

Church Growth through Prayer

Andrew Evans

Dr Andrew Evans is the senior pastor of the Assemblies of God church in Paradise, Adelaide, Australia, and national President of the Assemblies of God in Australia. The Paradise church has grown to over 3,500 people.

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The Paradise church was one of the largest Assemblies of God churches in Australia with 200 attending when they called me to be the pastor in 1970. They had tried to get a pastor from Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, but had failed. As a last resort they asked me.

For seven years I had been a missionary in Papua New Guinea. The area where I worked had a population in which about 10 per cent could read and write. Similarly, in the churches that I oversaw 90 percent of the congregations were illiterate. Therefore my preaching had to be simple Bible stories, or in simple language.

Through a series of crises God led me back to Australia. It was a difficult struggle for my family and me. While in Papua New Guinea my wife contracted hepatitis and nearly died. I remember standing by her bedside praying to God to keep her alive. At times I would wake during the night and listen to see if she was still breathing.

There were other complications for her at that time including the trauma resulting from a python slithering into the bedroom where she lay sick in our native material house. At her scream I ran in to find the snake above the door. I didn't know what to do, but with all my strength I hit it with a chair, demolishing the chair and killing the snake.

When we returned to Australia my wife became a little better but was still taking all kinds of drugs. This was my situation when Paradise church asked me to become their pastor. Some of the board members of Paradise church knew me before I became a missionary so were influential in my coming there.

Church decline

Suddenly I had to minister to educated Australians after seven years of working with primitive people. Besides this, some people thought the church was headed towards failure as the attendance was gradually declining.

'What am I going to do now?' I wondered. 'I have been in Papua New Guinea all these years and do not know how to preach to educated people.' I worked hard work on every sermon.

After one year the church attendance had decreased from 200 people to 150. I became very concerned.

When I began as the pastor of Paradise church I read a book called 'How to have a Soulwinning Church'. The author started his church with 17 people and it grew to 2,000 through a doorknocking program. Encouraged, I tried this program. Our church people were mobilised and went everywhere knocking on doors and inviting people to church. We had special literature printed to distribute. We knocked on one thousand doors, and talked to people personally, but not one person came to church as a result of this campaign.

Another thought occurred to me. We would have a healing crusade using a world renowned minister with a healing ministry. So we invited a famous evangelist. Our church advertised efficiently and distributed brochures. The brochures contained testimonies of people jumping out of wheelchairs and blind eyes opening. A banner outside the front of our church declared, 'Come and see blind eyes opened, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak.' We were all ready for a revival.

Through this expensive crusade we received 12 converts. Not one of them stood publicly. They just signed decision cards. I regarded this method as a failure also.

Later I thought of another idea to make our church grow. I reasoned that I was just a pastor, an ordinary shepherd, not an evangelist. If I could find an associate minister who was a real evangelist then our church would surely grow. We invited an evangelist friend of mine to be my associate. He declined. So that idea failed.

Meanwhile the church kept growing smaller. Nothing we tried seemed to work. I was greatly discouraged.

Another problem for me was that the previous pastor at Paradise church was a 'ten talent' pastor. He could do anything. He could play the guitar and sing, was a really good preacher, and always had a word of knowledge for the people. The people all loved him. When he resigned they cried.

Picture the situation! This talented man left the church and I came to be their pastor. I tried all the gimmicks possible to get the church to grow, but nothing worked.

Desperate prayer

One day a man came to me saying, 'I have a problem with my wife.'

This couple were wonderful Christians. The wife was previously a drug addict and the husband had been an alcoholic. They both had remarkable conversions and everything went well for several years.

'My problem is that my wife wants a divorce,' he continued.

His wife had begun to drift slowly back to her old ways again. I had counselled her for hours and nothing changed. Now her husband was asking, 'What am I going to do? She is going to leave me.'

This man wanted me to give him a word of knowledge. Instead I just answered, 'I don't know. I haven't a clue.'

Nevertheless I offered to help him if he would fast and pray the next Saturday with me, all day long. He agreed. The following Saturday the two of us came to the church and began to pray.

My method of praying is to walk back and forth across the room and pray aloud. Praying aloud keeps your mind from wandering. It helps concentration. So we were both walking back and forth across the room praying, 'God help us. We don't know what to do about this marriage.'

We were desperately calling upon God for help. As we continued praying, the Holy Spirit spoke to me saying, 'I want you two to do this every Saturday.'

I agreed, saying, 'I will, but you must tell my friend yourself.'

No sooner had I agreed than my partner spoke to me saying, 'Pastor, the Holy Spirit has just spoken to me saying that we should fast and pray every Saturday.'

'Fine. Let's do it,' I said.

For the next eight months the two of us fasted and prayed every Saturday. Our prayers were not only for the broken marriage but for the church, for revival, and many other things.

The next day after we made this commitment, God put his seal upon it. As I led the first chorus during the Sunday service I felt a strong urging of the Holy Spirit to give an appeal. This was not on the program so I thought, 'Let's sing a few more choruses first until the people get settled, then I will give an appeal.'

