A PLAYBOOK FOR PASTORS

Starting a Prayer Meeting Playbook

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DISCLAIMER

I take no credit for anything helpful below. I learned from Pastor Jim Cymbala by reading his book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, attending both his Tuesday Noon prayer service and his Tuesday evening prayer service, and receiving coaching sessions from him. I've also sought the counsel of other pastors who lead prayer services at their churches. My team and I have wrestled together over the years with the best way to lead a prayer service. So I take no credit for anything helpful and effective below.

I am not an expert at leading God's people to pray. I am still learning and have a lot to learn. I share the below information as a fellow student trying to figure it out. I have been leading weekly prayer services in the vein of the one described below since September 2020.

SOME KEY PRINCIPLES OF A SPIRIT-FILLED PRAYER SERVICE

Building a culture of corporate prayer in the church requires principled conviction by the Senior Pastor

- The Senior Pastor must be as zealous about the corporate prayer life of the church as he is the preaching life of the church. I believe this is what the apostles meant in Acts 6:4 — "we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word."
- Corporate prayer and preaching are the two wings of the plane by which a church gets lift-off.
- The Senior Pastor must be the lead advocate, "the face," of the corporate prayer life of the church. He must lead the vast majority of the prayer services, or people will not attend.

Advance personal preparation by the senior leader of the prayer meeting

- The one leading the prayer meeting must show up at the prayer meeting already filled with the Holy Spirit. The prayer meeting is for the worshippers and the Lord to have an encounter. The leader's job is to facilitate that encounter by following the leading of the Spirit who knows the mind of God and will lead the worshippers into the presence.
- I find I am at my best leading prayer meeting if I have personally spent the day in an attitude of prayer and fasting.

Public humility by the senior leader of the prayer meeting

- Jesus must get 100% of the attention and credit. In our humiliation is Christ's exaltation. He must become more; I must become less.
- I have learned that the more I'm willing to publicly acknowledge from the stage that I do not fully understand how to lead a prayer meeting, the more the Lord manifests his presence. And the more I publicly say from the stage that if the Lord manifests his presence, it will be despite me, the more the Lord manifests his presence.
- Say the name of Jesus Christ a lot and publicly give 100% of the credit to him for every good thing in the life of our church – make sure it is coming from my heart and not simply lip service. There cannot be one ounce of pride or boasting in me.

Plan out the prayer meeting very well, then be ready to abandon the plan and follow the Spirit's leading the moment the prayer meeting starts

> *"In his heart man plans his ways, but God directs his steps."*

- Further down in this document is a template for planning a prayer service.
- It seems that a willingness to seek and follow the Spirit's leading in the moment wherever he leads is important to the Spirit's willingness to manifest the presence of Christ.
- I often end up departing from the prewritten plan for prayer service, at least for portions of the service. There are lots of "on-the-fly changes."

Radical obedience to the Spirit is essential

- The senior leader of prayer meeting must be willing to do and say whatever the Spirit prompts in the moment: pray, read a Scripture, lead a song, give a biblical exhortation, call on someone to pray, sit in silence, address any subject.

Constant change throughout the prayer meeting is essential to building and maintaining energy in the room

- The people are tired and distracted from a long day's work. They are doing well just to be physically present at the prayer meeting. The senior leader of the prayer meeting must drive the energy level.

- At all times, I pay attention to the energy level in the room; the moment I sense it dipping, I change things up:
  - **Change with whom they are praying:** alone vs. in small groups
  - **Change the volume with which they are praying:** silently or out loud
  - **Change the posture with which they are praying:** sitting, standing, kneeling
  - **Change the subject about which they are praying:** give them a different subject to pray about than the one they are currently praying through
  - **Change the segment:** if they are praying and energy is dipping, lead them in a song or read a Scripture passage or launch into a brief biblical exhortation from a specific passage of Scripture or share a praise report
  - **Don't hesitate to exhort them to pray harder:** "I don't sense we are fully engaged in what we are praying through here; I need you to focus your mind, body, and heart on this matter of prayer"; "I feel like our minds are wandering; we need to concentrate"; "prayer is work, come on, push yourself to pray through this matter."

