

The Influence of a Leader

Motivational Tips to Move a Congregation to Pray

By Jonathan Graf

As a pastor, Jamie Morgan has taught, modeled, prodded, encouraged, and equipped her people to pray. And the results are obvious!

The people of Life Church in Williamstown, NJ, are used to praying because their pastor models prayer and has created unique prayer experiences. She has led them on many prayer journeys beyond the walls of their church to places such as Israel, the Philippines, and former revival sites in the U.S.

The church held a spontaneous prayer meeting in the parking lot of a movie theater after seeing *Unplanned* (a movie about the abortion industry). They journeyed to 214 Bonnie Brae St., Los Angeles, CA (the site of the Azusa Street revival), and cried out to God to do it again. Recently, 12 members of Life Church flew to Orlando, FL, at their own expense, to host the "Prayer Experience" at their denomination's national conference. There they prayed for pastors, missionaries, and key leaders around the world, many of whom needed encouragement to continue.

When a pastor engages his or her people in unique prayer opportunities, the results can be transformational for a church, a city, and even a nation.

A Leader's Role

Recently I did a study of prayer mobilization in the Bible and discovered an interesting pattern: people were typically

mobilized to pray as a direct result of a challenge issued by a leader. In the Old Testament, Nehemiah, Ezra, Jehoshaphat—to name a few leaders—challenged people to seek God, and then provided a venue to do so.

But you might be thinking, That isn't the case in the New Testament. The examples from Acts and the birth of the early Church seem to indicate more shared leadership or spontaneous prayer meetings.

It's possible that for the first months and even a few years in the life of the early Church, believers took the initiative to pray with or without leaders' encouragement. It was part of the DNA of the newly launched church.

But by the time the epistles were written, Paul and James were challenging those under their care to pray. James wrote a lengthy encouragement for people to pray more often because of the inherent power of prayer offered in faith (James 5:13–18). Paul asked people to join his missionary endeavors by praying (Rom. 15:30–33; Eph. 6:19–20; Phil. 1:3–6; 2 Cor. 1:8–11). He also challenged people to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:16–18, kjv), to pray when they had anxiety (Phil. 4:6–7), and to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1–2). I suspect James and Paul issued all these challenges because they saw the believers relaxing their prayer urgency.

It is common for people to become careless or complacent in their prayer lives. For most, prayer does not come naturally. We need encouragement to do it! As pastors, elders, small group leaders, and prayer leaders—we need to challenge people to pray.

In light of this pattern of effective prayer mobilization, I asked those charged with leading their congregations in prayer this question: “What prayer opportunities are the most effective in mobilizing a congregation to pray?” Here are two of the best answers I received:

1. Engage Your Congregation with a Prayer Initiative.

A prayer initiative, designed to engage everyone in a congregation to pray in unity, focuses on a given theme for a set period of time. The most popular time frames for a prayer initiative are 24 hours, one or two weeks, a month, or 40 days. If done well, this unified prayer effort can be your most successful tool in drawing the most people into prayer. And many participants will have such a good experience that they will catch the importance of prayer and be better equipped for the rest of their lives. Why is a prayer initiative so helpful?

- Most initiatives use Scripture-based prayer guides that teach people to pray God's Word and move them to pray beyond personal needs to adopt a Kingdom agenda.
- When the entire church is involved, people are reminded week after week to participate. Hearing others talk about their experiences creates a built-in accountability and grows within each person a desire to participate more.
- Prayer initiatives provide a twofold, manageable time commitment. First, people are not making a commitment to pray every day for the rest of their lives. (While that would be great, it is too scary a commitment for most.) Instead, they know they are committing to 30 days or three weeks. Second, most prayer initiative guides ask for no more than a two- to five-minute commitment each day. That makes it less intimidating.

Remember, however, a prayer initiative will succeed only if it is well planned, prepared for, and promoted. Just purchasing prayer guides a week ahead of the Sunday you announce the initiative will not work. Thompson Station Church in Thompson Station, TN, does prayer initiatives well. They plan two each year—one in January (a 21-day fasting initiative) and one at another point in the year.

The second prayer initiative is often tied to a sermon series, which makes it unique and inviting for everyone. The prayer leader, Leighann McCoy, develops a prayer guide based on the sermons that the lead pastor (her husband Tom) will preach.

Leighann says this is a great way to connect the entire congregation with prayer. “By participating in churchwide prayer initiatives, we introduce the work of prayer to people who’ve possibly never participated in such work before,” she explains.

2. Take Advantage of a “Passionate” Need.

People will pray if they feel desperation or a deep concern for an issue. Good leaders pay attention to those times when prayer happens naturally—and they build on it.

First, when a congregation’s heart seems to be focused somewhere, take note. Has something unusual or difficult happened in the life of your congregation—a natural disaster or catastrophe in your community or the world? Is there something going on that naturally moves people to cry out to God? Take advantage of those situations and work hard to rally meaningful prayer through events, meetings, groups, and worship services.

As I was writing this article, the United States was in the midst of both the COVID-19 scare and the horrific George Floyd death in Minneapolis, and the rioting that followed in cities across the nation. I guarantee your people were praying! These situations provide the perfect opportunities for leaders to organize people to pray together continually in Kingdom-focused intercession.

The pastor and elders of my church rallied us to a seven-day prayer initiative to pray for our nation. We had seven organized prayer meetings that week—four via Zoom and three in person at the church. Half of our congregation participated during the week (double the usual prayer meeting attendance).

Second, pay attention if there is an area of unusual need in your congregation. Many in your church may be struggling with cancer, job loss due to COVID, company closures, and other distressing factors. People's hearts are tender in such times. That can be an opportunity to rally more prayer than normal.

Third, is a particular area of your church's ministry growing significantly? Maybe your youth group is suddenly expanding, or maybe your Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) program has more women in it from the community than from your church. Look for those kinds of things and rally prayer around them. God is at work there, which means Satan will be on the attack. This may be an opportunity to motivate more people to pray for protection and prosperity. Areas of passionate need often call for spontaneity—like the Life Church people who were so touched by the message of Unplanned that they broke into a prayer meeting in a theater parking lot, crying out to God for an end to abortion.

Capitalize on the Moment

Above all, capitalizing on these events will have a far-reaching impact on your church. If given a meaningful opportunity, your people will pray. Want to see your church grow in prayer? Then make the most of special moments and rally your people to pray.

Dr. Jamie Morgan affirms prayer that goes beyond the walls of the church: "I teach my congregation the necessity of prayer, the power of individual, corporate, and on-site prayer, and that God gives every Christian and church prayer assignments," she says. "As a consequence, my Life Church family believes that praying outside the four church walls via prayer journeys is normal Christianity; they don't want to miss out on what God is going to do!"

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prayer. Among his five books on prayer is *Restored Power*, which expands on these concepts.

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