

A Praying Church

Becoming a People of Hope in a Discouraging World

Paul E. Miller

Foreword by Dane C. Ortlund

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A Praying Church: Becoming a People of Hope in a Discouraging World

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*To Bob Allums,
a Barnabas, whose gentle leadership and kind laughter
have been catalysts for a million prayer stories*

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Foreword

THE BATTLE TO PRAY IS not mainly a battle against prayerlessness but a battle against discouragement, cynicism, and unbelief.

If this is true of our individual lives—and it is, including mine—how much more of the life of our local churches. This magnificent book is a winsome and utterly compelling rallying cry to step out of the smiling unbelief infecting and dampening our churches, where prayer is one dutiful activity among many. The wondrous alternative that Paul Miller gives us, according to Scripture, is to move prayer into the nuclear core of all we do—which is to say, to do church *as if God is there*.

This book defies neat categorization. On the one hand, it takes us deep into the inner workings of Pauline theology and how the New Testament speaks of the Spirit and the dawning of the new age in Christ's resurrection. On the other hand, this book is supremely earthy and practical, using real-life examples and stories of how prayer has worked (and hasn't) in the author's own life and ministry.

A Praying Church is chock-full of deeply probing insights into what prayer is and how it sets aglow an entire church community. For example:

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What I pray over lasts, and what I don't pray over doesn't last.

I've seen what happens when the Spirit of Jesus inhabits a community—everything starts to sparkle.

Paul never mentions “the gift of prayer.” Why? Because there is no gift of breathing.

If you grasp the simplicity of *prayer* → *Spirit* → *Jesus* → *wonder*, then praying together won't be just another burden; it will be the activity that transforms all your burdens.

Insights like these abound. Taking the book as a whole, however, here's the real genius of it: Paul Miller brings prayer into the messy reality of our actual lives. Not the cleaned-up lives we're all walking around presenting to others, but the lives we're really living, with all their failures and discouragements and tears and numbness and fatigue. In other words, Paul understands prayer in a gospel way—just as the gospel is power for us at the precise place of our need, so too prayer is deep power and help at the very place where we have need and weakness. It's the whole point.

And what this book has managed to do is to take that gospel reality of prayer—the way prayer is for us *now* in our *need*, not later once we've got it together—and make prayer actionable for a church body. Paul coaches us into praying our way forward together. Noting that the early church leaders insisted that “we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4), Paul Miller wants us to do church by prayer.

In other words, *A Praying Church* is not a book telling us to scurry faster on our hamster wheel of prayer. It is an invitation to

Foreword

step off of that hamster wheel by looking to the Spirit of Jesus and letting him lead us forward as we commune with him. Wonderfully simple, widely neglected, deeply liberating.

A church with rich history, flawless music, powerful preaching, amazing childcare, a paid-off mortgage, and stellar attendance but sleepily operating out of the resources of the flesh instead of prayer is headed toward tragic inconsequentiality.

A church riddled with dysfunctions, embattled and beleaguered, unimpressive in preaching, off-tune musically, small in numbers, and without resources but quietly collapsing into the freefall of faith-fueled praying that this book outlines is a church that will bless this world in a thousand surprising ways and leave a mark that reverberates through eternity.

This book may be the wardrobe door into Narnia your church has been needing and longing for. For it is not, finally, a book about prayer. It is a book about God, and how we move through life as a church as if he is actually there. I commend it wholeheartedly, and I thank Paul Miller for giving it to us.

DANE C. ORTLUND

PART 1

WHY PRAY TOGETHER?

A Glimpse of a Praying Community

FOR MOST OF US, PRAYER IS SOLITARY, which means that when it comes to corporate prayer, we aren't exactly sure what it even feels and looks like. So I begin this book by letting you peek in on my three prayer meetings this morning. Before we lament the loss of praying together, we need to know what we've lost!

My first prayer time in the morning is with my wife, Jill. Beginning at 5:45, we take forty-five minutes together to read the Bible and pray together. Jill punctuates our time with fervent prayers for our family, friends, and world. It's also interrupted by job duties for me: "Oh, Paul, would you move all the boxes off your office floor before you leave for work? The carpet cleaner is coming today." (Technically this is a question, but relationally it's an order!) Then back to more fervent prayer for our family, which is interrupted by Jill asking if she can call our handyman to hang pictures, since I'm so backed up with other projects. "Yes, that's fine." Then back to more prayer for our grandchildren.