Except for exceptional prayer requests, don't accept prayer requests from the worshippers for the whole room to pray for

- It really kills the mood.
- We provide the prayer requests from the stage to the worshippers. If someone wants prayer for a personal matter, they can pray for it during the appointed segment in the prayer meeting, or they can get in the 1-on-1 line.

No sermon

- A very brief Bible exhortation time is needed in the prayer service. This is because we need to "ride faith" into the presence of God. And faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.
- However, a sermon kills the mood in prayer service. A Scripture reading followed by a four-minute maximum set of remarks designed to spark reflection, meditation, and prayer points is what is needed.
- I often re-raise the subject of the sermon from the prior Sunday, because the people already heard the Scripture passage exposited, they are familiar with the passage and sermon, and in 3-4 minutes I can make remarks to spark reflection and prayer points.

POSSIBLE PRAYER MEETING ELEMENTS

- **Singing** (only sing songs they know well from Sunday mornings; do not introduce new songs in prayer meeting)
- **Scripture reading**

- **Scripture meditation**
- **Brief (3-4 minute) Bible exhortation**
- **1-on-1 prayer line,** including anointing oil
- **Listening**
- **Praise and thanksgiving**
  - We always have the worshippers pray a prayer of thanksgiving out loud at the same time
  - Celebrate specific reports of answered prayer
  - Celebrate acts of God in the life of the church
  - Call on the people to offer praise and thanksgiving based on a name of God in the Bible
- **Videos** – e.g., a people group receiving the Bible in their language for the first time; a missions video; a mission trip update video from a short-term team on the field; a testimony from a church member.
- **Lord's Supper**
- **Global missions focus:**
  - Specific info about a missionary, people group, etc
  - Great resources: Joshua Project, International Mission Board
- **Public, individual testimonies** (3 key rules):

1. **All about Jesus** – tell the story in a way that Jesus is the main character
2. **Be brief** – the testimony should take under 2-3 minutes
3. **Current** – the story needs to be about a recent event

PRAYER MEETING STRATEGY

Three key phases of every prayer meeting:

1. **Seek and find the presence of the Lord** – "Our Father who art in heaven"
2. **Talk to the Father about what is on his heart** – "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"
3. **Talk to the Father about what is on our heart** – "Give us this day our daily bread"

Phase 1: Seek and find the presence of the Father

- **Start the prayer meeting by exalting Jesus Christ** through reading a passage of Scripture about him (e.g., Heb. 1, Col 1:15ff, Phil. 2:5-11, John 1:1ff, Rev. 5:9-12) or with Scripture meditation.
- **We'll sing songs they know very well.** One focused on God himself (e.g., "How Great Thou Art") and one about Jesus Christ and the gospel (e.g., "In Christ Alone"). We will

usually follow up these two songs by singing a song(s) that are a direct personal expression of love to the Lord (e.g., "I Love You, Lord"; "I Exalt Thee"). These songs are led by our worship leader.

- **Praise and thanksgiving.** See above section called "Possible Prayer Service Elements."
- **Personal consecration.** Preparing one's heart to be a place the Spirit is willing to fill.
  - The Bible is filled with personal consecration guides. The one we use most frequently is Matt. 5:3-6, the first four Beatitudes:
    - **Humility** – "blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3)
    - **Repentance** – "blessed are those who mourn" (5:4)
    - **Surrender** – "blessed are the meek" (5:5)
    - **Christ above all** – "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6)
  - Key to the consecration process: move through each step slowly and deliberately, following the Spirit's lead. The result is "for they will be filled" (Matt 5:6)!
  - Sometimes I'll throw out specific prayer items for them to think about during one or more of the steps: for example, under repentance: "Are you holding a grudge? Are you bitter at someone? Is there someone you are refusing to forgive?"
- Often, if the worshippers are led in a very personal song that expresses exaltation or love in the 2nd person, there is an undeniable presence of the Lord in the room at this point.
  - Or I'll say, "Y'all, he is here, let's pray this prayer together" and launch into leading songs such as "I Love You, Lord", "I Exalt Thee", "Father, We Love You, We Worship and Adore You", "You Are Worthy Of It All"

