

Hopping on One Stilt

Hindrances to Corporate Prayer

By Jonathan Graf



A few years ago, I was leading a prayer weekend in a megachurch. It was the third time I had been to that church over a three-year period, so I had built solid trust relationships with the pastoral staff. The church's prayer coordinator and I had talked months prior about holding a five-minute corporate prayer time within the morning worship service (6,000 attendees in two services).

We both sensed the congregation was ready for such an event. She was excited, but when we approached the senior pastor about the idea, he was very reluctant to allow it. He believed too many people would be uncomfortable with the thought of praying in groups with others. Even after explaining how I would facilitate the time so that no one felt awkward, he said no.

Though corporate prayer was clearly practiced in the early church (Acts 1–13), very few Western churches these days practice it. Why?

Why do we allow our comfort to override a clear practice of the New Testament Church (Acts 2:42)?

God has given us two stilts in the Christian life to allow us to rise above the world and walk the Christian life in vibrancy and power. But most churches today—and our people—only hop on one stilt. What are the stilts? The Word and prayer.

In Acts, the two were given equal emphasis. Today in most evangelical churches the Word is taught, but prayer is more assumed than taught and practiced. We need to change that if we want to see spiritual power return to our churches.

Few pastors will argue against the need for praying together in a corporate way. No one can argue from Scripture that it is not important or that the early church did not pray together. But few pastors and churches today make an effort to develop this style of prayer. Why?

I think it stems from the extreme difficulty in overcoming all the hindrances. To make praying together a natural part of the spiritual dynamic of a congregation takes work. But if a church wants to be New Testament-like, spiritually healthy, and truly Kingdom-minded, it must pray corporately.

Based on what I have observed throughout my years in prayer ministry, beyond the obvious—that the enemy does not want to see churches pray and therefore opposes it—here are some hindrances to corporate prayer in a local church, and some potential cures.

Hindrance #1: No Personal Prayer Life

By far the biggest hindrance to corporate prayer is individuals within a church who have weak or no personal prayer lives. The believer who doesn't pray when alone is not going to get excited about being asked to pray with others. Most churches fail to recognize that many of their people do not have healthy prayer habits. In fact, statistics indicate

that in most churches more than 80 percent of a congregation admits to poor prayer lives.

Cure: Don't give up on corporate prayer because nonpraying believers won't come to a prayer meeting or will be uncomfortable if asked to pray together in a worship service. Instead, raise the level of prayer discipleship in your church. Teach people to pray and give them experiences and opportunities to practice. With all the excellent resources on prayer available today, believers have no excuse for not praying. Look for strategic ways to teach prayer—through small groups, men's ministry, Sunday school classes, and the pulpit.

Hindrance #2: Poor Past Prayer Experiences

People may not like to pray together because they have experienced poor, dull, corporate prayer in the past. Their picture of corporate prayer or the typical "prayer meeting" is negatively skewed. Many people's image of "praying together" is six seasoned saints in a room each praying for 15 minutes, all fully covering the church's prayer list of everyone's ailments. That is not corporate prayer. That is simply personal prayer practiced in a group.

Cure: Cast a different vision of corporate prayer for your people. Offer them a more dynamic model, where a leader directs the prayers on one theme, not a hodgepodge of prayers based on everyone's individual agendas. Don't let your times of prayer be about them, but rather about Him.

Hindrance #3: No Expectations

One of the most significant reasons people do not pray with

others is that they have no expectation that anything will happen when they pray. While most will never say that they don't believe "prayer works," they often pray with a sense of "wish or hope" more than faith. We know God is big enough and we hope He will do something, but we do not really believe He will.

Cure: This will only change from the top down. Leaders need to model expectancy. If the elders and pastor don't believe anything will happen, nothing will! In order for the people to glimpse a vision of a God who moves when we pray, the church leaders need to demonstrate that vision from the pulpit and publicize testimonies of answered prayer within the church.

Hindrance #4: Fear of Complaints and Discomfort

Many church leaders are like my pastor friend who did not allow a corporate prayer time in his morning worship service. They restrict corporate prayer within a service to one leader praying from the platform. That way, those who do not like to pray out loud won't feel uncomfortable. These leaders also fear complaints from congregation members if they encourage group prayer experiences.

Cure: Corporate prayer times can be made easy and nonthreatening. Keep them within two to five minutes. Always direct the prayer by giving people topics to pray about. Put prayer points and a prayer on the screen. Let people know that they may pray multiple times within the group, but challenge them not to pray longer than 30 seconds at any one time. Tell people that if they are uncomfortable praying out loud, no one will force them to do so. They can simply pray in their hearts.

If there are unbelievers present, they are not generally the

ones bothered by this practice. Non-believers know Christians are supposed to pray and that prayer happens in churches. Typically, when they witness it, they are not turned off—even if requested to be a part of it.

A few years ago, I was speaking in a church in California, and their prayer leader wanted a time of prayer in the worship service. The senior pastor, though reluctant because of the comfort level of his people, allowed it. The prayer time became so dynamic and powerful that people came to him for weeks afterward, asking to do it again. They now pray corporately on a regular basis!

