the church come to embrace them? What specific activities and programming has been implemented that help people stay motivated and engaged in the practice of corporate prayer? Is there a season of the year when you emphasize corporate prayer? Is it a recurring theme in your lectionary or planning process? Do you incorporate this theme into a broader focus on Lent, spiritual formation, or ... ?*

## APPENDIX D

### CODES, CODE CLUSTERS, AND CODE SETS

Sixteen documents—nine phone conversation transcriptions, four e-mail exchanges, two magazine articles, and one sermon transcription—made up the corpus of the research for this dissertation. During the first stage of analysis (open coding), eighty-four different themes emerged—each of which received a code. These codes, during the second phase (axial coding), were grouped together according to a similarity of subject matter into what I called code clusters. Seven codes (divineprompting, interactive, pastoralleadership, personalpassion, personalprayer, relationships, and takeforgranted) were placed into a couple of clusters because they seemed to fit in both areas. These nine clusters, during the third stage of analysis (selective coding), were further abstracted and grouped into four distinct code sets.

The eighty-four codes, nine code clusters, and four code sets used for data analysis are broken down and explained in this appendix. Sets One, Two, and Three contain two code clusters each, and Set Four contains the remaining three. After a brief statement as to the unifying theme or rationale for each code set, each of the nine code clusters is highlighted in bold type within the respective set in which it was placed. Bulleted beneath each heading are the various codes that comprise that cluster and a brief definition of the conceptual idea or understanding associated with it.

**Set One** focuses on matters of leadership as the primary determinant affecting the development and direction of an organization or group. The two code clusters that were a part of this set are

## Pastoral Issues

- foundingpastor—a statement that indicates the individual is the founding pastor of the congregation he or she presently serves
- pastoralleadership—a statement of the senior leader’s importance in championing the practice of corporate prayer
- personalpassion—an expression of the interviewee or leader’s personal passion for prayer
- personalprayer—a statement of the belief that effective personal prayer in the life of the leader is a necessary precursor to effective corporate praying
- relationships—a statement regarding the importance of leveraging relationships in the establishment of a praying culture
- tenure—a reference to the length of a pastor’s tenure at his or her congregation

## Leadership Skills

- coaching—a statement regarding the leader intentionally coaching a person/group in an effort to develop an openness/affinity for prayer
- communication—an expression of the need for effective communication and/or method of communication in the implementation of a praying culture
- culturebuilding—a statement regarding specific activities that are perceived to help in the establishment of a specific culture
- expectationsofleaders—a statement regarding expectations that are placed on leaders in the support of corporate prayer initiatives
- goal—a reference to a numerical or involvement goal for the practice of corporate prayer
- identifiedvalue—a statement indicating that a congregation has formally adopted prayer as a core value
- influencer—a statement regarding a person who elicits the involvement of others because of his/her personal influence
- infusion—a statement regarding techniques/approaches to infusing elements of corporate prayer into other church activities
- pastoralleadership—a statement of the senior leader’s importance in championing the practice of corporate prayer
- personalmodeling—an expression of the pastor or leader actually modeling what he or she wants the people to do
- personalpassion—an expression of the interviewee or leader’s personal passion for prayer
- pulpit—a statement regarding the use of the pulpit to convey vision and create buy-in for the practice of corporate prayer
- relationships—a statement regarding importance of leveraging relationships to the establishment of a praying culture
- strategic—a statement regarding intentionality about the mechanics of a corporate prayer time or the topics addressed during a corporate prayer time

- teaching—a statement regarding teaching on the topic of the practice of prayer as a means of developing people
- visiontransference—a statement of the perception that the vision that resides in the pastor or leader is taking root in the heart of a specific congregant/congregants

**Set Two** addresses key components that can spark progress and sustain

momentum—the prevailing attitude within the setting as well as the background and

experience one brings to the task. The two code clusters that made up this set are