Jill freely admits she has ADD. Recently, I suggested she hold off on the job ideas for me until we'd finished praying. In her defense,

I've been painting the house, and we've redone the kitchen, so not only is she managing lots of loose ends, but I'm behind in my to-do list, and it's just easier to tell me stuff as it comes to her mind.

This is my most disorganized prayer time of the day, and yet it is the most powerful. Jill usually leads. It took me about ten years to realize that if I wanted to pray with her, I couldn't organize her. Not only that: she prays better than I do. By that I mean, her prayers are almost on the verge of lamenting—she talks to God like she's talking to me when I've promised to paint a room and keep postponing it. She feels the growing evil of our day and prays passionately against it. She's a fighter. Jesus's repeated command to *ask anything* gives us freedom to ask for even seemingly impossible things. Because of the loss of our beloved daughter Ashley to cancer, we especially pray for people battling cancer. We do have one systematic stretch of ten to fifteen minutes when we pray for our more than twenty-five children, spouses, and grandchildren.

Next I pray with our adult daughter Kim, who is affected by disabilities. We pray together barely five minutes, but I love hearing her "voice." Using her speech computer's icon language, she thanks God for multiple things. This morning she thanked God for our Thanksgiving dinner four days ago. (Dinner with our extended family was canceled due to the pandemic, so we went to a restaurant similar to the one in *Lady and the Tramp*, which absolutely charmed her.) Usually she slips in a prayer for our very bad golden retriever, Tully, who's always stealing her things. If I'm biking to work, she prays that I won't crash. If I'm skiing at night, she prays I won't hit a tree. She prays for her ninety-seven-year-old grandmother in London. I usually encourage her to pick one niece or nephew to pray for. She often picks one she feels is too noisy or bad. Kim looks at her nieces and nephews like wine—they get

better with age. Kim struggles with anger—it’s a symptom of her disability—but we try not to let her “diagnosis” define her, so she prays regularly for God to help her with anger. Lately, we’ve been visualizing her day together and praying for the parts where she might be tempted to get angry. That has helped. And then, as often happens, I notice my struggle with impatience, so Kim and I close by praying for each other’s struggle with impatience.

My third prayer meeting is mid-morning with the ministry I direct, see Jesus. About thirty of us gather on Zoom for about an hour. We spend the first half hearing reports from around the world on our seminar and training ministry. It’s an open mic, so we also hear updates on personal and family needs.

As we pray together, it feels like we are weaving a tapestry: We begin by praying for Felicia, who, the day before Thanksgiving, lost her sister to COVID. Our prayers wander through Felicia’s life with her sister, enjoying the good things that God had done, and lamenting the hard things. Then we pray for Mafdi’s work in the Arab world. Someone circles back to praying for Felicia; then we pray for Mafdi’s online Arabic Person of Jesus study. We pray for Miguel, our Spanish-speaking trainer in Chile, who has been sick. With only five minutes left, prayers pick up their pace slightly, a bit like the fourth quarter of an American football game. We don’t want to forget anything, so the conversation style of the prayer meeting disappears, and short, quick prayers emerge to cover what we’ve not yet covered. I close our prayer time by inviting the Spirit of Jesus into our work to shape and lead us.

Our prayer time is the high point of the day. You can tell because hardly anyone misses and people start gathering early. The feel of the prayer time is *resurrection*. We pray boldly and expectantly, not

just because that's what resurrection people do but because we've seen God work in so many amazing ways. Prayer fuels prayer.

The hopeful, resurrection *feel* of each of these three prayer meetings does not happen automatically. It has taken time to cultivate. With Jill, I'm attentive to her and her world. With Kim, I prompt her with ideas—her limit is about five promptings. Any more and she gets irritated because *SpongeBob* awaits! With seeJesus, I try to be attentive to each person in the prayer meeting and to his or her story. For example, I talked with Felicia ahead of time to hear more of the story of her sister, so in our “open-mic” time, I prompt Felicia with questions to plumb the depths of suffering that her family has been through, but also to highlight some amazing ways that God worked through Felicia in her sister's life. Attentiveness to resurrection keeps us from getting stuck in sadness.

