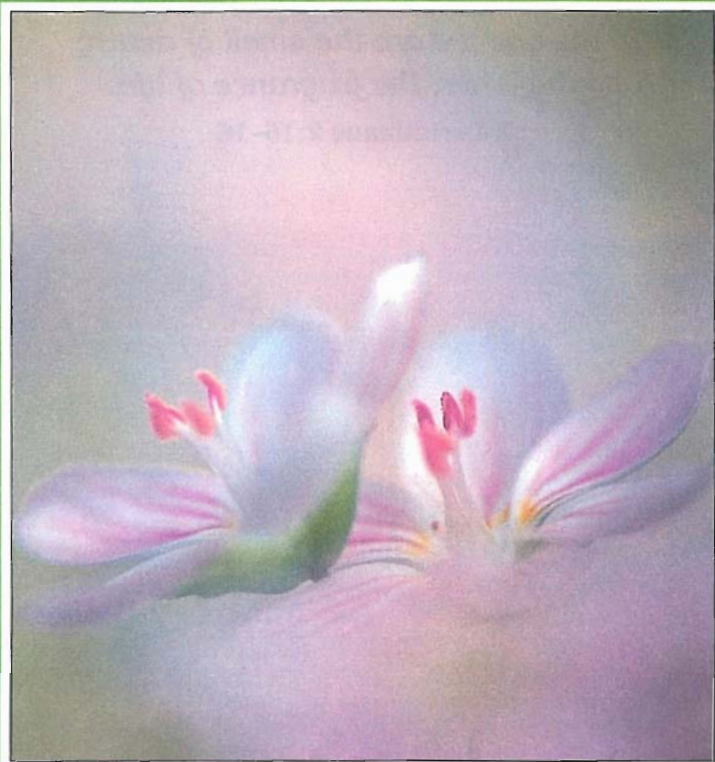

The Priority of Prayer



Core Values Series

*For we are to God the aroma of
Christ among those who are being
saved and those who are perishing.
To the one we are the smell of death;
to the other, the fragrance of life.*

2 Corinthians 2:15-16

Core Values Series

The Priority of Prayer

by Edi Bajema

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Just maintaining—that's what Dearborn Christian Reformed Church's Coffee Break program was doing. Their membership had remained steady for a few years, the women were enjoying the fellowship and Bible study, things were very comfortable.

But when director Jo Wedeven attended a Coffee Break Convention, she heard the challenge to make her program grow again. And she heard about the power of prayer.

Jo took her enthusiasm back home. She shared with her leaders God's vision of reaching out to new women in their community. She talked about the amazing power of God that's unleashed in people's lives when Christians begin to pray. She urged them to pray very specifically for goals and outreach. And they began to pray.

Then Jo presented the situation at Coffee Break to her congregation. She asked for prayer partners to keep asking God to bring new women from the community into the Coffee Break groups. Fifty people from the congregation signed up to pray.

Dearborn CRC prayed very specifically for twenty new community women to come that year. As a result of those prayers, they began in the fall with fifteen new members; throughout the year, God brought ten more into the Bible study. This experience emphasized again for the Dearborn Coffee Break the need for prayer and the power that is available when the church begins to pray.



Joanna Martin, leader of a Coffee Break program in Abbotsford, British Columbia, also found her groups in a comfortable but definite slump in the fall of 1991. By January and February of the next year, it was clear that they had lost their evangelistic focus.

Then several of the leaders, including Joanna, attended a "Passion and Power in Prayer" workshop that February. Their eyes were opened to the power of prayer. As their perspective on prayer changed, so did their practice. They began to pray, fervently and faithfully, that God would bring unsaved people into their program.

Early that spring, one woman showed up at a Coffee Break study. She was a new Christian, hungry for the Word of God. As she found a welcome in the Bible study, she in turn brought several more women into the program. And they in turn brought their friends—without any special outreach on the part of the Coffee Break leaders! God simply provided the women, and they kept showing up, even as the season was winding down.

Not wanting to quit so soon for the summer, the newer members agreed to meet each Tuesday in the park for Bible study, led by the new Christian who had first come to Coffee Break that spring!

By the beginning of the next fall season, the character of the church's Coffee Break had totally changed from the previous fall. Now five groups were meeting, with a total of over forty ladies—and at least fourteen of those were unchurched, uncommitted Christians! Joanna remarks, "To put it mildly, we learned the value of believing, specific prayer. God has been very, very faithful."