Phase 2: Talk to our Father about what is on his heart

A sample of the things God wants us to talk to him about:

- Pray through a passage of Scripture using it as a prayer guide
- Pray for a greater filling of the Holy Spirit and a greater manifestation of the presence of Christ in our hearts (1 Cor 6:19-20) and church (Eph 2:19-21)
- Pray for the particular vision of our particular church
- Pray for increasing transformation into the image of Christ among the members of the church. Ie:
  - Pray through the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5
  - Pray through the characteristics of love in 1 Cor 13
- Pray for more salvations and baptisms
- Pray about local evangelism
- Pray about global missions

- Pray for Sunday's services
- Pray for the discipleship ministries of the church
- Pray for key upcoming events in the life of the church

Phase 3: Talk to our Father about what is on our hearts

- Right before we open the 1-on-1 line, we have someone share the gospel in under three minutes and call people to salvation and baptism. We use children, teenagers, and adults to do this. (This is a hard three-minute time limit; two minutes is better.)
- Then I open the 1-on-1 line: I announce the 1-on-1 prayer line is open, I call our pre-designated prayer leaders to stand across the altar area facing the congregation, and I exhort people to get in line for 1-on-1 prayer. I remind them that anointing with oil in accordance with James 5 is available in the 1-on-1 line.

> **Note** You have to exhort the people to get in the 1-on-1 line. The most effective way is to share a quick story of a recently answered prayer from the 1-on-1 line.

> *"Do you need someone to pray with you for a miracle? Maybe physical healing from a disease, maybe healing from a mental health disorder. Do you need a demon cast out? Do you need a job? Do you need a house to sell? Do you need your marriage healed? Do you need your infertile womb opened? Do you need the hard heart of an adult child softened? Do you need freedom from a pornography addiction? Do you need to be purged of PTSD from an abortion or an abusive relationship or divorce? Do you want deliverance from same-sex attraction? Then you come."*

- Simultaneously, while the 1-on-1 line is going, I lead the main group.
  - I'll ask the main group to extend a hand towards those in the 1-on-1 line as a symbolic laying on of hands and ask them to intercede for those coming for prayer.
  - I'll give the main group time and space to pray about personal matters on their own. I'll suggest they pray as a couple or a family unit or group of friends.
  - Sometimes during this segment we'll sing a song.
  - So at this point, it's a bit chaotic in the room: people are in the 1-on-1 line and with prayer leaders who are all praying out loud, the main group is in their seats calling out to God, and the worship leader may be leading a song.
- When I sense the energy dipping from the main group praying for personal issues, I start to call out prayer requests from the stage.
  - Whereas in Phase 2, we prayed for big spiritual things, now in Phase 3 I call out smaller but still important things. Ie:
    - A significant situation with a church member
    - A prayer request that came in from a missionary overseas

- A current event happening in our nation
- Government leaders

Close out prayer meeting

- First of all, the prayer meeting will go by MUCH, MUCH, MUCH faster than you anticipated.
- Try to end it before your people want it to, in order that they leave with positive vibes and not negative vibes. Leave them wanting more, not less.
  - When we first started prayer meeting, I had a hard 7-8 pm time frame, but as my people have grown into it, we now go 7-8:20 pm, and at 8:20 pm they are not ready for me to shut it down, but I do anyway.
- We sing one big song at the end.

