How to conduct prayer meetings

In most churches and congregations the prayer gatherings pose a problem. This is a situation that requires our urgent attention. Unless this matter is attended to in a powerful and serious manner the church will remain largely ineffective and Satan will proceed unhindered. No congregation can afford to function without a regular prayer gathering. In fact these gatherings are indispensable to the church. Regular and fixed times for prayer should be arranged in every congregation. If yours does not have a regular prayer gathering, start praying for it. Get someone to join you in this prayer and together you can look for a third person to also pray for this matter regularly. In this way the group will grow and you will have established a prayer group. If a prayer group already functions in the congregation join it immediately. Don't just sit and criticize; see to it that you are there and that you make a contribution. To lead prayer gathering is definitely the most important responsibility of the spiritual leader of the congregation. If this person does not acknowledge the importance of these gatherings you should specifically and purposefully pray for him/her.

In some places there is currently a trend among intercessors to withdraw from the prayer groups within their respective congregations and to start their own groups. This means that they become outsiders who try to "rectify the congregation". This is a very unhealthy trend.

Intercessors should at all costs guard against isolating themselves. In many cases one cannot blame the intercessors for wanting to withdraw into their own group, since the spiritual leaders of congregations often seem to have no vision or feel threatened by the intercessors. However this is even more reason for the intercessors not to divorce themselves from the congregation and to simply do their own thing. The intercessors need the protection and spiritual covering of the minister, pastor. God gives the spiritual leader to the congregation as its leader and authority, and we should guard against ignoring this fact. Even if you feel that your spiritual leader is in your opinion, not on the desired spiritual level you must not ignore his authority. Each intercessor should go out of his/her way to get to know the spiritual leader of his/her congregation and the same applies to the spiritual leader as far as the prayer groups and intercessors are concerned.

The following are a number of guidelines for prayer groups in the congregation:

- The prayers said in a prayer group should be concise and to the point – in most cases a few sentences only. After someone has prayed, a number of other people should first be allowed to pray too, before this person may pray again – but all these prayers should be short.

- The most important element of group prayer is harmony and unity, so that you may agree with one another in prayer (Matt.18: 19-20) The number of people who pray is far less important than the oneness/unity that should characterize the group that has gathered to pray. The Greek word for "agree" can be literally translated as symphony. There must be spiritual unity among those who pray.

- Pray about one topic at a time. One person prays for a specific issue and the others join in on this subject. When everybody feels satisfied that prayers for the specific issue have been concluded the next prayer topic can be started with.

- Brief instructions about prayer should be given at prayer gatherings. A short section from the Bible may be dealt with or one or two specific verses may be explained. Give the other prayers an opportunity to share a text or an important thought with the group.

- Give the various intercessors the opportunity to say whether The Lord has put any
particular prayer topic on their hearts or perhaps to share something with the group.

- Do not convert the prayer occasion into a Bible study session or into any other form of discussion. The main emphasis should be on prayer.

- Deal with the different aspects of prayer. For example, start with Worship and Praise, followed by song, intercession, thanksgiving, other prayer requests, and conclude with Praise.

- Write the topics for intercession and thanksgiving on a black board or use transparencies and an overhead projector.

- Intercession for mission work and evangelization is normally of cardinal importance during prayer opportunities. Make specific individuals responsible for collecting prayer information on specific missionaries, mission actions or special activities, and for submitting this information for intercession. A congregation could for instance "adopt" a particular missionary (mission field) or evangelist and undertake to intercede for him and his family in prayer.

- Don't start and pray non-stop for an hour on end. Give information on a prayer topic, pray about it for 5-10 minutes (perhaps longer) stop the group and share information about a next matter with them.

- When you commence with a prayer group you should announce it in church and invite all. Don't be discouraged if only two or three persons turn up. Start with those who are there. It is of extreme importance to pray for more intercessors. Do not complain about the fact that there are too few people who are interested, pray for more. Approach specific individuals and ask them individually to join the prayer group and to come and help with the work of prayer. Ask people to become involved just as you would ask them to help transporting chairs to a hall, putting up posters, etc. Too many people regard prayer as something we do when we have extra time and too little is said about the extreme importance of devoting quality time to prayer.