### **Attitudinal Essentials**

- confession—a statement regarding the need for confession as part of the exercise of corporate prayer
- desperation—a statement regarding a perceived sense of being at the end of oneself and needing a breakthrough from God.
- humility—a statement that speaks to the sense of brokenness/humility that results from prayer
- integrity—a statement regarding the need for people’s hearts to be right with God for corporate prayer to be effective
- learningbydoing—a statement regarding the perception that involving people in the practice of prayer is more effective than merely teaching them about prayer
- openness—a statement/expression as to one’s ability to be candid/open/real before God
- persistence—a statement as to the leader’s stubborn determination to build the practice of corporate prayer in spite of resistance/opposition
- roomforimprovement—a statement that acknowledges that the leader/church has a long ways to go in terms of establishing a culture of corporate prayer
- takeforgranted—a statement regarding the belief that part of the reason for a lack of emphasis on prayer is because people take it for granted

### **Formative Influences**

- book—a statement regarding one being powerfully influenced by a printed work
- capturedbyculture—a statement regarding a circumstance where a leader stepped into a church or ministry that had a well-established praying culture in place
- divineprompting—a statement as to one feeling a clear sense of God’s leadership in a specific direction
- exampleofJesus—a statement that speaks to seeing in Jesus a model that validates a certain activity or initiative
- historicalexamples—a statement that sees reinforcement for the practice of prayer by looking at the lives of people in history
- mentor—a statement regarding a specific person who influenced the pastor/leader in the area of prayer

- **parentalinfluence**—a statement regarding the belief that one’s parents/family created an appreciation of the importance of prayer
- **prayersummit**—a mention of a prayer summit as an influential activity
- **scripture**—a statement regarding Scriptural validation for the practice of corporate prayer
- **watershed**—a reference to a watershed experience that had a powerful impact or helped convince the leader of the need for heightened emphasis on corporate prayer

**Set Three** centers around those things that either contribute to the long-term success of plans or hinder their pursuit and sabotage a vision. The two code clusters that made up this set are

### **Motivational Factors**

- **answeredprayer**—a statement of the belief that prayer creates the condition for God to break through and answer
- **characterofGod**—a statement that sees support for the practice of corporate prayer in the very character of God
- **divineprompting**—a statement as to one feeling a clear sense of God’s leadership in a specific direction
- **fruitofprayer**—a statement regarding the perceived sense that corporate prayer has produced tangible dividends and made a difference
- **holiness**—a statement regarding the perceived sense that an encounter with God transforms and makes people holy
- **lifechange**—an expression of the church’s objective of facilitating life change which serves as a stimulus for prayer
- **powerfulpresence**—a statement regarding the sense of God’s manifest, powerful presence in a corporate prayer gathering
- **powerinprayer**—a statement that speaks to the motivation to pray because prayer is perceived to be a source of significant spiritual power
- **spiritualgrowth**—a statement regarding the perception that personal spiritual growth is an offshoot from participation in corporate prayer
- **unity**—a reference to the relational or congregational unity that comes as a perceived result of corporate prayer

### **Perceived Obstacles**

- **boring**—an expression of the belief that many people view prayer meetings as lifeless and boring
- **eliminatethreat**—a statement of a specific action taken to eliminate the perceived threat of corporate prayer
- **hardship**—an expression of the belief that prayer is hard work



- interactive—a statement of a specific action taken/intentional effort made to make prayer gathering more participatory
- lackofemphasis—a statement regarding the perception that the North American church lacks emphasis on corporate prayer
- lackofmodel—a statement that expresses/acknowledges the lack of models for the practice of corporate prayer
- misalignment—a statement that speaks to the perception that the church's core values and her practices do not line up
- slowpace—a statement regarding the belief that the implementation of a praying culture does not happen rapidly
- spiritualwarfare—a statement that speaks to the belief Satanic opposition to the practice or corporate prayer exists or the perception that corporate prayer is an ingredient in spiritual warfare
- standardofsuccess—a statement that speaks to the belief that success in developing a praying culture cannot be gauged solely by numbers
- takeforgranted—a statement regarding the belief that part of the reason for a lack of emphasis on prayer is because people take it for granted
- uncomfortable—a reference to the fact that a major hindrance to corporate prayer is that many people are uncomfortable praying aloud in a public setting
- userfriendly—a reference to an intentional effort undertaken to make a prayer gathering more user friendly