These three prayer meetings are completely ordinary. Jill's language to God is no different from her language to me when I've forgotten to take out the trash. I say this because we tend to think of prayer as somehow a *higher life*, when it's actually *real life*. Each of these three prayer times is strikingly different from the others, based on the focus and who is involved, but that's true of all our conversations. We shape our dialogue based on who we are talking to.

Why Pray Together?

You likely agree that prayer is important, but let's be realistic; not many of us have the luxury of praying for an hour and a half in the morning. Life comes at us too fast.

Actually, I slow down to pray with other believers *because* life is coming at me so fast. Instinctively, I respond to life's speed with my own speed. That creates a ten-car pileup not only in my outward life but also in my soul. I can't imagine leading my family or community

without corporate prayer. I do these morning prayer times not from discipline but from *learned desperation*. I am constant in corporate prayer because the Jesus communities I'm in are *constant in need*. I have no interest in doing anything that hasn't been prayed for and prayed over. What I pray over lasts, and what I don't pray over doesn't last. But there's more: A Jesus community is characterized by wonder, and the conduit to that is prayer. I've seen what happens when the Spirit of Jesus inhabits a community—everything starts to sparkle.

Praying together is not a luxury, nor is it something just for “spiritual” Christians; it's the very *breath of the church*. Most of us don't have the faintest idea of what that means. That's what I hope to show in this book: how integral prayer is to a Jesus community.

God has used my earlier book and seminar *A Praying Life* to help many *individuals* pray, but without a supportive, praying *community*, it's easy to lose hope, to wear out in the work of prayer. Unless entire churches learn to pray together, individual prayer can lose steam. And that isn't just in official prayer meetings but in our families and small groups too, and even in that random phone conversation. That's the passion of this book—to foster praying communities.

Creating Praying Communities

Here's an overview of what we'll cover in the pages ahead:

- In part 1, we answer the question *Why pray together?* We'll discover why prayer is critical to the church's life. My template is Luke and Acts. I hope to capture your imagination with a new vision of how prayer ignites the Spirit of Jesus in his church.

- In part 2, we examine what the church is. This book isn't just about praying together; it's about how a Jesus community works. Using Ephesians, we'll discover who runs the church (the Spirit of Jesus) and exactly what the church is made of (saints), which helps us see why prayer is fundamental to how we *do* church. If I can fill you with wonder, with a new, richer way of looking at the church, you'll find your heart enlarged—and that will do its own work.
- In part 3, we explore the interface between the Spirit of Jesus and a community at prayer. We turn our eyes outward and discover where the church is going and how it gets there. If you miss the journey and the goal, then prayer becomes either merely therapeutic or a power trip.
- In part 4, we focus on *how* to pray in community, and the multiple subcommunities that make up a family, mission, or church, and how to cultivate prayer in them.
- In part 5, we look at how integral prayer can be to the subcommunities of the church.

I opened this chapter with three morning prayer meetings to give you a feel for what a praying community looks like; then I briefly shared *how* I lead those prayer meetings; and finally, I paused to share my heart as to *why* praying together is so vital. Once you grasp *why we pray* (part 1), *what the church is* (part 2), and *how the Spirit works* (part 3), then *how we pray* (parts 4–5) will come alive in fresh ways. But no matter what, you must begin to pray together—even if just with a good friend. Some things are understood only from the inside. For example, you can study love all you want, but until you've endured in love, you won't understand love.

When I say “a praying church,” I mean the local church, but also the multiple layers of friendship we have with other believers. Some of my examples of a praying community come from the mission I lead, see Jesus, but the principles of praying together are the same in any Jesus community, whether it’s the local church, your family, or a friendship.

My Hope for This Book

I’ve written this book for the whole church, because it’s the whole church that prays. When Luke gives us a sermon in the book of Acts, we get a preacher: “But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them” (Acts 2:14). But when Luke describes a prayer meeting, we get the whole church: “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14). This book is for everyone. Anyone can ask a friend in the middle of a conversation, “Could we stop and pray about that?”