- Older people generally pray more easily when they are together in a group and young people's unique style enables them to usually pray fervently and seriously. Do not be unnecessarily afraid to get different prayer groups going.

- One of the golden rules for congregations is to organize as many prayer groups as possible. Try to involve as many people as possible in intercession whether in groups or as individuals. You may even hand out a weekly prayer letter to the congregation to provide information to individuals who have indicated that they would pray specifically for these matters.

- A prayer gathering should be held in the congregation at least once a week. Intercession may never be isolated from spiritual growth and from the fellowship of the believers.

- Make enough time for prayer. Do not devote an unnecessarily large amount of time to prayer on occasions when prayer is actually unsuitable. However, make sure that there is ample time for prayer when specific prayer gatherings are arranged.

- Prayer gatherings may adopt different formats:
  
  - Weekly gatherings for the entire congregation or for certain groupings within the congregation
• Prayer triplets (attempt to involve as many church members as possible in this way)

• A small group who regularly meets to pray for a specific matter

• Half a night or an entire night of prayer once or twice a year

• A prayer weekend

• A 24-hour prayer chain one day per week

• Early morning prayer meetings

• Prayer meetings over lunch time

• A prayer breakfast especially for working people

• A 40 day fasting chain

• A prayer team who prays specifically for the activities of the minister of the congregation

A prayer gathering may be devised in different ways and more than one form of prayer may be used in the same meeting:

• Divide into small groups (3-6)

• Spontaneous prayer in the large group

• Ask specific individuals to pray for specific issue

• Ask two or three people to pray for an issue, name the next prayer topic and again ask two or three people to pray for it.

• Encourage the intercessors to use quotations from the Scriptures - especially The Lord's promises in their prayers as this serves to build one's faith.

• Pray for the intercessors since Satan will continuously do all that he can to prevent them from gathering to pray.

• The relevancy of issues for intercession during prayer meetings is essential. The group has to meet with a clear objective in mind. When this objective starts fading people start losing their motivation to come together for prayer. Although it is important to pray for the local congregation it is also essential to pray for matters outside of it. When the prayer vision of the congregation narrows to intercession for the sick and next month's church fête the number of intercessors will dwindle and the prayer meeting will become a burden.

In the following paragraphs I would like to discuss four of the abovementioned possibilities for group prayer.

1. PRAYER ROOMS
Prayer rooms are a matter which are very closely linked to the whole concept of prayer chains. The ideal is to have a prayer room in every congregation. This prayer room can be used for
individuals to come and pray for prayer chains and for use by various prayer groups in the congregation.

**Advantages of prayer rooms**

- It helps members to physically have a place where they can pray
- It helps to cultivate the principle of constant, persistent praying by a congregation if the prayer room is effectively used.
- It is a visible expression of the congregation's prayer initiative.

**How to utilize a prayer room**

- Begin to get a 24 hour chain going in the prayer room for one day a week
- Allow the different prayer groups and Bible study groups to use the prayer room for their prayer meetings
- The youth, women, men and working young people can decide on a cramming session and fill the prayer room with intercessors. For argument's sake, the youth action can take Friday afternoon from 14h00 to 24h00 and pray specifically for the activities of the youth.
- The prayer room can be used to do intercession for crisis situations.
- The prayer room is an ideal place for intercessors to meet during the Worship services to do intercession for the services.

**Organizing a prayer room**

- A responsible person must be appointed to exercise leadership around the prayer room - preferably not the minister. This person must, however, be submitted to the spiritual leader and must report to the spiritual leader at least weekly.
- This person must ensure that new prayer information is available and that feedback is given concerning matters prayed for.
- The prayer room must be kept tidy and control must be kept over the groups that use the prayer room. Attempts should be made to involve more people so that the prayer room will be utilized effectively.

**What is prayed for in a prayer room?**

- Pray for the activities of the congregation
- Pray for the missionaries that have been sent and are supported by the church
- Pray for the evangelism actions of the congregation, bazaars, etc for all meetings concerning the congregation's activities
- Pray for families, social activities, those in the congregation who are ill, people who are celebrating birthdays that week, etc.
• Pray for spiritual growth of the members and for the unsaved that live within the congregation's boundaries

• Pray for the congregation's finances and the effective administration of the finances

• Pray for the Worship services on Sundays

• Pray for the specific town/city

• Pray for the reaching of the unreached with the Gospel.