**Set Four** deals with practical concerns and issues surrounding the implementation of specific corporate prayer plans and initiatives. The three code clusters that made up this set are

### **Accompanying Practices**

- externalfocus—a reference to praying about external issues as opposed to internal issues (i.e., perceived congregational/personal needs)
- fasting—a reference to the practice of fasting as a helpful accompaniment to the practice of personal or corporate prayer
- focusonmen—a statement regarding an intentional effort made to engage/focus on men
- interactive—a statement of a specific action taken/intentional effort made to make prayer gathering more participatory
- personalprayer—a statement of the belief that effective personal prayer in the life of the leader is a necessary precursor to effective corporate praying
- praise—a statement regarding the need for praise as part of the exercise of corporate prayer

### **Involvement Methods**

- annualgathering—a reference to a corporate prayer event that happens once a year

- groupgathering—a reference to the gathering of a smaller group for prayer as opposed to an event where the entire congregation is encouraged to participate
- layleadership—an expression of the importance of key laypeople in the establishment of a praying culture or the success of a specific prayer initiative
- monthlygathering—a reference to a corporate prayer gathering that meets on a monthly basis
- multipleopportunities—a reference to the church providing a variety of options/ prayer possibilities into which people can plug
- prayerchain—a reference to an around-the-clock prayer effort for a day or a number of days
- prayerexcursion—a reference to a trip/excursion where prayer is the primary focus
- prayerrequests—a reference to the practice of allowing people to submit requests that will be the focus of the praying
- prayerwalking—a reference to engaging in prayer-walking as a distinct expression of corporate prayer
- prayingGodsWord—a reference to the practice of allowing the Bible to guide/ shape one's, or a group's, prayer
- responsetoevent—a reference to using an exceptional/remarkable event in the community/world as a stimulus to create an opportunity for prayer
- specialempphasis—a reference to a seasonal or special emphasis on corporate prayer
- weeklygathering—a reference to a specific prayer gathering that meets on a weekly basis

### **Logistical Matters**

- childrensissues—a statement regarding the need to provide programming/address children's issues to implement a praying culture
- programmingonhold—a reference to shutting down other church programming for a period of time in order to give heightened emphasis/attention to a particular prayer emphasis
- rentalspace—a reference to a church using space they do not own
- sacredspace—a reference to a place within the church facility that is set aside intentionally and specifically for prayer

## APPENDIX E

### A DETAILED ACCOUNTING OF THE USE OF DATA CODES

In the course of my data analysis, I identified eighty-four specific codes. These were subsequently abstracted out and placed into nine code clusters and four code sets in order to bring the various ideas and themes together for the purpose of determining relationships between the codes and identifying points of association. This appendix provides a detailed accounting of the use of each code as well as the number of participants who referenced it.

**Code Set One** focuses on matters of leadership as the primary determinant affecting the development and direction of an organization or group. The two code clusters that composed this set of codes were pastoral issues and leadership skills.

#### **Pastoral Issues (N=13)**

Code	Number of total uses	n
foundingspastor	6	5
pastoralleadership	26	11
personalpassion	17	11
personalprayer	15	7
relationships	10	5
tenure	5	3

**Leadership Skills (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
coaching	3	2
communication	25	7
culturebuilding	12	7
expectationsofleaders	8	4
goal	2	2
identifiedvalue	19	10
influencer	7	6
infusion	21	8
pastoralleadership	26	11
personalmodeling	24	10
personalpassion	17	11
pulpit	26	10
relationships	10	5
strategic	27	10
teaching	39	10
visiontransference	14	9

**Code Set Two** addresses key components that can spark progress and sustain momentum—the prevailing attitude within the setting as well as the background and experience one brings to the task. The two code clusters that made up this set are attitudinal essentials and formative influences.