These two examples point out a basic truth, summarized by author Evelyn Christenson, that all Coffee Break leaders should memorize and post above the door to their meeting place:

Plans and programs in evangelism are necessary and good, but it is only God's power that will actually win people to Christ. No expenditure of time, effort, and money can replace the convicting and calling of souls by God.

In our evangelistic efforts, as in all work for him, God is able to accomplish through us only "according to" the power that works in us (Ephesians 3:20). This power is appropriated and released by praying. In evangelism, our prayer is for people to find Christ.



Why Pray?

In all ministry, we follow Jesus. The gospels show us that prayer was vital to Jesus' work. "Prayer was the secret of his power, the law of his life, the inspiration of his toil, and the source of his wealth, his joy, his communion, and his strength," writes E. M. Bounds. Jesus prayed before every major turning point of his ministry. He often slipped away early in the morning, at the end of a long day, and in between, seeking a solitary place to ask God's guidance and to find strength.

Knowing the power available in prayer, Jesus also urged his disciples to be persistent pray-ers, to ask with complete trust in the Father's ability to provide. He promised them, "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." He told them parables "to show them that they should always pray and not give up." He gave them a model for their prayers: "Our Father in heaven ..." He urged them to pray, saying, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Jesus constantly reminded his followers that the most powerful tool he could give them for ministry was prayer.

Jesus' promises about prayer held true. The early Christians' prayers had great effect. They asked for boldness to witness, and the place where they were meeting was shaken with the power of God. They prayed for God's grace to be shown, and God performed miraculous signs of healing and deliverance. They prayed for Peter in prison, and God sent an angel to free him. They prayed for the dead, and God restored life. They prayed that everyone might hear the good news, and the persecution that was meant to kill the church instead spread it across the

entire Roman empire.

The early missionaries depended on prayer. Everywhere Paul went, the prayers of the believers went before him and prepared the way; his ministry was filled with great power and with signs and wonders as a result of their prayers.

Paul himself made prayer his first and top priority. "God is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times. ... I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ... We have not stopped praying for you. ... Night and day we pray most earnestly. ... I thank God, whom I serve, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers." In the battle against the spiritual powers of darkness, he urged, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Paul knew that his ministry depended on the power of prayer. He actively recruited prayer partners. "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ. ... Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored."

If the Lord himself made prayer the cornerstone of his ministry, and if the early church grew so rapidly through the power of prayer, how can we expect growth and power today unless we make prayer our first priority?

What Does Prayer Do?

Prayer unleashes the power of God. Moses discovered this when he was high on the top of a hill, watching the Israelites battle the armies of Amalek. Interceding for the people, Moses lifted up his hands to the throne of the

Lord. "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning" (Exodus 17:11). God gave his people the victory as long as Moses' arms were raised in praise and intercession.

Afterward, God told Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it. ..." (Exodus 17:14). God wanted to make sure that this truth is not lost: when leaders pray, the battle advances; when they don't pray, it goes back. This is surely "something to be remembered"!

The Scriptures make it very plain: **things happen when you pray that will not happen if you don't pray.** The Lord told Ezekiel, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them. ..." (Ezekiel 22:30-31).

Coffee Break leaders are called to pray—to "stand in the gap"—for the members of their groups. Group members are called to do the same for each other's family members and friends. A Coffee Break group in Elmhurst, Illinois, prays faithfully for each other's needs. "If we don't pray, we don't know what would happen," say the group members. They believe the Bible's teaching that if they fail to cover these needs in prayer, the channels of God's grace will be severely restricted.

Prayer prepares people's hearts to hear the Word of God. Obviously, the prayers of the Dearborn Coffee Break leaders and prayer partners were fruitful in preparing people's hearts. The twenty-five people who joined the Bible study during that year were reached first through prayer. So were the unchurched women who came to Coffee Break in Abbotsford. The Holy Spirit was active in

their hearts as a result of those prayers, long before anyone invited them to Coffee Break.

Prayer opens doors in places where you cannot go.

This truth is most obvious in the account of Peter's escape from prison and certain death. "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (Acts 12:5). The believers could not go into the prison physically; but their prayers certainly reached to the innermost cell where Peter was kept.

Your neighborhood may have "innermost cells" of apartment complexes that are unreachable by door-to-door methods. Churches have reported much greater contact with these "unreachables" after they've begun to pray for the people who live behind those closed doors. One church decided to canvass its city by prayer, rather than by ringing doorbells. As they prayed for specific city blocks and streets, people began attending church from those streets—unexplained except through the power of those prayers.