But the urging was stronger than ever. I argued with the Lord, 'Don't you think it is a bit early in the meeting to give an appeal? We could wait until the end of the service. That is how we always do it.'

As I was mentally arguing with the Lord I saw a man get up from the back seat, walk down the aisle and kneel at the altar. I said, 'All right, Lord, I get the message.'

I challenged the people, 'Would anyone else like to join this man?'

More than half the congregation came forward and began to cry and weep. God moved upon us in a powerful way.

The man who had come forward first was an alcoholic. He came to church that morning with a strong desire to drink again. He had been sitting in his seat fighting that desire. God met his need, and many other needs.

Then God spoke to me: 'If you want church growth, you have to build a powerful prayer base. That is the foundation of church growth.'

The church may have many activities but its growth will not be powerful and effective without a strong prayer base. Our trend is that of tradition. It is hard to change what has been practised for a long time. However, it is very important to follow God's direction in the program of your church.

Church growth

After my friend and I had been praying together for about eight months the Holy Spirit spoke to me: 'I don't want you to continue praying every Saturday with this brother alone but go onto the next step. Bring the entire congregation into it.'

I announced to our congregation, 'Two of us have been praying now for eight months, but God told us not to continue alone. Instead, we are to invite others in the congregation to join us in praying and fasting. You say you are concerned about our nation, our society, our church, but do you really care enough to give one day a month to prayer and fasting for revival?'

Out of our congregation of 150 only 31 people committed themselves to join us in prayer.

Therefore we mobilised one person every day to give a whole day for prayer and fasting. This covered the entire month 31 days. Someone was praying for revival every day.

Immediately we noticed the impact of prayer upon our church. People began to come in. The church began to develop and grow. By the early nineties we had over 3,500 attending and 1600 involved regularly in day and evening home cells. Every year I challenge them anew to give one day a month to prayer and fasting. Whenever the members are slack in their commitment it is felt in the church.

Our church has a group of people called the intercessors. These are special people who give one day every week to prayer and fasting. About 300 members had joined this group by 1992. They pray for me every week. Wherever I go, whatever I am doing, they always pray for me. I meet constantly with the intercessors to relate prayer needs.

This is one department of the church that I oversee myself because I realise the importance of prayer. I have found that it is impossible to see church growth without a tremendous prayer foundation. Our church has grown and is now decentralised. A full time team of 20 pastors join me in pastoring Paradise church.

Dreams and visions

Many Scripture speak of evil abounding in the last days. Another stream of Scripture says that in the last days there is going to be a great revival. Some passages describe a terrible falling away, a decline, and things getting worse and then there are many Scripture that say a revival is going to take place. Both are true, and both are more obvious around us now.

Prayer prepares the way for revival. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in great power when the believers were praying. Then Peter spoke of Joel's prophecy, 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams' (Acts 1:27).

It thrills me to see so many young people sold out to God. These promises are very powerful. I am sure God has given many people great visions and dreams for the future. I encourage people, young and old, to hold onto these dreams because they come to pass in your life.

When I was a Bible school student God spoke to me through prophecy and said, 'One day you are going to preach to multitudes.' I could hardly believe this. But God planted a vision and dream in my heart.

What about the promise for the old people? They will dream dreams. That does not mean

dreaming of the past, sitting in a rocking chair and dreaming of the good old days. Dreams in the Bible are supernatural and progressive.

My father is a dreamer. When he was 80 years old he came to me and said, 'Andrew, God has told me to start a church in a town called Katherine.'

There was no Assembly of God church in Katherine. This town in the Northern Territory has a population of about 3,000 people and is about 300 miles from the next town. Many people go to the northern part of Australia to get away from something a bad marriage, a bad job, or some unpleasant experience. Katherine has many people like that.

When my dad told of his dream to start a church in Katherine I said, 'You're crazy.'

But my dad had a dream and began saving his pension in order to fulfil that dream God had placed in his heart. After six months my dad said, 'I am going to Katherine.'

'Do you know anyone up there?' I asked.

'Well I have written to four people, but none of them answered my letters.'

'Where are you going to stay?'

'I don't know.'

My dad got on the plane and flew to Katherine. The airport there is about 25 kilometres from the town and is located in a desert place. Upon arriving my dad stood there looking like a lost sheep. He had no home to go to, no place to stay that night. He was standing at the airport holding his bag.

An aborigine couple approached my dad and asked, 'Can we help you?'

My dad answered, 'I want a lift into Katherine.'

'Oh, come with us,' they said. So they took him in their car into town.

On the way they asked him, 'Why are you coming to Katherine?'

'God sent me to start a church here.'

'Do you know anyone here?'

'No.'

'Do you have a place to stay?'

'No.'

'We will see if we can find a place for you,' they responded.

My dad went to the showground and began meetings. In two weeks his crowds grew to 120, and 37 people made decisions for Christ.

We live in marvellous days. People of all ages are part of the move of God in these last days, young and old alike. God is wanting to do something powerful and dynamic. He is blessing young people, and old, giving them revelations, dreams, visions and gifts. They are going out praying for the sick, ministering in various ways, and souls are being saved all over the world.

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