**Attitudinal Essentials (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
confession	5	5
desperation	20	9
humility	1	1
integrity	1	1
learningbydoing	10	5
openness	1	1
persistence	19	9
roomforimprovement	10	5
takeforgranted	1	1

**Formative Influences (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
book	13	6
capturedbyculture	3	3
divineprompting	19	8
exampleofJesus	5	4
historicalexamples	2	1
mentor	15	8
parentalinfluence	2	2
prayersummit	8	3
scripture	35	11
watershed	21	11

**Code Set Three** centers around those things that either contribute to the long-term success of plans or hinder their pursuit and sabotage a vision. The two code clusters that made up this set are motivational factors and perceived obstacles.

### Motivational Factors (N=13)

Code	Number of total uses	n
answeredprayer	12	4
characterofGod	8	3
divineprompting	19	8
fruitofprayer	15	7
holiness	2	1
lifechange	11	7
powerfulpresence	10	3
powerinprayer	2	2
spiritualgrowth	12	5
unity	10	6

### Perceived Obstacles (N=13)

Code	Number of total uses	n
boring	2	2
eliminatethreat	6	5
hardship	7	3
interactive	9	4
lackofemphasis	3	3
lackofmodel	7	5
misalignment	11	5
slowpace	21	11
spiritualwarfare	8	4
standardofsuccess	7	6
takeforgranted	1	1
uncomfortable	6	3
userfriendly	12	4

**Code Set Four** deals with practical concerns and issues surrounding the implementation of specific corporate prayer plans and initiatives. The three code clusters in this set are accompanying practices, involvement methods, and logistical matters.

### **Accompanying Practices (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
externalfocus	17	9
fasting	1	1
focusonmen	3	3
interactive	9	4
personalprayer	15	7
praise	6	5

### **Involvement Methods (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
annualgathering	18	6
groupgathering	18	7
layleadership	19	12
monthlygathering	10	6
multipleopportunities	13	8
prayerchain	9	5
prayerexcursion	8	6
prayerrequests	13	4
prayerwalking	5	4
prayingGodsWord	8	3
responsetoevent	1	1
specialemphasis	22	11
weeklygathering	25	11

**Logistical Matters (N=13)**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Number of total uses</b>	<b>n</b>
childrensissues	4	1
programmingonhold	5	3
rentalspace	2	2
sacredspace	4	3



## WORKS CITED

- Arnold, John. *Making Prayer the Core Feature of the Evangelical Church*. Diss. Liberty U, 2008. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
- Backus, Samuel. *The Prayer-Meeting Assistant*. New York: Barnes, 1852. Print.
- Bakalov, George. "Honestly Speaking: The Powerlessness of Corporate Prayer in the Church Today." *Gbmi.us*. George Bakalov Ministries Intl, 26 Sept. 2010. Web. 27 Mar. 2012.
- Banks, James. *The Lost Art of Praying Together*. Grand Rapids: Discovery, 2009. Print.
- Barnes, Albert. "The Acts of the Apostles—Chapter 1—Verse 24." *Notes on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949. *Ccel.org*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 22 Mar. 2013.
- . "The Acts of the Apostles—Chapter 13—Verse 3." *Notes on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949. *Ccel.org*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 22 Mar. 2013.
- Beeke, Joel. "Prayer Meetings and Revival in the Church." Crawford 301-07. Print.
- Bickman, Leonard, and Debra J. Rog, eds. *Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998. Print.
- Boice, James Montgomery. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997. Print.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Trans. John Doberstein. New York: Harper, 1954. Print.
- Booth, Steve. "The Place of Prayer in the Early Church." Crawford 283-88. Print.
- Bounds, Edward M. *The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990. Print.