Finally, **prayer changes you.** This may be one of the most important truths about prayer for you as a leader. It will strengthen your relationship to God. Prayer will broaden your awareness of who God is; it will cause you to grow in love and understanding and godliness. It will form the character of Christ in you. It can do this because it brings you into the very presence of God, and it is there that you are changed.

Your sensitivity to the prompting and the timing of the Holy Spirit will be sharpened as you pray—a valuable thing in leading your group members to Christ. Your ability to listen to God will grow in prayer. Your compassion for others will grow as you pray for them. In every way, you will grow up into Christ—through time spent in his presence, listening to his Word, and receiving the

deep, refreshing experience of his love. The discipline and ministry of prayer will make you a much more effective Coffee Break leader—and will bond your group of leaders together in love and faith.

Ways to Make Prayer Part of Your Coffee Break

1. Hold regular prayer sessions in the leaders' meetings. You and your leaders must first agree that your prayer time together is the power center of your Coffee Break. Gather Scriptures on prayer and share them before your prayer time. Read encouraging articles together; bring stories of God's answers to prayer. Continually remind each other that "only God's power will actually win people to Christ."

Remember too that Satan will do all he can to discourage your prayer times or cause you to lose interest. Paul's prayer for the church is "that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11). Be warned that when you begin to pray seriously, you will meet spiritual opposition. The old proverb holds true here: "The wolf attacks only when there is bacon inside the door." If a powerful prayer ministry is beginning to develop, you may expect to see more evidence of Satan's opposition. He knows all too well the power of prayer. Don't let him discourage you from it!

With that in mind, take plenty of time for your prayer together. The amount of importance you give to prayer is in direct proportion to the amount of time you spend praying. If organizational details or lesson discussion crowds out your prayer time, you know that prayer is a lower priority in your group. Many leaders' groups meet

for prayer and study on a separate day from Coffee Break to assure that they have enough time for prayer.

A longer time for prayer doesn't mean a longer time for sharing. You must make this time as efficient as possible. If you have many leaders, it will be difficult to pray for personal needs in one large group. Often most of your time for prayer is spent in talking about needs and sharing news. This can be frustrating.

But you don't need to cut out the sharing time. Consider how group leaders from different churches have handled this situation:

- One leaders' group circulates a "prayer and praise" sheet at its meetings, asking each leader to write down her prayer requests and reasons for thanksgiving. This sheet is photocopied and handed to each leader. When the leaders break into small groups, they pray for these personal concerns, as well as for the larger Coffee Break needs. This is also done in the evening Coffee Break groups; it's an effective way to cut down on time spent talking about prayer requests when time together is limited.
- Another Coffee Break program asks its leaders to bring prayer items in writing to the weekly leaders' meetings, following the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication/surrender) outline. One person leads the prayer time, making the transition from adoration to confession, and so on.

During the opening section, they simply go around the circle of leaders, each one reading what she has written to God as part of her adoration. Then the leader opens a time of personal, silent confession. When the leader senses closure, she begins with the items she's written for thanksgiving, and others follow,

reading their written reasons for thanks. Supplication follows.

Leaders comment that they find their prayer time much more meaningful since they've given it a high priority. The tension of not knowing what to pray is also gone, since they have written their prayers before hand. They go into their prayer time with a strong focus; they also feel more bonded in fellowship and strengthened in their leadership.

If you try these ways to make your leaders' prayer time more efficient, you may find it possible to include the Story Hour leaders as well in your prayer time. One group of leaders from Orland Park, Illinois, decided to provide child care during their leaders' meetings so that the Story Hour leaders could attend as well. They report a much greater unity among these two ministries as a result. And as each group of leaders prays for the needs of the adults or children they work with, they both have an increased appreciation of what each other does.

The Story Hour leaders at Kelloggville Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, meet regularly with the Coffee Break leaders. In their prayer time together they target specific children's needs. For example, in the fall one of their main prayer concerns is the crying and separation anxiety that occurs with many new children. "We have seen *many* answers to these prayers," says Diane Dykgraaf, a Story Hour leader. "Later in the spring we focus more prayers on discipline problems that come up. The prayer support has been wonderful."

You may want to vary the way that you pray from time to time; keep your prayer times fresh and creative. If you follow a guideline, such as ACTS mentioned above, you won't fall into the rut of coming to God only with your

requests and omitting the praise and thanksgiving that can refresh your souls and bring you into submission to God's Spirit.