Hindrance #5: Staying in Control

Church services today are typically well planned out (even to the minute with event-planning software), full of “stuff” and often with no margin available at the end due to another service or planned event. Even if prayer is incorporated into the plan, it must adhere to the schedule: “2.5 minutes and no more.”

I was recently in a church where, before I got up to preach, the pastor told me I had to be done at a certain time or he would come up to get me. He said it with a smile, but he got his point across. I understand that there is usually no need to speak beyond a certain amount of time, but what’s wrong with this picture—so typical in the Western church? What if God actually moved in a service?

If prayer is to be effective, it does not fit into this time-constraint mold. Prayer is giving up control. What happens if one of the pray-ers, suddenly empowered by the Spirit, becomes impassioned and goes over the time limit?

Most leaders understand it is difficult to control prayer’s length, so it becomes easier to leave out any opportunity for

corporate prayer in a worship setting.

Cure: If your church has no margin, then conduct a prayer time in which people organize into groups and pray briefly about one topic at a time. The time length can easily be controlled from the platform. The leader simply prays a short closing prayer to wrap it up. Or if the prayer time is during the musical worship portion of the service, the worship team starts singing again to bring prayer to a close.

Hindrance #6: Church Is for Me

Another major hindrance to corporate prayer is the individualistic attitudes of many congregants. Many believers look at their church with a consumer mentality. If their needs aren't met, they look for a place that will meet those needs. This mentality highly affects corporate prayer. It is hard to get people to want to pray for anything but their own needs.

We unknowingly perpetuate this problem when most visible prayer is about people's needs, rather than outreach and the move of the Spirit among us.

Cure: Administer a healthy dose of outreach praying. For several months, focus entirely on praying for the lost, for your community, the nation, the world. Focus any prayer from the pulpit on those things. In a prayer meeting, don't take requests. Instead, focus your time with prayer guides, a topic, or other tools.

A Clear Call

Effective corporate prayer, especially dynamic prayer within corporate worship services, can happen in any church—but it takes effort, prodding, and equipping. Any pastor or leader

who tries is in good company.

The Book of Acts provides proof of the powerful role that praying together had on the early church. However, within 20 to 30 years church leaders already had to challenge believers to pray. By the time the epistles were written, Paul and James needed to remind those under their care to pray. Paul asked people to join his missionary endeavors by praying. He also challenged people to pray continually, pray when they had anxiety, and pray for those in authority.

James had to write a lengthy passage, in chapter 5 of his epistle, encouraging people to pray more often. I suspect Paul and James made these challenges because they saw the people slacking off where prayer was concerned.

Don't give up calling your people and church to prayer. Show them how by offering easy and manageable ways to do it. It is biblically right to do so—and so spiritually powerful!

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Sidebar to Jon's article

Variety Is a Key

If you want to improve corporate prayer in your church, whether it is at a weekly prayer meeting or prayer within the

worship service, one effective key is variety. Prayer becomes stale when we always do it together the same way. Often a method or format starts out dynamically, but it can become boring and lose its effectiveness when we do it the same way week after week, month after month. So look for creative ways to involve people in praying together.

I have deep respect for a former pastor of mine, Doug Dry (then of North Springs Alliance Church in Colorado Springs, CO), for the variety he brings to prayer in the worship service. Pastor Dry never did prayer the same way two weeks in a row. Besides the anti-rut factor, every method or format we use gives our people new insight into prayer.

Shake it Up!

Here are some ideas to incorporate prayer effectively into a worship service:

- **Pray the thoughts of a song.** During the singing, an effective worship leader can guide people into short snippets of prayer that reflect on the words of the song. You might also have some people come to a microphone while the music is playing, and pray prayers that reflect the song's content.
- **Pray the sermon application.** Leave a few minutes at the end of the message to organize people into groups of three or four. Provide a prayer point that reflects what you want them to take away from the message, and then have them pray it for each other.
- **Offer pastor-guided prayer.** The pastor leads in prayer, but invites people to pray after him or her, line for line. Another variation: the pastor prays but leaves moments within the prayer for people to pray silently for something the pastor mentions. (Lord, we pray for the salvation of our neighbors Pause and let

people pray for a specific neighbor.)

- **Pray in groups regarding a topic.** Something may happen in your community—or you may witness a tragedy in the world scene—and you want to mobilize special prayer. Have people get into groups of 4 to 6 and pray short prayers regarding the situation. The person leading can close in prayer as the signal to stop. This works best when you start with a topic that will engage most people. But once your church gets used to praying corporately, you can have them pray for any topic this way—revival, the nation, your upcoming woman’s retreat. Never let this time go for more than a few minutes, five maximum.
- **Pray for each other.** Have those with needs stand; have others gather around them and pray. This works best if you give instructions to those with the needs by explaining that they do not have to mention the need. But if they do, they should keep it short and general. Having background worship music while people are praying for each other can also be effective.

There are lots of creative things you can do to keep corporate prayer from becoming stale. Shake it up regularly and watch people get more engaged and interested in prayer.

—Jonathan Graf

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