- Bruce, F. F. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988. Print.
- Buttrick, George. *Prayer*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1942. Print.
- Chambers, Talbot W. *The Noon Prayer Meeting of the North Dutch Church, Fulton Street, New York: Its Origin, Character and Progress, with Some of Its Results*. New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1858. Print.
- Cowan, John F. *New Life in the Old Prayer-Meeting*. New York: Revell, 1906. Print.
- Craig, D. J. "The Glasgow United Evangelical Association Noon Prayer Meeting, 1874-1974." Diss. Scottish Baptist College, 2007. Print.
- Crawford, Dan, comp. *Giving Ourselves to Prayer: An Acts 6:4 Primer for Ministry*. Terre Haute: PrayerShop, 2008. Print.
- Curran, Sue. *The Praying Church: Principles and Power of Corporate Praying*. Lake Mary: Charisma, 2001. Print.
- Cymbala, Jim. *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. Print.
- DeJong, John E. *The Place of Corporate Prayer at a United Methodist Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia*. Diss. Regent U, 2004. ProQuest. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
- Dever, Mark. "On the Use and Importance of Corporate Prayer." *9Marks.org*. 9Marks Journal, Jan./Feb. 2008. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.
- Duke, Dee. *Prayer Quest*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004. Print.
- Dunlop, Jamie. "Class IV: Corporate Prayer." *9Marks.org*. 9Marks Journal, May-June 2008. Web. 2 Mar. 2011.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Peterborough: Epworth, 1996. Print.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and

- the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth." *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, A. M. Ed. Edward Hickman. London: Ball, 1840. 2: 278-311. Print.
- Fernando, Ajith. *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. Print.
- Finney, Charles G. *Lectures on Revival of Religion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Leavitt, 1835. Print.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. Print.
- Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. San Francisco: Harper, 1992. Print.
- Franklin, John. *And the Place Was Shaken*. Nashville: Broadman, 2005. Print.
- . "The Priority of Praying Together." 2010. *Microsoft Word* file.
- . "Teaching Transferable Principles for Corporate Prayer at Two Rivers Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee." Diss. Samford U, 2001. Print.
- Fuqua, Dennis. *United and Ignited: Encountering God through Dynamic Corporate Prayer*. Vancouver: L/P, 2012. Print
- Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003. Print.
- Gonzalez, Justo L. *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001. Print.
- Graf, Jonathan. "One Voice, One Focus." *Pray!* Jan./Feb. 1999. Web. 21 Jan. 2011
- Groenewald, Thomas. "A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* Apr. 2004: 1-26. Web. 27 Apr. 2011.
- Hallesby, O. *Prayer*. Trans. Clarence J. Carlsen. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1931. Print.
- Hamilton, James M., Jr. "A Biblical Theology of Corporate Prayer." *9Marks.org*. 9Marks, Jan.-Feb. 2008. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.

- Hampel, Walter. "Prayer Revivals and the Third Great Awakening." *Evangelical Review of Theology* Jan. 2007: 30-42. *Christian Periodical Index*. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.
- Harrison, Everett F. *Interpreting Acts*. Grand Rapids: Academie, 1986. Print.
- Hartung, Bruce M. "Praying Together vs. Private Prayer." Crawford 308-13. Print.
- Henderson, Daniel. *Fresh Encounters*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008. Print.
- Hybels, Bill. *Too Busy Not to Pray*. Ed. Lavonne Neff. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988. Print.
- Immanuel Presbyterian Church. *The Prayer Meeting and Corporate Prayer*. Norfolk: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, 2007. PDF file.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. London: MacMillan, 1891. Print.
- Johnston, J. B. *The Prayer Meeting and Its History, as Identified with the Life and Power of Godliness, and the Revival of Religion*. Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1870. Print.
- Jones, Mark S. *Cultivating Prayer and Intercession in the Local Church*. Portland: City Christian Publishing, 2002. Print.
- Key, Timothy J., et al. "Mortality in Vegetarians and Nonvegetarians: Detailed Findings from a Collaborative Analysis of 5 Prospective Studies." *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 70.3 (Sept. 1999): 516s-524s. Web. 18 Aug. 2011.
- Knowling, Robert J. "The Acts of the Apostles." *The Expositor's Greek Testament*. Vol. 2. Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1897. 3-554. Print.
- Larkin, William J., Jr. *Acts*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995. Print.
- Lester, Stan. "An Introduction to Phenomenological Research." Stan Lester Developments. Web. 19 Aug. 2011. PDF file.

Long, Thomas. *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. Louisville: Westminster-Knox, 2009.