**Recruiting intercessors**

To recruit intercessors is of cardinal importance. As a rule people do not volunteer to serve as intercessors. It is imperative that the minister in spite of how busy his programme might be, take a half hour in the prayer chain or utilizes the prayer room himself at least once a week.

Feedback concerning answers to prayer helps to motivate and encourage individuals to come and volunteer to join the group of intercessors.

Don't make people feel guilty because they don't come to pray. Make it attractive to them - concentrate on the blessings that intercession has in store for the intercessor and on the fact that God answers prayer. That will draw people.

Don't be in a hurry. Allow the Holy Spirit to prepare people's hearts to become involved with intercession. Don't place an obligation on people to come and pray in the prayer room. Invite them to use it and do not place unrealistic expectations upon people.

Also remember that you will never get to the point where the whole congregation will use the prayer room. In the Kingdom of God people's gifts and responsibilities differ. Keep that in mind.

**Practical tips**

• The prayer room must preferably be at the church building or at a place close by and it must be accessible.

• For people to get in the prayer room easily it helps to use a combination lock. Keys are always a bother.

• It helps a great deal to have photos of the congregation's missionaries, maps of the countries where missionary work is being done, maps of the congregation, etc. in the prayer room, it stimulates the intercessors to pray. It is also acceptable to display a family photo of the minister, photos of the church building, city hall, and other places of importance - whether on a notice board or in an album.

• Use a specific book in which to write all the answers to prayer. Let the minister read some of these prayer answers from the pulpit once or twice a month - it will strengthen the faith level of the whole congregation.

• It is important that the prayer room is used only for prayer.

**The following are important conditions for a prayer room:**
• it must be easily accessible;

• it must be safe and preferably should have security lights for the night;

• it must be clean and someone must take responsibility for keeping it tidy;

• it must be comfortable (it is not necessarily holy to pray on a cement floor) but it is not necessary for it to be luxurious;

• there must be a good lighting system and it should be relatively quiet.

• It is important that the spiritual leaders of the congregation are involved. Beyond that the chairman of the congregational committees should be encouraged to utilize the prayer room as well as the ordinary members. From time to time a list can be put up on the church notice board for people to write their names if they want to become involved with the prayer room. Ensure that new people who are added are thoroughly orientated concerning the functioning of the prayer room as well as the practical procedures.

• A prayer room is not a goal in itself. The prayer room functions in agreement with the vision of the congregation.

• Do not take it for granted that every member knows how to fill their prayer time practically. Dick Eastman's prayer model of taking an hour in 12 period of 5 minutes each and dealing with a different facet of prayer in each period is a very good starting point. "The Hour that Changes the World" by Dick Eastman).

• A significant book concerning prayer rooms is the book "don't just stand there, pray something" by Ronald Dunn.

2. Continuous prayer support for specific meetings

This covers prayer support for a specific project or action. It can be an evangelism week, missions conference or spiritual renewal conference, to name but a few examples. It can be set up in different ways. One way is to get people who are available to come together at a specific place one to three hours per day, for three days or two weeks, to pray for this specific matter. For example, it could be decided that there should be people praying from 06h00 to 21h00. The prayers come in shifts of 2-4 hours (preferably not longer) There must be a prayer group leader to co-ordinate all this.

The groups that come to pray should preferably consist of 8-10 people per shift and each person should try to take 2 shifts per day.
If shifts of 3 hours per week are going to be dealt with there will be 8 shifts (per 24 hours) and there will therefore have to be at least 50-60 people who are praying. In effect this means that the person who is on the prayer support team must be available for the duration of the conference or event that is being prayed for. For many people that would mean taking leave from work for those few days. This type of intercession is not child's play and is extremely exhausting. Guard against supplicants becoming too tired physically: It causes lack of concentration and results in ineffective praying. If we are not physically fit and prepared we are an easy target for the counter attacks of the devil.

