

A New Chapter in Altoona

Pastor Tim McGarvey



I have been the pastor at Altoona Alliance Church in Altoona, PA, for 21 years. When I moved here decades ago, I was told not to expect the churches or pastors to work together on anything. The statement was clear and consistent, “Churches don’t do things together in this city.” We didn’t even have a ministerium!

History shows that this has been an ongoing problem in Altoona for decades. Altoona is mentioned in Billy Graham’s biography, *Just As I Am*, but not in a positive way. In 1949, Billy Graham came to Altoona for one of his earliest evangelistic crusades and it didn’t go well. He called it the “Altoona fiasco” and left with burning embers in his eyes and a doubt if he should continue to pursue gospel ministry (p. 133-140 *Just as I Am*). What was the problem? Ongoing squabbling, competition, and dissension among the pastors and churches. In fact, pastors would not even sit on stage together during the crusade.

If you have ever lived in Altoona for any time, you know THAT story. In fact some of us pastors have felt for some time it is like a curse over our city.

But the reality is that not much has changed in 70 years . . . that is until April 2018.

In April 2018, seven city pastors got together to pray. We

couldn't settle on a day of the week to do this, so we decided to try Sunday at 6:30 AM.

At that first meeting, one pastor publicly apologized for any offense he or his church may have caused the other pastors or churches through pride, arrogance, and a "better than you" attitude. We were off and praying.

Over the past year those seven pastors and four churches has grown to as many as 40 pastors and leaders, and 25 to 27 churches praying every Sunday at 6:30 AM . . . and now working together on ministry and events.

These prayer times resemble a huddle in football. Wikipedia says a huddle is for three reasons: to strategize, mobilize, and encourage. At these weekly prayer time huddles, we see these three happen nearly every week.

The Sunday 6:30 AM Prayer Time

- We meet in a different church in the city each week.
- We begin with celebrations. "What can we celebrate in your churches today?"
- We pray for our city, leaders, people, churches, etc. Usually an unplanned theme arises from the prayers being prayed that morning (sin, humility, addictions, spiritual warfare, families, etc).
- We close the $\frac{1}{2}$ hr of prayer by huddling around the host pastor and staff if there, lay hands on them, and pray a blessing over them, their family, and their ministry.
- Some stay and talk or pray in smaller groups, while others have 8am services and need to go.

Now we feel God leading us to not just pray at churches, but at businesses or schools as well when invited. Over the past year we have prayed at local high school, local college campus, café, and crises pregnancy center.

Results of Praying Together over the Past Year

As we pray together as pastors and church leaders of the city, we are seeing the church become stronger together. It is beginning to look like Acts where the churches were designated by name of the city such as the Church in Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, not the churches in those cities. We are seeing the church in Altoona arise, not just the churches in Altoona.

Through prayer, the Holy Spirit is leading the pastors and churches of the city into doing initiatives together. Think of this. In the past, city churches were not working together, and pastors were not willing to sit together. But after praying together over the past year, we have seen successful initiatives done together.

- **First ever Blair County Prayer Breakfast.** We had more than 200 come to this, including many government leaders from the city of Altoona and the state of PA.
- **Joy In The City Altoona unity night of worship.** We wanted the curse and sin of our past to “come down” and the church to “rise up!” 910 people showed up to this Sunday night event and it left many in the city crying, “Do it again!” We had a combined worship team from various churches, five city pastors spoke on awakening, and more than 30 pastors stood on stage of that “historic theater for a historic moment” locking arms in unity and love, committing to serve together. At that service, we reminded those attending, God was doing a new thing, writing a new chapter.
- **A Joint Sermon Series.** Leading up to the Joy In The City worship night, pastors did a first ever 5-week citywide sermon series using the themes of Prayer, Worship, Holy Spirit, Sending, Gospel Awakening.
- **English as a Second Language.** There is a need in our

city to help internationals learn English. Seven churches are working together to hold classes every Monday night in our brand new Altoona English and Culture Club. We teach English and learn of their cultures. We just finished our first year with 25 students from about six or seven areas of the world, along with up to 18 of their children.

- **Celebrate Recovery.** Some churches are coming together to make this recovery ministry available to those in our city with addictions.
- **Combined Good Friday service.** Churches came together for an afternoon city Cross Walk and an evening service.

As we wait on the Holy Spirit to show us next steps, we recently talked about two areas of focus: equipping and sending people out to serve. We are talking about forming a "School of music and ministry." Also, we are talking of possibly that some churches would come together to plant churches in our city.

We are also planning for prayerwalks and a clean-up day to bless the city.

And finally we are already planning a second Blair County Prayer Breakfast and a second Joy In The City worship night.

Another benefit from these Sunday AM prayer huddles, is more opportunities for pastors and their wives to get together. We've done a summer picnic, a Christmas party, a book study at local café and planning meetings.

Our Mission

We have discovered there are more than 60,000 people in Blair County that have no relationship with Jesus, and 290,000 in tri-county area. We want to reach them with the gospel of

Jesus Christ. We want to make an impact in our city . . . offering help and hope in Jesus, and to make our city better.

We are developing a desire:

- to reach out to the internationals in our city.
- to provide the answer to homelessness, drugs, suicide, addictions, etc.

We also desire for people in our churches to begin pockets of prayer huddles in their workplace, neighborhoods, and places of recreation. We are already hearing stories of that happening!

God is writing a new chapter.

Some may have felt for years that the history of Altoona, PA was complete. “Roll the credits. The End.” The “Altoona Fiasco” where churches and pastors never come together to work as the church would never change. It seemed to be a curse we would just have to live with. BUT GOD!

The One who declares in Isaiah 43:19 “Behold, I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Yes, we perceive it!

God is writing another chapter in the story of Altoona. A major part of the story is pastors, church leaders, and churches coming together for prayer, hearing from the Holy Spirit, and stepping out in obedience and unity to make a difference in our wonderful city and beyond like never before. There is an awakening happening in Altoona, Pa. That awakening is bringing Joy in the City “So there was much joy in that city!” (Acts 8:8).

To God be the glory!

–Pastor Tim McGarvey is the lead pastor at Altoona Alliance Church in Altoona, PA. This is published by the Church Prayer Leaders Network.

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