That’s what five Williams College students did in 1806 while taking shelter from a thunderstorm in a haystack: they started to pray for world missions. The five students were relatively wealthy, busy, and faced with a society that was increasingly cold of heart. Because of the impact of Enlightenment secularism, American church attendance was at an all-time low. And yet the haystack prayer meeting ignited a groundswell of prayer that led to the greatest period of growth the church has ever seen. Over the next hundred years, professing Christians went from 10 percent to 30 percent of the world’s population.¹ And it all began with five college students praying together.

I had a front-row seat in watching and participating in two praying churches develop over a period of twenty years where I was

a deacon and then elder—Mechanicsville Chapel and New Life Church, north of Philadelphia. But the heart of this book is my experience in cultivating communities of prayer within my family and in my ministry, see Jesus. I've worked in over two hundred churches encouraging them to become praying communities. I've mentored hundreds of pastors in cohorts, in counseling, and just in friendships. I know the slowness of cultural change, but I also know, as many of you do, the power of the Spirit of Jesus to do beyond all that we can ask or imagine!

As in all my writing, I write only about what has become a part of my life. I'm not a spiritual guru; I'm a discipler. When I was a young man, I noticed that Christians *dabbled*—bouncing from book to book, trying to stay current with the latest idea. In a world saturated with Christian values, you might get away with dabbling, but in a post-Christian and increasingly anti-Christian world, we need discipleship that produces change into the image of Jesus. That only happens when we concentrate on some aspect of Jesus long enough that we begin to look like him. My desire is to help the church look like Jesus, to have his heart, his cadences—in short, to have his prayer life. We are now his praying body.

A church hosted a gathering of artists to talk about their work: a musician, a painter, and a writer. I was the writer. When it came my turn, I explained that I was more of a craftsman than an artist, like the unnamed architects who created the soaring Gothic cathedrals. These architects weren't trying to create art for art's sake; they designed something that transported people into the heavenlies. That's my hope for this book, that the Spirit will use it to help create "virtual spaces" that draw the church into the heavenlies.

In order to craft this cathedral, I share stories from my own life. My desire is not to boast of my successes or glory in my failures

A Glimpse of a Praying Community

but to put shoes on the ideas I'm sharing. Ideas need to connect with reality. We aren't "brains on sticks."² We need to see things enfolded in the nitty-gritty of real life so we can imagine what they might look like in our own communities. I hope this makes praying together easier, as natural as asking a friend to meet for coffee. When praying together becomes perfectly normal, frequent, and filled with love, the Spirit will have given us a praying church.

Who Killed the Prayer Meeting?

THE EAST INDIAN EVANGELIST K. P. YOHANNAN described his first experience at an American prayer meeting. He was visiting a megachurch known, even in India, for the pastor's outstanding preaching. He was thrilled when the pastor invited the three thousand Sunday worshipers to the midweek prayer meeting. The pastor even shared that something was "heavy on his heart" for prayer.

Yohannan couldn't wait. In India, the prayer meeting was the heartbeat of the church, where you stormed the heavens, often far into the night. The designated prayer chapel seated only five hundred, so Yohannan arrived early to get a seat. But at the designated 7:00 p.m. start time, he was alone. At 7:15, puzzled and still alone, he wondered if he had the wrong location, so he went outside to check the name. Yes, it was the same chapel the pastor mentioned on Sunday. Finally, at 7:30 a few people straggled in, chatting about sports and weather until the leader arrived at 7:45. The leader shared a short devotional with the seven attendees, prayed briefly, and closed the meeting.

Yohannan was stunned. No worship. No crying out to God for help. No senior pastor. What was heavy on the pastor's heart? What about prayer for the sick, for the lost?¹

No one in this story, except for Yohannan, thought that corporate prayer is important: not the senior pastor (he didn't show up), the congregation (only seven came), or the prayer leader (he was forty-five minutes late and only had one brief prayer). Prayer was a mere window dressing. If you doubt something, you don't think it works, so you don't use it. No one here thought prayer works. Unbelief is as practical as faith.

