

Leading / Facilitating Corporate Prayer



Phil Miglioratti

"Let's pray. Everyone bow your head, close your eyes . . ." And so begins a standard, down-the-list, around-the-circle prayer meeting. Unfocused prayers. Unenthused pray-ers.

The day when good intentions or strong emotions were enough to set the table for a strong and successful prayer gathering are long gone. Today's prayer group, whether a class or committee, a study or fellowship group, or a congregation of many or few, desperately needs a leader with the ability to facilitate an "experiential"-an activity during which every person has an authentic, meaningful encounter, both with the ones they pray with and the one they pray to.

The solution is not to make the prayer experience more entertaining, educational, or expressive. Each of these elements is vital to a comprehensive prayer experience but without the engagement of those gathered with one another and the Holy Spirit, the time spent is more a human than a spiritual activity. Those who have the privilege of leading Christ followers in praying need first a new way of thinking about the process rather than a new program or set of methods and ideas.

A New Way of Thinking

Who are You? Yes, prayer starts with God and praying is ultimately about the glory of God ("Your kingdom come on earth . . .") but the role of the person He has selected to lead is vital to the process. Pastors and prayer leaders must realize the difference between their role in leading and how to operate when facilitating. Leadership relates to casting vision, setting clear direction, providing compelling action steps. Leaders direct the process step-by-step, declare solutions to problems or hindrances, exert influence over a group or team to achieve a specific agenda or to take a particular action. Leaders are like symphony conductors; they select the music, determine the tempo, and stand front and centre for all to see and follow.

Facilitators perceive their function differently. Facilitators have a clear focus and have prepared an anticipated format but are constantly submissive to the leading of the Holy Spirit as the corporate praying unfolds. They perceive themselves as an assistant to the Holy Facilitator, seeking the mind of Christ then guiding, even redirecting, the praying in that direction.

Facilitators think about the type of authority the group recognizes them to have, as it will make a difference in their readiness to follow, especially if new methods are being employed. Is the person facilitating a self-imposed leader (never a good idea), is he or she operating with delegated authority (for example, the pastor has selected him or her to lead the gathering) or has he or she been officially appointed to an ongoing role (the

congregation's prayer coordinator, for example)? The best scenario is to be recognized by those gathered as the one with the heart and skills necessary to facilitate rather than dominate the praying experience. Permission to experiment is related to the extent of trust the facilitator has built with the people gathered to pray.

What is the purpose? The purpose of every prayer meeting is, well, to pray, of course. But, since prayer is never an end in itself, the prayer facilitator must always discern the here-and-now reason for the group to dedicate its time, whether a few minutes or a few hours, to listening and talking with the Lord.

Facilitators ask a series of questions as they prepare and pray toward the meeting in order to recognize the unique-to-this-gathering focus or spiritual assignment. A group which meets weekly and follows a similar format each week should still have a sense that the prayers of this meeting are not merely the prayers of the past 51 weeks. God's Spirit has placed into our hearts and minds the praises and promises, the problems and petitions that are fresh for this particular time and place of praying.

Where are you meeting? Even though we can pray anytime and anywhere, the effect of the environment is often overlooked. In an emergency, a group of people can pray effectively at the scene of an accident on a busy highway in the pouring rain but in normal circumstances, a facilitator will consider the room setting and do what is necessary to maximize its potential.

A small group, whether in a home, a classroom, or a large auditorium can easily and quickly form a circle and create a sanctuary feel that crowds out other noise or activity. Groups of several dozen or more, depending on the purpose of that day, may pray best in circles of six to eight chairs. If the only setting available is pew or fixed seating, the facilitator will need to instruct participants to move into pairs or stand in triplets or kneel at their seat in order to engage all who have come.

If the gathering is multi-church, the facilitator needs to do pre-meeting homework. Does the hosting congregation have local protocol? What is the dress code, at least for the facilitator? As a guest facilitator, should you recognize the host pastor or guest leaders from other congregations? Think carefully through how you will explain the guidelines for praising ("It is fine to raise your hands while we sing or as you pray.") and offering prayers ("Please wait to introduce a new subject or focus until several have prayed over a topic."). Offer guidelines that give both freedom ("You may kneel at any time or come to the altar area . . .") and boundaries ("If you have a message you believe God wants you to speak to the entire group, please bring that to me before you speak it aloud").

Practical matters, such as lighting, sound amplification, competing noise, access, seating arrangement, and room temperature, all impact the praying experience. The extra effort to provide the best possible setting is always well worth the time and energy invested.

When are you meeting? Unless the meeting time is fixed, the facilitator needs to consider how the choice of the day and the time impact participation. Every choice makes it feasible for some and difficult for others. Consider posting both start and stop times as this may benefit parents with young children who have early bed times (Are children welcome, as a way to disciple them in praying?). Time of day may also determine the style of songs selected; does it feel like time for rejoicing or quiet meditation?

Why is this person praying? In order to guide and guard the entire group (whether six or six hundred), the facilitator must be both a praying participant and a prayer observer. Total participation on the part of the facilitator makes it difficult to steer or stop the process. Observation without participation turns the facilitator into a director and methods become manufactured or mechanical. In a small group, the facilitator sits with the group but in a larger gathering, the facilitator needs to be visible to all (and accessible, if many small groups are scattered across the room.)

