

Kingdom Balance

Develop Purpose in Your Congregational Prayer Lists

By Jonathan Graf



A few months ago I preached at a church in the Midwest. The pastor specifically asked me to teach about Kingdom praying, so I tweaked a message I love to give, entitled “Get into the Battle.” This message focuses on the truth that prayer is our primary weapon to grow the Kingdom of Christ.

I arrived a little early for the first service and looked around the church lobby. My attention was drawn toward the church’s prayer sheet. It was a 5 x 8 card, with one side filled with needs of people. I noticed that the back side of the card was blank. I also noticed there were no ministry prayer requests. Everything on this list was, I assumed, a personal need of people in the church.

An idea came to me as I looked at the card, so I stuck it in my Bible in the spot where I would conclude my message.

Typical Duty

This church's practice is common in the Western Church. Most churches make some kind of prayer list available to those in the congregation who want it. Some smaller congregations put it in the bulletin so all can see what the needs are.

In most cases, the lists are entirely focused—like the Midwest church I visited—on the needs of people. There are lots of health needs, requests for relatives in the military, and a few personal needs other than health—finances, a school issue, car problem, etc. While most requests are about people in the church, often many on the list are needs of people whom most in the church do not know—a cousin of a church member, a coworker, or a friend of a friend.

Since I speak regularly in churches, I see lots of these lists. They are very similar. But I rarely see lists that include prayer requests for church-related items, for things that will grow God's Kingdom.

I understand why church prayer lists focus on the personal. One of the ways we show love to others is to pray for their concerns and whatever is on their hearts. I also understand that the "person in charge"—the pastor—often has a shepherd's heart. That pastor's heart puts his people's comfort and desires above anything else. So even if pastors wish to teach their people to focus outwardly in their prayer lives, any time there is a need in the body, it ends up taking precedence.

But the challenge comes when outward prayers—prayers for the ministry life of the church—take a back seat to the personal needs.

We do not see this practice when we look at prayer throughout Scripture. When Paul writes to the believers in Colosse, he

sends a greeting from Epaphras, who, Paul says: “is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured” (Col. 4:12). Epaphras was not wrestling over an illness or a new job in someone’s life, but over the spiritual health of others.

In Acts 4, following a beating of the apostles and a threat on their lives if they ever preached Christ again, the apostles return to their fellow believers and pray about the situation. Rather than pray the way most of us would in the same situation (“make the situation better, remove the evil men from office, protect us”), they pray, “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29–30). Yes, they expressed, “consider their threats, Lord,” but the prayer was primarily to give them the strength and enablement they needed to still proclaim Christ in the midst of the difficulty.

I could be wrong, but I cannot picture the apostles pouring over a modern church list, offering prayers for the everyday stuff that concerns us. Even after they pulled back from the nitty-gritty of ministry to instead give themselves to prayer and the Word (see Acts 6:4), I don’t think they let up on their Kingdom-focused prayers.

The answer is not to get rid of church prayer lists. The answer is to make them more balanced between personal and ministry-related needs. Here are a few suggestions to help make this shift in your prayer ministry:

1. Add Relevant Church Ministry Prayer Points

One of the simplest tweaks is to add specific prayer ministry items to the list. Include a section in the prayer list for prayer points about the preaching ministry, worship, outreach, youth, children’s ministry, etc.

If an outreach event is coming up in your youth group, get the church praying. If the women's ministry is bringing in a special speaker for a retreat, put that on the prayer list. What about the missionaries your church supports? Why not include recent prayer requests from them? Include points about the moving of the Spirit in your midst, or praying for people to be spiritually hungry. Pray for the pastor's sermon preparation, for ears to hear among the people. Any of those things will help to balance the list.

One of the best prayer lists I've seen was a monthly list used at Shandon Baptist Church in Columbia, SC. (I was there years ago, so I do not know if the church still does this.) The list was an 8.5 x 11 sheet folded in half so it looked like a 4-page booklet. There were individuals and needs mentioned in one section of the prayer guide, but half or more of the items on the prayer list were ministry-related. That church understood balance.

2. Remind People to Pray for Kingdom Growth

Another great way to bring balance is to put prayer prompters along with the needs list, reminding people to pray beyond the obvious. So when you list a believer's need, you might add something like, "Pray that Susan will display the character of Christ to her unsaved loved ones as she goes through this trial. Pray that her family will see the power of Jesus displayed in this situation and will be drawn to Christ."

Think of things you can add as prayer points that will clearly grow the Kingdom of God and bring glory to His Son, Jesus Christ. This will teach your people that God often wants to do things beyond the quick fix in people's lives. It will also help them start thinking about His Kingdom work in your eyes.

Perhaps add a few prayer points that challenge people to pray for a biblical virtue or characteristic for all the believers

in your congregation. This point can often come from the current sermon series. Praying a response to the sermon the pastor just preached helps people internalize the biblical principles.

3. Remove Unknown People

This may sound heartless, but if you want to encourage more people to pray, I would not include in the prayer list a request for someone few people in the church know. People grow weary of prayer when they are asked to cover things outside their sphere of knowledge (distant relative, friend of a friend, etc.).

Establishing this policy can also preclude any legal liabilities. Some people your church members know do not want their life situations made known to others. Often those who add people to a prayer list do not think to ask permission to do so. It is not a good practice to allow private information on lists without seeking permission of the people involved.

If you are in a smaller church, there is an exception to this rule. Sometimes a church member has been witnessing to and praying for the salvation of a family member or friend, someone unknown to most. It may be possible to include the name and need of that person on a list seen only in a prayer meeting setting when the witnessing church member is present and can add some knowledge to the request. Then you are probably safe. But I would still not put this person's information on a list available to the entire church.

The Importance of Lists

Prayer lists can still play a vital role in the life of a church. But to make them more effective, I challenge you to more fully develop the Kingdom side of the list to bring

balance—and likely more participation from your congregation.

What did I do in the church in the Midwest? As I came to the end of my message and suggested ways to “get into the battle” through prayer, I held up the list. I challenged the congregation to use the list. But I also urged the leadership—in front of their congregation—to fill up the blank side of the prayer guide with church-ministry prayer points!

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