The State of Prayer in the Church

When we descend from the formal prayer meeting down to the smaller parts of a Jesus community and into our families and friendships, we encounter the same corporate prayerlessness that Yohannan experienced. Christians are praying, but they are doing it by themselves. According to a recent Barna study, 94 percent of American adults who have prayed at least once in the last three months do so by themselves. Barna's researcher writes:

Prayer is by far the most common spiritual practice among Americans. . . . [But] people pray mostly alone—it is a solitary activity defined primarily by the immediate needs and concerns of the individual. Corporate prayer and corporate needs are less compelling drivers in people's prayer lives. . . . But what would it look like to begin to broaden the scope of those prayer lives? To consider the power of corporate prayer—when more than one are gathered in God's name?²

The American church is functionally prayerless when it comes to corporate prayer. Of course, a remnant does the hidden work of prayer, but in most churches corporate prayer doesn't function in any meaningful way. How big is that remnant? In our prayer seminars, we ask several confidential questions about a participant's prayer life. In hundreds of seminars, we've found that about 15 percent of Christians in a typical church have a rich prayer life. So when someone says, "I'll keep you in my prayers," 85 percent of the time it is just words. This isn't a pastor problem; it's a follower-of-Jesus problem.

The prayer meeting, which used to function at the heart of a praying church, is all but dead. Wednesday night prayer meeting used to be the core meeting, where the most dedicated, spiritual people attended; now for many, the prayer meeting itself is a distant memory. At a recent A Praying Church seminar, I asked participants what they don't like about prayer meetings. One young man nailed it: "It's boring." Someone else added, "It's depressing." But the most poignant comment was "I don't know where I'd go to attend a prayer meeting." I asked the pastor of a three-thousand-attendee church if he knew of any prayer meetings in his church. He said, without a hint of concern, "No, I'm not aware of any."

How Secularism Killed the Prayer Meeting

Which brings us to the unique challenges of praying together in much of our modern world. We are a busy, and often wealthy, people. We didn't reach our career goals and attain the comforts we enjoy by sitting around, and yet praying together feels like we are *sitting around*. We can be so intent on building and producing that we don't pause to reflect on *what* we are building.

Behind our busyness and wealth is a philosophy called *secularism*, which doesn't just deny God's existence but denies the existence of any spiritual world. This is strange, because every culture in the history of humanity has openly acknowledged the spiritual world. You ignored God or "the gods" at your own peril. Given this history, it would be normal for every news program to open with a prayer of thanksgiving. We don't, of course, because secularism defines *normal* for us. Talking openly about God or to God feels odd.

It's no coincidence that the prayer meeting has declined simultaneously with the rise of secularism, which sees the spiritual world as mere illusion, true for you, but not true for everyone else. That comes from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment's leading thinker (and regular church goer!) called prayer a "superstitious delusion" that God has no need to hear and that therefore accomplishes nothing.³ Kant's god is distant, nonpersonal. Ignoring God is a far more effective than denying his existence. If you ignore him, he disappears.

Secularism remained confined largely to our universities and our elites until the rise of mass media (radio, TV, etc.) in the mid-twentieth century. Endlessly portraying a world without God and without meaning, it created a new normal. Modern agnostics are not just unsure of God's existence; they no longer care. God is a nonissue. As one young man who'd walked away from his faith said to me, "What difference does it make?"

Kant killed prayer by dividing the world into the spiritual and the physical (see fig. 2.1). The spiritual (the top half of the circle) is the realm of faith, inner feelings, and what is true only for you—it cannot be verified by sense experience. The physical (the bottom half) is the realm of facts, what can be tested

Why Pray Together?

by the five senses, what is true for everyone—in other words, hard reality.

