

# From Hopelessness to City of Hope

## The Story of Manchester, Kentucky

By Arlyn Lawrence

You're from *Clay* County? Oh . . ."

A knowing comment and a condescending lift of the eyebrows were typical responses when someone admitted to being a resident of what was once the second poorest county in Kentucky and the fourth poorest in the nation.

In 1964, CBS News gave the small city of Manchester—Clay County's county seat—the title of "Depressed City, USA." Forty years later, in 2004, nothing had changed; if anything, the situation was worse.

The community was divided—not just physically by geography, but relationally by years of violent clan feuding. The churches were divided, marked by spiritual pride and parochial bickering that left them stripped of any real spiritual power or meaningful role in the public arena.

Families were divided—destroyed by divorce, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, abandonment, suicide, and widespread crime. More people were incarcerated in the local prison than resided in the town. Even law enforcement was divided and impotent, riddled with corruption and devoid of cooperation between its various agencies.

From all visible signs, the scenario for Manchester, KY, was increasingly hopeless.

## **A Desperate Place**

Out of sheer desperation, Christians began to pray together. One hundred to 150 of them started gathering on Saturday mornings—fed up with the loss of far too many bright young lives due to drug overdoses. They were also fed up with the corruption and the crime—fed up with drug dealers whose houses got more commercial traffic than the local Wendy's while law officials turned a blind eye. One participant put it simply, "People just got tired of burying their kids."

So they gathered, from all walks of life, praying across denominational lines—Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Charismatics, and Catholics. Even those who were not professing Christians showed up to pray, so great was their desperation. One pastor reported, "People who had never done that before were on their knees crying out to God—and all of a sudden you're hugging a Presbyterian or a Methodist." Instead of focusing on their differences, they were focusing on their commonalities: *Jesus and their community's problems.*

## **Repenting and Exposing Darkness**

What did those desperate, united prayers look like? For one, participants repented (as churches and individuals) for their passivity, disunity, and spiritual separatism that had robbed the Church of its rightful role and responsibility in the community. "We weren't [just] trying to take back what the devil had stolen," says Pastor Doug Abner of Community Church in Manchester. "We were taking back what was rightfully ours that we had given up because the Church wasn't doing what it was supposed to have done."

One Methodist minister said at the beginning of the prayer meetings, "We need to pray for God to expose the darkness." So they did. And God responded. Little did the praying band of believers know that God was already moving powerfully behind the scenes to break open the crime and corruption that had poisoned the community for so long. Unbeknownst to anyone, the FBI had quietly moved into town and was working intensely behind the scenes.

It is notable that those Saturday morning prayer gatherings were not the first foray into seeking spiritual solutions to the community's practical difficulties. On September 7, 2002, a historic prayer initiative took place at the Cumberland Gap, just 40 miles southeast of Manchester. That gathering brought several thousand intercessors from more than 40 states and included representatives from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales—the ancestors of the original settlers who traversed the Gap in the earliest years of America's history.

The intercessors believed fervently that God would pour out His Spirit through the Gap just as hundreds of thousands of pioneers had poured through it centuries earlier. That day, ten cities in the Kentucky region banded together to form a prayer corridor to prepare for revival in the region, and prayed words of healing over the land.

### **Taking a Stand and Welcoming Jesus**

Two years later, those prayers came to powerful fruition on May 2 as 63 churches and more than 3,500 people came together on a cold, rainy day to march in the streets against drugs in Manchester.

"ENOUGH!" roared the newspaper headlines the next day, for that was the battle cry, both practically and spiritually. But John Becknell, president of CCMP-TV in Manchester, says they knew the march that day wasn't just taking a stand against

drugs. It was about welcoming Jesus as Lord of Clay County and consciously re-enthroning Him as the ruler over the land and people. Alongside the anti-drug banners, marchers lifted high signs reading, "Lord of Lords," and "Jesus is Lord in Clay County."

Many people in Manchester will tell of their conviction that this climactic prayer event broke the vice-like grip of drug addiction and other issues that had tormented the daily life of the entire region. Within roughly two months, the FBI closed in and made its move.

Subsequently, over the next several years, more than 3,000 people were arrested, including drug dealers. Seventy county officials were indicted. The mayor, city supervisor, council members, commissioners, assistant police chief, fire chief, county clerks, and even a circuit judge presiding over three counties, were exposed and jailed for racketeering, distributing drugs, and voter fraud. Corrupt members of the police and sheriff departments were exposed, prosecuted, and sent to prison. New, stable, and accountable government was instated, which has had far-reaching effects.

### **True Transformation**

In fact, residents of Manchester will be the first to tell you there has been a distinct "before" and "after" in the community—before the prayer started, before the march, and after. And that before and after effect can best be described as *transformation*:

- Crime and corruption have diminished dramatically throughout the community.
- Economic conditions have improved, leading to a discernible lessening of poverty.