Print.

Martin, Glen, and Dian Ginter. *Power House*. Nashville: Broadman, 1994. Print.

McDonnell, Kilian. "Prayer in Ancient Western Tradition." *Worship* 55.1 (1981): 34-61.

ATLA. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.

Miglioratti, Phil. "Leading/Facilitating Corporate Prayer." Crawford 314-21. Print.

Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Westwood: Revell, 1924. Print.

Murray, Andrew. *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Westwood: Revell, 1953. Print.

Nee, Watchman. *The Prayer Ministry of the Church*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry,

1993. Print.

O'Neal, T. Michael, Jr. *An Analysis of the Ministry of Charles H. Spurgeon, with Implications for the Modern Church Growth Movement*. Diss. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006. ProQuest. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.

Patterson, Ben. "Whatever Happened to Prayer Meeting?" *Leadership Journal*.

Leadership Journal, Fall 1999. Web. 4 Aug. 2010.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Acts*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005. Print.

Peters, Thomas J., and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence*. New York:

Harper, 2004. Print.

Piper, John. "Sweet 'Our' of Prayer." *Pipersnotes.com*. Piper's Notes, 4 Jan. 1987. Web.

3 Mar. 2011.

Pohill, John B. *The New American Commentary: Acts*. Nashville: Broadman, 1992. Print.

Price, Oliver W. *The Power of Praying Together*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999. Print.

- Prime, Samuel Irenaeus. *The Power of Prayer, Illustrated in the Wonderful Displays of Divine Grace at the Fulton Street and Other Meetings in New York and Elsewhere, in 1857 and 1858*. New York: Scribner, 1859. Print.
- Quinn, Robert E. *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. Print.
- Rainer, Thom. "Thom Rainer: 12 Healthy Church Trends." *Churchleaders.com*. Church Leaders, n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Richards, E. Randolph, and Brandon J. O'Brien. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012. Print.
- Rinker, Rosalind. *Praying Together*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968. Print.
- Rowe, David Livingstone. "The Relational Affects of Corporate Prayer." Crawford 395-400. Print.
- Sacks, Cheryl. *The Prayer Saturated Church*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007. Print.
- Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. Print.
- Spurgeon, Charles H. *Only a Prayer Meeting: Forty Addresses at Metropolitan Tabernacle and Other Prayer Meetings*. 19 Mar. 2013. Microsoft Word file.
- Stott, John. *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990. Print.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1990. Print.
- Stuckwisch, D. Richard. "Principles of Christian Prayer from the Third Century: A Brief Look at Origen, Tertullian and Cyprian with Some Comments on Their Meaning for Today." *Worship* 71.1 (1997): 2-19. *ATLA*. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.

Tannenbaum, Robert, and Warren H. Schmidt. "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern."

*Harvard Business Review* 51.3 (May/June 1973): 162-80. *Business Source*

*Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*. Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1995. Print.

Thompson, Lewis O. *How to Conduct Prayer Meetings, or an Account of Some Meetings*

*That Have Been Held*. Boston: Lathrop, 1880. Print.

Verploegh, Harry, ed. *Oswald Chambers: The Best from All His Books*. Vol. 2. Nashville:

Oliver-Nelson, 1989. Print.

Wagner, C. Peter. *Acts of the Holy Spirit*. Ventura: Regal, 2000. Print.

---. *Churches That Pray*. Ventura: Regal, 2003. Print.

Waters, Janet. "Phenomenological Research Guidelines." *Capilanou.ca*. Capilano U, n.d.

Web. 19 Aug. 2011.

Willimon, William. *Pastor*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. Print.

Wright, Charles James. "Corporate Prayer and the Kingdom of God." *Modern*

*Churchman* 40.2 (1950): 148-56. *ATLA*. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.

Yancey, Philip. *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

Print.

Young, Robert. *The Importance of Prayer Meetings in Promoting the Revival of Religion*.

New York: Lane, 1850. Print.

Zaleski, Philip, and Carol Zaleski. *Prayer: A History*. New York: Houghton, 2005. Print.