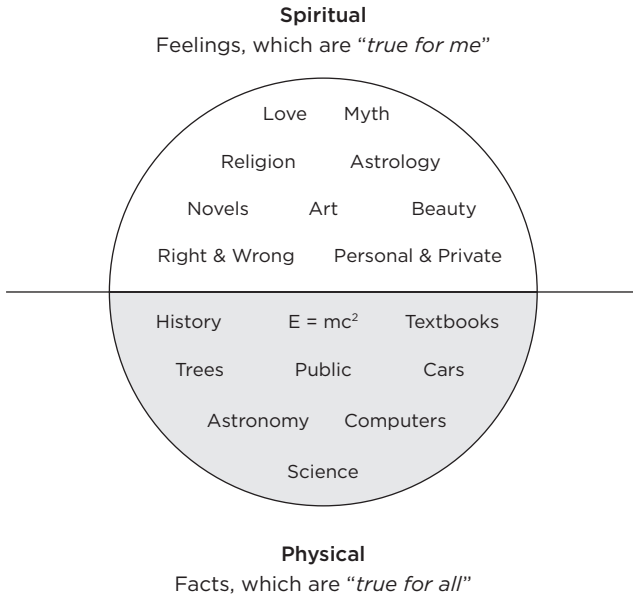


Figure 2.1. How most people divide the world

Figure 2.2 shows another way of looking at prayer. For the modern secularist, life is lived only on a physical plane, but prayer assumes a vertical dimension as shown by the “prayer” arrow. Prayer assumes an unseen connectedness in life. For example, Jill and I had been praying for a young man for years, that God would break down the barriers between him and his family. Just this week, we saw a remarkable breakthrough. We never mentioned a word to him about our prayer or even our desire, and yet God broke through. The connection was completely unseen. Our prayer (where the arrow starts) had no visible connection with the answer (where the arrow ends).

Who Killed the Prayer Meeting?

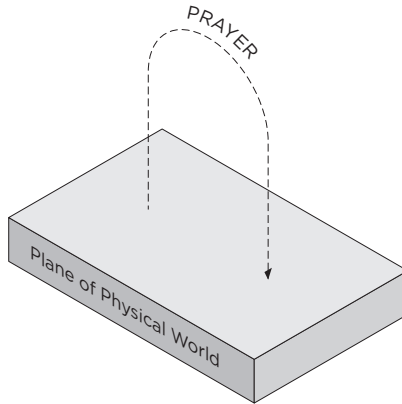


Figure 2.2. Prayer assumes an unseen connection

That unseen connection is fundamental, because the church is a three-dimensional Spiritual community. The capital *S* in “Spiritual” is deliberate. We aren’t a yoga community, burning candles to get in touch with our feelings; we are a praying community, living in a personal world where the Father, by his Spirit, is constantly making Jesus come alive in our midst.⁴

When we relegate prayer to the world of feelings, prayer becomes mere therapy. If it is simply the world of feelings, then praying together feels awkward. When you talk with someone about sports, typically your conversation feels fluid—you share a common interest, language, and knowledge. You enjoy watching football and rooting for your favorite team. You both know that sports exist. But what if everyone in your life who sounded smart and powerful, and everyone you saw on TV, told you that sports are fake, that no one is really playing, and the games you see in person are just elaborate dramas? After you’d heard this nonstop, year after year, it would get into your blood.

When we combine a prayerless church with a prayerless culture, it creates a “feelings world” where God feels exalted but distant. Then when hardship comes, God feels impotent and uncaring. This is especially true if you’ve prayed about something difficult and the heavens have been like brass. Eventually, you don’t feel anything about God. He’s merely peripheral.

Because our flat, two-dimensional world rules out prayer at the outset, spontaneously praying with a friends at mealtime or on the phone feels odd. We’ve lost the fluidity of prayer that you see in children, where in one breath they are talking to you and in the next breath they say, “Thank you, God, for no bad dreams.”⁵ We’ll hear sermons on prayer, listen to a pastoral prayer, and begin meetings with prayer, but prayer seldom happens naturally in conversation. It just feels too religious.

That’s one reason why it’s a delight to fellowship with Africans or Asians, who are largely unaffected by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. For example, for years Ugandan churches have had monthly all-night prayer meetings. They are keenly aware of the spiritual world, so prayer flows easily.

But secularism alone didn’t kill the prayer meeting.

“I Killed the Prayer Meeting”

My father, Jack Miller, had recently joined the faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary when, in 1968, he decided to visit Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland. Schaeffer was already well known from his writing and the impact of his lived Christianity at L’Abri Fellowship. At L’Abri, Dad encountered something he’d never seen before: prayer operated at the center of L’Abri; the community orbited around prayer. Here are Edith Schaeffer’s reflections on what a praying community looks like:

Who Killed the Prayer Meeting?