- New laws, school curricula, and business practices have been put into effect.
- Political leaders have publicly acknowledged their previous sin and their renewed dependence on God.
- Restored hope and joy have led to a marked decline in divorce, bankruptcy, and suicide.
- Secular media and government have confirmed growing social and political renewal.
- Volunteerism has increased as Christians have recognized their responsibility to care for their community.
- Large numbers of local drug dealers and addicts have surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ and been dramatically delivered from drug addiction.
- In 2007, the city council voted to change the name of the city to Manchester: City of Hope.
- The city has become a regional influence, receiving desperate calls from 49 different states and five foreign nations, all soliciting guidance in their own battles against drugs.

George Otis, Jr., of the Sentinel Group, has documented the transformation of Manchester, KY, in his most recent documentary, *An Appalachian Dawn*. After thousands of hours of research, interviewing, filming, editing, and the resulting video production of the dramatic and moving story, Otis says that much of the story still remains untold. "It was the hardest story for us to tell," he recounts, "because where do I start? What is the best angle? There are so many possibilities. I can't even begin to overstate what God has done here."

After having observed and/or documented transforming revivals in more than 700 communities around the world, Otis agrees that Manchester, KY, is a classic example—and all the more exciting because it is in America. It's an example of what happens, he says, when people take seriously what God promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14: ". . . if my people who are called by my

name will *humble* themselves and *pray* and *seek my face* and *turn from their wicked ways*, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land” (NLT, emphasis added).

That’s exactly what happened in Manchester: *Confession. Repentance. Humbling. Action.*

“People in this story who, from a theological perspective are oil and water, are joined at the hip in what God is doing,” says Otis. “That’s a hallmark of genuine revival.”

### **Returning to Repentance, Prayer, and Unity**

What’s going on in Manchester these days? Now, seven years after the original prayer meetings and the march, they’re getting *back* to repentance, reports Otis. As with all movements of God, there can be a tendency to rest on one’s laurels (or one’s blessings) and take for granted what God has done. The key, Otis says, is to *stay* in humility, *stay* in dependence on the Lord, and *stay* in prayer.

With this principle in mind, both church and civic leaders in Manchester are taking seriously the responsibility to stay in prayer and unity. Because of it, God’s presence and work are still being keenly felt and observed in the public arena in Manchester.

How do we know if God is responding to prayers for transformation, as was evidenced in Manchester? What should any of us who are praying for transformation in our own communities be looking for? “Really,” reflects Otis, “we don’t always see right away everything that God is doing in response to our prayers. Sometimes He’s moving behind the scenes in response to our prayers in ways we can’t even see—yet. When He does manifest His presence, you’ll always know it, not just by the nature of His response, but by its magnitude and force.”

## Attracting God's Attention

But while God's response to our prayers may vary from community to community, what remain constant are the things He says attract His attention and His presence. These are the very things the Manchester churches set into motion, whether they realized it or not at the time. They realized the problems were spiritual, not just physical. They united in desperation and repentance. They began to pray for a solution. *And* they started taking action.

The resulting transformation is beyond the scope of most people's ability to describe. Perhaps John Becknell's simple assessment says it best. He just tells people, "God tabernacled here."

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## Why Don't We See More Community Transformations in America?

Community transformation is an extraordinary season in which the Kingdom and presence of God pervade virtually every institution of the community's life. In recent years, prayer-related transforming revivals have been documented in Guatemala, Brazil, Fiji, Uganda, and many other nations around the world.

The uniqueness of the story of Manchester, KY, is that it is

currently the only documented example of transforming revival that meets these criteria in America. Why? It's hard to say.

But here are some possibilities, according to George Otis, Jr., of the Sentinel Group:

- Western Christians tend to lack the childlike, cause-and-effect faith that people groups such as the Fijians and Africans consistently demonstrate.
- The sophistication of Western Christians often contributes to the “hedging of bets,” so to speak, and the mindset that we cannot say anything about God or expect anything of God with certainty.
- Westerners don't seem to be as willing to put themselves “on the clock” as other cultures that have experienced documented community transformation. Fijians, by contrast, will call a 21-day corporate repentance and fast and fully expect that when the fast is broken, God will show up in some way. The reality is, He generally does—and usually within 48 hours. It's always different and always unpredictable, but always distinctly God.

So what are the implications for us in America? What are some ways we can reach out to God on behalf of our communities and expect to see His hand in our midst?

### **Consecrate and Humble Yourself**

The Bible teaches that when God wants to reveal Himself to His people on a corporate level, He first asks them to examine and humble themselves on an individual level. “Consecrate yourselves,” Joshua told the Israelites, “for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you” (Josh. 3:5). *Consecrate* means “to purify”—to make a person free from guilt or moral blemish. We purify ourselves through humility, confession of sin, and repentance.



In this account, God wanted to do something wonderful for the community as a whole. But first, He asked them to purify themselves *individually*. This meant careful self-examination, humility, honest confession, and earnest repentance of any revealed sin. Then the people were ready to come together corporately to experience God's presence.

As many of the people in the Manchester story will testify, it is as we humble ourselves before the Lord and repent individually that we have the platform to come together to repent and pray corporately. When we do, we cultivate a spiritual appetite and atmosphere in which the Lord can do *amazing* things among us.

**–Arlyn Lawrence**