The fruit of these meetings are overpowering. People who have participated find that after the meetings their lives are never the same again. Groups which have already utilized this kind of prayer support are adamant about one thing: they don't ever want to arrange another conference or seminar without having continuous prayer support for the meeting.
This type of prayer meeting must be very well organized and the intercessors must be people who can stand under authority and can accept someone else's leading. The choice of a team leader is of critical importance. By putting the wrong person in this position everything can turn out to be disastrous.

Once the whole action has begun, it is important that information be passed on to the prayer room to enable the intercessors to know what to pray for. There must be as much fresh news as possible, because this keeps the intercessors in touch with the matter they are praying for. On the other hand, intercessors must also pass information on to the conference in a significant way. This information must be monitored by responsible leaders and passed on to conference goers and speakers in a meaningful way.

Every prayer meeting can start with a time of Praise and Worship. After that pray for the matters at hand. Take time to listen whether there is something that The Spirit of God is wanting to say to the intercessors. Write down the impressions that The Lord is laying on the group's heart and (if necessary) pass the information on to the next prayer team. Use the promises of God and of The Word. It will protect the prayer group from a whole lot of deception and ensure that pitfalls are avoided.

In her book "Possessing the Gates of the Enemy", Cindy Jacobs gives very clear guidelines about organizing such continuous prayer action. You really should take a look at that for more information.

3. Prayer chains

It is obvious that prayer chains are going to form a part of God's strategy for the next few years. Great break-throughs followed the Christians humbling themselves during the election in April 1994 in South Africa.

Great break-throughs also came as a result of the prayers before and on "A Day to Change the World", June 25, 1994. But that was only the beginning. We have to continue persevering in prayer until every single person on earth has heard the Gospel, our country is restored, true reconciliation has come amongst the different groups in the country and spiritual revival has come to the church in South Africa as well as world-wide.

I am convinced of the fact that the church is entering a period where consistent, persevering and intensive prayer will be necessary. My conviction is that within the next few years we will see a great revival in prayer groups as well as great spiritual break-through as fruit of these prayer chains. I want to encourage prayer groups, congregations and Christian organizations to have a 12 to 24 hour prayer chain at least once a week for the next six years, excluding normal hours of prayer. It will cultivate a spirit of prayer perseverance and help spiritual break-through to come in our country and also in other parts of the world.

Prayer chains are not a new type of prayer but it is as though they have begun to revive again in the last few years. The aim of a prayer group is to get a group of people together who will take turns to pray for a specific time and a specific cause. For argument's sake it can be decided to pray for a whole month for spiritual revival in the congregation. People who are each willing to take an hour or half an hour daily or weekly or whichever way possible to pray for a specific cause are then found. This type of prayer chain can be highly effective if it is organized correctly. That means that everybody has to know exactly

- what is being prayed for, and
- when they must pray
Feedback must be given concerning answers to prayer and the intercessors must be able to share with one another what they experienced in their different prayer times. It could be that the Lord wants to relay a specific word to the whole team. It can come through a vision, dream, Scripture or a specific impression. It can also be a promise, a rebuke, a warning or guidance as to what, or who, must be prayed for. Such information must be controlled and passed on to the whole group in the prayer chain.

Example

Approximately three centuries ago a group of Christians, the Herrnhutters, started a 24 hour, 7 day a week, prayer chain and prayed that the Gospel will be taken to all the world. There were 24 women and 24 men who took part in this prayer chain. They had shifts on which 2 men or 2 women took prayer shifts of one hour each. They continued with this chain for 100 years. During this period of time this little group of Christians (a couple of thousand) sent out more missionaries that the rest of the church of The Lord in all other denominations and countries together.

Various possibilities

There are various ways in which these prayer chains can be instituted:

- You can for instance start with a 12 or 24 hour, one day per week prayer chain in a congregation. With as little as 12 people (each taking 2 hours) such a chain can be meaningful and successful. Try not to make people's prayer shifts less than one hour per session. If there are more than 24 intercessors the chain can be extended to two days a week or the chain can be strengthened by putting more than one person in a prayer shift.

Furthermore, the chain can be strengthened through the participants undertaking:

- to fast on the relevant day that the chain is in operation or

- that each person will fast on a different day of the week.