To live without prayer being woven into every part of every day is stupid, foolish, senseless, or is an evidence that your belief in the existence of the Creator, who has said we are to call upon Him, is an unsure belief. Common sense Christian living takes place in an atmosphere where prayer is as natural as breathing, as necessary as oxygen, as real as talking to your favorite person with whom there is no strain, as sensible as reaching into the bag of flour for the proper supplies for making bread.⁶

Dad was a professor at a leading seminary, an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a pastor at a local church, and a newly minted PhD, yet prayer operated at the periphery of his life. He didn't have a deep prayer life, nor had he cultivated a praying community. And yet the Spiritual power coming out of the Schaeffers and L'Abri was striking.

After Dad and Mom visited L'Abri, they also visited a ministry to former priests in Holland and an inner-city ministry in London. All three of these ministries had prayer at the center. I was fifteen at the time, but I still recall Dad puzzling over these three Jesus communities at prayer. He knew something was missing from how he "did church" and how weak our church's prayer life was. He later wondered, *Who killed the prayer meeting?* Then it dawned on him: *I killed the prayer meeting by talking too much.* So Dad stopped talking at prayer meeting and started praying.

Dad was not alone in his struggle with corporate prayer. Multiple pastors have told me how difficult it is for them to be faithful in prayer. Recently at lunch several Southern Baptist church planters said to me, "Planting a church killed my prayer life."

Something is off with how we view the church.

A Peculiar Danger

I went to dinner with a young pastor and his wife after one of our prayer seminars for pastors. As a homeschooling mom with three kids, this wife shared with me how she did life through prayer. Then she leaned over and asked her husband, with a puzzled expression on her face, “Isn’t that how you do church?” He shook his head. She was so surprised, she asked him again. “No,” he said, “We pray at beginning of meetings, but it tends to be official and lack depth.”

The megachurch pastor who announced the prayer meeting as if it were a high value but didn’t showing up didn’t just devalue the prayer meeting. He sent a mixed message to the congregation. His words said one thing, but his actions another. Jesus calls that hypocrisy. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus singles out prayer as a “hot spot” for hypocrisy (Matt. 6:5–6). There is nothing worse for a Jesus community than looking Spiritual on the outside but being hollow on the inside. Hypocrisy in leaders creates cynicism in followers.

After I’ve reflected with a group of pastors on their struggles to have a consistent life of prayer, I’ll ask, “How good are you at public praying?” They usually say, “Pretty good.” I query again, “So, what does it do to your heart to be outwardly good at prayer but inwardly bad?” They groan, because they are good men. Of course, this applies to all of us. Any time we cultivate an outer appearance of maturity but mask inward weakness, we corrupt our soul. That weakens our best gift we offer to others—a soul that walks with God.

Now that we’ve reflected on why we *don’t* pray, the question remains: Why *should* we pray? Why is the death of the prayer

meeting in the American church even a problem? Why bother praying together? Our failure to address the *why* has resulted in the virtual death of prayer in the church. But if you get the *why*, it will transform your view of how the church works. That's the next chapter.

A Word to Pastors

Life as a pastor in a post-Christian world is overwhelming. With the moral breakdown in our culture and the resulting fracturing in our families, pastors have far more needs coming at them than they did fifty years ago. With faith burning low, people's inner core has weakened, making them thin-skinned, easily triggered. And yet they obsess over "relationships" but have little capacity for the basics, like forbearance and forgiveness. So when pastoring, you need to be slower, more careful with your words. In addition, with perfectionism on the rise, pastors are getting a lot more free advice and criticism. Pastoring has never been more difficult.

Consequently, you might feel like a camel walking through the desert, burdened with a load of bricks, and now I've just tossed on another brick called prayer. It's a particularly heavy brick because it has *guilt* written all over it. But I hope by the end of this book, you'll realize you don't need to be the camel, that you were never meant to carry a load of bricks. I hope to renew your excitement about the presence and leadership of the Spirit of Jesus in your community, possibly even making pastoring in a post-Christian world actually fun. In short, I hope to increase your faith, to restore the original wonder that led you into the pastorate in the first place.