This active participation is important to the task of reading the prayer dynamic. The facilitator must be able to discern if silence is a sign of listening and contemplation or an indication the topic of prayer has been completed. When unsure, the facilitator should simply ask the group for feedback, such as "Does anyone else have a prayer for this need before we move to our next focus?" Then he or she should wait until someone prays or the silence continues (indicating it is time to introduce a new topic).

Listening to the prayers of the people is a vital task for the facilitator. It enables you to gauge how well participants understand your instructions. Is someone beginning with a petition when you have asked for a time of praise (extolling God for who He is) or thanksgiving (expressing gratitude for what He has done)? If you direct the group to pray from a specific passage of scripture, are the prayers offered based on the text? Is some instruction needed?

The goal in asking oneself "Why is this person praying?" is not to control nor is it to squelch anyone but rather to guide the praying back to the previous instruction or to discern a new leading of the Holy Spirit. Facilitators should neither quench the Spirit (saying no to a new leading because they are not sensitive) nor grieve the Spirit (moving in a direction not intended by the Spirit or moving prematurely).

Discerning the leading of the Spirit is a combination of spirit and skill. The spiritual component requires ongoing dialogue between the Holy Spirit and the facilitator. (Are we ready to move into a new topic? How do I encourage others to participate? The person praying is sad, even tearful. Is that a sign of God's heart for those we are praying for?). The skill component requires the facilitator to listen carefully, communicate clearly, and confidently guide the process.

Listen to the prayers from a continuity perspective. Are we at the beginning, middle or conclusion of a prayer focus or topic?

Communicate by giving the group clear instructions. Is it obvious what you are asking them to do and have you repeated the instruction using synonyms for the key words?

Guide with brief comments ("We've moved too quickly from simple praise . . ." "When your group is done, please wait in silence for the others . . ." "Remember to begin your prayer with a word or phrase from the scripture passage.")

This type of leadership in a prayer context is a paradigm shift for those accustomed to a start-and-stop style. Start-and-stop leaders are only responsible to tell the group when to begin praying and when or how to stop ("I'll say the first prayer, others pray, then Deacon Hernandez will conclude our time."). Facilitators not only give clear instruction at the beginning but as needed, throughout the experience. These interruptions, rather than

distracting, are welcomed by those who want a corporate conversation instead of a down-the-list, around-the-circle routine.

How can the focus be formatted for full engagement? Even if the purpose of the gathering is to pray over a list of congregational requests, a format should be utilized. Nothing is more boring (possibly to God as well as those praying) than simply rehearsing a list of names or needs without the discipline of seeking to pray out God's heart for the situation.

A format helps focus the prayers of the saints and allows the prayer leader to disciple the group into biblical praying. Biblical praying utilizes scripture to provide the text (such as using John 3:16 as the basis for evangelism praying), the topic (like Nehemiah pleading for his city), or the themes. Acts 1:8 offers an outward format: Jerusalem (our community), Judea (our state and nation), Samaria (our enemies far and near), the earth (other nations across the globe).

Formats may also be designed from acrostics, such as:

P-Praise

R-Repent

A-Ask

Y-Yield

Or:

Upward-Praise

Downward-Confession

Inward-God's will for my life

Outward-God's will for others (healing, evangelism)

Backward-Remembering God's faithful actions in scripture and the past

Forward-Declaring our hope in God's faithful action in and through our obedience

Facilitating a small or large group through such a format may be enhanced through power point slides that indicate the primary focus and/or present the scripture that serves as the basis of prayer. Intersperse the format slides with the lyrics of a song that will be sung as a transition. These lyric slides help move the focus of prayer from, say a section of adoration praying into a focus on confession. Simply begin to sing (a capella or with instrument or even CD background), for example, "Change My Heart O God" reminding the group the song is a prayer of petition set to music.

A New Way of Leading

Leading prayer as a facilitator requires:

A new role: You are a facilitator rather than a director

A new routine: Unscripted, dynamic, corporate conversation with the Holy Spirit

A new result: An uncommon prayer experience

"The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (Jn. 14: 26).

Questions for Further Thought or Discussion

1. Explain how this corporate description of facilitation applies to the function of a prayer facilitator:

"Smoothing the way. That's what facilitate means: to make things easier, to smooth the progress of and to assist in making things happen. Like so much of our work, we think that facilitation is about moving things forward. It's about allowing and creating an environment where things can move forward. It isn't about pushing or forcing things." Impact Factory

2. Explain how each of these components can be used in a prayer gathering:

- Song-Singing to God, not merely about God
- Scripture-Praying God's Words back to Him
- Story-Sharing success and struggles
- Silence-Seeking, meditating, listening
- Spoken-"All types of prayers"

3. Design a prayer format that includes:

- Foundation-A biblical passage or theme
- Focus-A specific application or topic
- Format-A road map for praying

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Suggested Additional Reading

Franklin, John. *And the Place Was Shaken: How to Lead a Powerful Prayer Meeting*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005.

Henderson, Daniel with Margaret Saylor. *Fresh Encounters: Experiencing Transformation through United Worship-based Prayer*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004.

Henderson, Daniel. *PRAYzing! Creative Prayer Experiences from A to Z*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007.

Small, P. Douglas. *Transforming Your Church into a House of Prayer*. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2006.

Sacks, Cheryl. *The Prayer Saturated Church*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004.

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