- To form a 24 hour, 7 days a week prayer chain in a specific town or city, 7 different congregations can agree to each fast one day per week. In different large cities of the world Citywide Prayer Alerts were started during the past years. This means that they are looking for 168 congregations to each take an hour a week thereby forming a weekly 24 hour prayer chain.

- It is also possible to have a fasting chain. In a previous congregation that I was involved in we had a 40 day fasting chain on one occasion. A group of 60 members undertook to each fast once a week. In effect that meant that there were 7-9 people fasting every day.

- Prayer chains can also be used for spiritual covering for a series of services, an evangelism week, etc. In these cases the prayer chain must not be continued indefinitely or for too long. Do it for a week or at the most a month. Stop after that. If the group feels like continuing with it again at a later stage, there is nothing to stop them. People can be dulled and no longer pray with fervency of spirit or with complete conviction when a chain does not have a specific target date especially if the reason why the chain was called into being was a short-term cause.

- Another interesting and useful type of chain is where people contact each other telephonically at a specified time and pray together for five or ten minutes. The
telephone is extremely useful to pass on prayer subjects in the case of a crisis. The facilities of the fax-machine and e-mail are also opening up new possibilities.

**Aim of prayer chain**

It is important that we don't have a prayer chain for the sake of having a prayer chain. There must be a very clear reason for that which needs to be prayed for. To be vague and undefined with intercession makes any intercessor spiritually tired and dead.

**I recommend that groups begin by praying for at least the following in their prayer chain.**

- Spiritual revival for the Church of Christ all over the world.
- World evangelism - reaching the more than 6 000 unreached groups with the Gospel and all it embraces.
- Pray for reconciliation between all the peoples and the termination of all violence and striking. Pray for the economic development and growth of the country. Pray for the new government to rule and make decisions equitably leading to the building up of the country.
- Every congregation organization or prayer group will have it's own prayer matters that are important to them as a group. There is definitely room to pray for these.

**Length of prayer shifts**

Don't make the time of the different shifts shorter than 1 hour per time. Initially some people will back away from this but with only a little leading and encouragement it will be done quite easily. Look particularly at the concept that Dick Eastman uses in his book The Hour that Changes the World.

**Organization is important**

A prayer chain requires thorough organization. It is not something that will just continue spontaneously. The person who organizes it should preferably not be the minister or the pastor of the congregation. They have enough work. However, the organizer must work very closely with the spiritual leader and be under his authority.

It is also important that the prayer organizer has at his/her disposal the addresses and telephone numbers of all the people in the chain. Regular communication must be made with the people in the chain (once a week, or not less than once every two weeks). It can be done by telephone or by letter.

**It is important that:**

- practical information and arrangements are passed on;
- answers to prayers are to be passed on;
- new prayer requests are to be passed;
- to ensure that the chain is functioning and that everybody is still observing their prayer turn;
where necessary people who have had "night shift" for a month or longer should be afforded the opportunity to swap so that others can take the difficult times in the early morning hours.

The advantage and Scriptural connotation of prayer chains

Prayer chains have various advantages:

- It brings unity amongst believers because they are focusing on a specific matter or matters together.

- Prayer chains are in agreement with the principle of persevering prayer in Luke 18:1; 1Thessalonians 5:18; and Ephesians 6:18.

- 2 Corinthians 1:11 says that the prayers of many bring great blessings from God

- Matthew 18:19-20 says where two or three agree on anything, God will give it to them. Prayer chains actually work on the principle of agreeing in prayer.

- These chains create an expectation in the believers and that's why they pray with more vigour and faith.

4. Half nights of prayer

Another way of obtaining a bigger volume of prayer for your congregation is to arrange a quarterly half night of prayer, e.g. from 19h00 to 23h00. A prayer session such as this has a strong, binding effect on a congregation or a group of believers. This doesn't mean that all that is done the whole time is praying. There is place for Praise and Worship. Strong testimonies and clear answers to prayer are also significant. It is important to vary the way in which prayer is being made. Sometimes prayer can be made in the large group, other times in groups of 10-15, or small groups of 2-3 or 4-6. Variation is important but the variation must also not be continuous as this would confuse and unsettle the people. In the beginning when groups begin to pray together they get to know each other and learn how to join each other in prayer. If the groups are changed too often the prayer groups do not build unity and it hampers the Spirit of Prayer.