The honesty and vulnerability of these prayers will depend in part on how much of your meeting you give to them. This kind of relating to God and to each other takes time. If your leaders feel rushed, they won't be able to share in prayer some of the deeper desires and needs that are in their hearts. It also helps to set an example for the rest of your leaders in being open about your own needs, fears, and the longings of your heart.

Be sure to look at the other side of personal prayer, too: identifying with the needs and emotions of those you are praying for. Encourage your leaders to imagine themselves in these people's situations. As much as possible in your prayers, "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." In this God's love will be shown most clearly among you.

In all of this, however, don't lose the evangelistic focus of your leaders' prayer time. It's easy to get off onto "safe" tangents in prayer that don't require you to keep reaching out to the unsaved in your community. When this happens, your leaders will come away from their prayer times discouraged, sensing that their prayer has not touched the heart of what Coffee Break is all about. Your prayers must include the names of specific people who need to come to the Lord. Keep a prospect list of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances (or even just street names and house numbers) to pray over faithfully each week.

Diane Dykgraaf of Kelloggsville says, "In our Story Hour there are many children who come with their babysitters. These children often come from unchurched homes, and we feel that we have a wonderful opportunity to reach their homes through the take-home material—and

through prayer. We pray specifically for each of the children whose parents are unchurched. Each of the leaders has a list of children in her class; we encourage them to use this list in their prayer times at home during the week as well.”

2. Set aside a place for groups of people to pray at the church during your Coffee Break hour. Joanna Martin from Abbotsford, British Columbia, reports that her Coffee Break program requested a separate prayer room in the church for group members who needed a private place to pray with a leader or another member. “One lady in my group was very troubled, trying to deal with an alcoholic husband. She ran out of one meeting, crying, and I followed her into the women’s bathroom. We prayed there together, asking for God to work in her husband’s life. God was very faithful to that ‘bathroom prayer,’ because her husband has not touched alcohol since we prayed about it. That’s all the more amazing, considering that her husband had thrown out her Bible when he heard that she was going to Coffee Break. It had taken a lot just for her to be able to come.

“But that incident pointed out the need for a prayer room during the Coffee Break meetings. Now we’ve set aside a room for group members and leaders to use for prayer before, during, and after the Bible study, along with the Coffee Break intercessors. Our mornings can be so hectic, the leaders appreciate a quiet place to pray and prepare themselves before the Bible study,” says Joanna.

Brookside Church in Kentwood, Michigan, has asked for six to eight volunteers from the congregation to come to church on the morning that Coffee Break is held. These intercessors pray in a separate room, during the Coffee Break and Story Hour sessions, for the specific needs of

these ministries, as well as for other outreach ministries of the church. A Coffee Break leader always makes sure that this group receives an update of the ministries' needs every week, bringing in new requests as they're shared in the sessions.

This prayer effort has had a measurable effect on Brookside's ministry, creating more cohesiveness between the church and the Coffee Break program. It has also created a steady growth in the program. In the first two years that these intercessors have been praying, God has brought more than fifty new people into the Coffee Break studies. The number of groups has grown from seven to ten, and they have been blessed to see an average of five or six commitments to Christ each year.

At Kelloggsville, Diane Dykgraaf reports, "We have at least one person at church who prays throughout the meeting time for the needs of Coffee Break and Story Hour. We make sure that we give her individual children's names and needs so that she can pray as specifically as possible. We also include praise items for children who have been doing better."

As you invite people to pray in this way for your Coffee Break program, remember to look for people in your congregation who have the gift of intercession. Don't be afraid to ask them outright. If your church already has a prayer room ministry, talk to the prayer room coordinator to see how you can tie in your specific prayer needs with the schedule and the volunteers who already come to pray for your church's ministries.

3. Ask individuals to pray on their own during the Coffee Break hour. This has some advantages over the previous suggestion, since you can invite shut-ins and those employed full-time outside the home to pray for

Coffee Break during the scheduled meeting time. It also requires no travel to and from the church, which may be especially helpful to churches in larger cities.

Ask your intercessors to set aside some time during the actual time of the Bible study to pray for the individual group members whose needs are on the prayer request sheets. Be sure to get specific requests (including people's names) to your volunteer intercessors within the week. Keep requests as personal and specific as possible. Be sure to ask the intercessors to pray in specific ways for the working of God's Spirit during the group meeting. God delights in answering specific prayers.