HOW WE LAUNCHED PRAYER MEETING

1. In June-July, I preached a phrase-by-phrase sermon series through the Lord's Prayer to communicate a coming seismic shift towards a priority of corporate prayer.
2. In August, we launched a weekly staff prayer meeting to generate satisfied customers for prayer meetings.
3. In September, I preached a two-part sermon series. The first was an expository sermon of a text like James 4:8-10, Revelation 2:1-7, or Revelation 3:14-22. The second was a testimony-based sermon about how the Lord has told me to lead our church to prioritize corporate prayer. We launched weekly prayer meeting the week after sermon 2.
4. I was bold and prophetic in calling them to start praying and fasting together on Tuesdays, and as many as possible to end the day in our worship center in a prayer meeting that I would lead. Do not be subtle. I stopped short of demanding they come. But I used phrases like, "this is a matter of life and death", "we desperately need a miracle from God if our church family and nuclear families are going to live the abundant life in this new Covid, protest-filled, economically unstable world", "I am all in on prayer meeting as your pastor; I am staking our church on it; I am as zealous for prayer meeting as I am Sunday morning worship; we need both."
5. At our second prayer meeting, I handed out free copies of *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* to every teenager and adult who showed up. This was in an effort to give them a vision for what prayer meeting could become.
6. I try to bring up prayer meeting every single Sunday morning from the stage.
7. Once or twice a year, we do prayer meeting in our Sunday morning worship services in place of our regular service format in order to expose our entire church to prayer meeting and sell the vision.

RESOURCES

Books

- ***Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*** by Jim Cymbala. The book that shaped the vision for our prayer meeting, and the one we handed out at our second prayer meeting.

Global Missions

- **Joshua Project** – joshuaproject.net. Profiles of people groups around the world.
- **International Mission Board** – www.imb.org. Missionary updates and people group information.

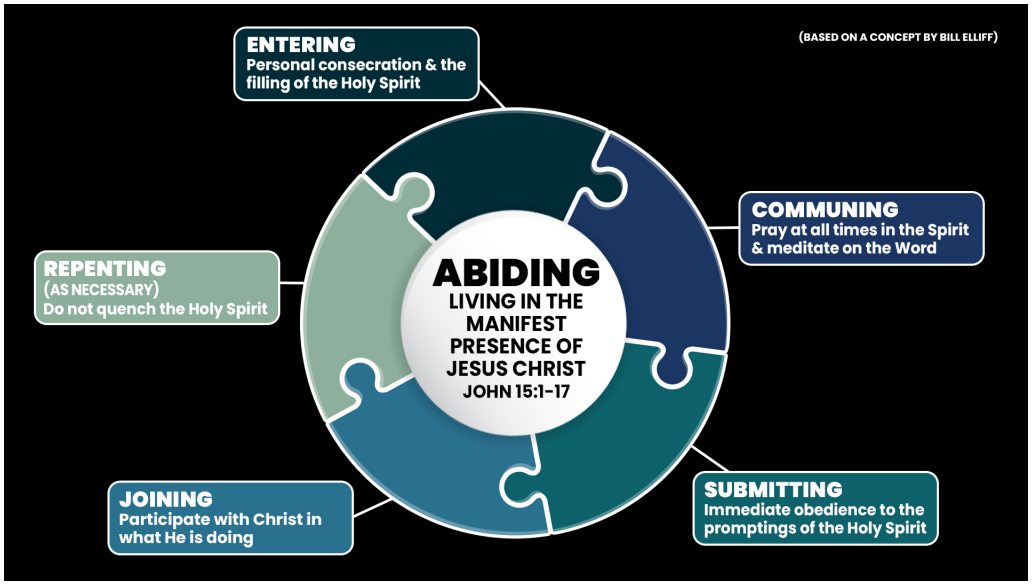
Beatitudes Consecration Paradigm

The guide we use most often to lead personal consecration in Phase 1 (Matt. 5:3-6).



The Abiding Wheel

Living in the manifest presence of Jesus Christ (John 15:1-17): entering, communing, submitting, joining, and repenting as necessary. Based on a concept by Bill Elliff.



Questions or want to talk more about leading prayer meetings?

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