Occasionally (about every six weeks or so), call this group of volunteer intercessors together for a time of sharing, prayer, and encouragement or teaching in the area of prayer. You'll be surprised at the way this time of fellowship can strengthen the unity and sense of ministry in this diverse group of pray-ers.

4. Recruit a prayer partner for each leader. This can be a crucial means of support for your leaders, who may be confronted with overwhelming needs in their group. You may want to involve your leaders in choosing these prayer partners; some may already have friends who pray for them regularly. Others may appreciate getting to know a prayer partner with whom they're not well acquainted. Again, look for people who are committed to prayer, who are known to be faithful and disciplined in their interceding for others. Request volunteers through the church bulletin, or contact your church's "prayer warriors."

It is each leader's responsibility to keep her prayer partner informed. Urge your leaders to do this weekly (by phone or mail) and to keep their requests and items for thanks as personal and specific as possibility. If confiden-

tiality is a must, leaders can simply use initials or fictitious names to protect the group members they are requesting prayer for.

Prayer partners should also share their concern for the unsaved. Coffee Break leaders should send a list of prospects, if necessary, for their partners to pray over. Sharing this list and having to update their partners on what's happening will help keep the leaders' focus on evangelism. And, as the Dearborn and Abbotsford leaders found out, the Spirit works mightily through such prayers for the unsaved.

Be sure to publicly thank these prayer partners, perhaps with a yearly brunch. Their work deserves recognition. You will also want to invite them to attend a Coffee Break group once in a while as a guest. Encourage them to be up front with the group about being prayer partners; the group will respond very positively to knowing that they are being cared for in this way.

5. Ask people from the congregation to pray for Coffee Break concerns. These are volunteers who agree to pray regularly for the more general concerns of the Coffee Break ministry, rather than focusing on one leader's needs or praying during the actual meeting time.

You can ask people to sign up through an announcement in the church bulletin, but it helps also to have one of the leaders speak to the congregation, explaining Coffee Break's ministry and the great need for prayer. Another effective way to raise the congregation's awareness of this need is to have the pastor include requests from Coffee Break in the congregational prayer (without betraying confidences, of course).

Update volunteers with a regular weekly list of ministry needs, personal requests, unsaved friends and neighbors,

and answers to prayer. Be sure also to communicate at least monthly with the congregation via letter, especially regarding God's answers to prayer.

6. Invite all members of Coffee Break groups to a special time of prayer each month. A church in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, encourages its members to come an hour early on Tuesdays once a month for prayer. This is an especially meaningful time for members who are struggling with family problems or personal difficulties. Here they can receive the support of the larger group of members.

Make sure you have group leaders on hand who are able to pray with and for those members who are hurting. If there are a large number of women, make the prayer time more intimate by breaking up into smaller groups of four or five, each with a leader, if possible.

Again, keep the emphasis on prayer for unsaved neighbors, family members, and especially spouses. Many women who attend Coffee Break need understanding support and prayer for their husband's spiritual growth. For more encouragement in this area, read *What Happens When Women Pray* by Evelyn Christenson and Viola Blake (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1976).

Also, explain the format and structure for this prayer time to members beforehand so that they know what to expect when they come. As stated before, it's important to avoid the trap of spending most of your prayer time in sharing.

7. Form prayer cells—small groups of Coffee Break members—to pray for “beloved unbelievers.” This is a place where group members can share their pain and pray specifically for spouses and children who do not yet know

God's grace and love in Jesus. Basically, this functions as a support group for such women. It can meet weekly at a separate day and time, or monthly just prior to or following the regular meeting.

8. Make prayer a regular part of your grow groups and newcomer groups. This prayer time will vary, of course, with the spiritual maturity of your group. In newcomer groups, the leader should do the praying, since most members will not have prayed aloud in front of others before. This can be threatening for them. A relatively brief but specific prayer by the leader helps teach them how to pray.

In grow groups, leaders can help make members more comfortable by asking for only one-word or one-phrase prayers. Then, as members get used to hearing themselves praying and feel bolder to include longer prayers, they can take more leadership in the prayer time. Remember, a big part of this prayer time, both in newcomer and grow groups, is teaching members how to pray. Gentle encouragement and good modeling is the best teaching method.

The groups will also grow closer as supportive fellowships as members hear others praying for them with real concern and feeling. And they will become used to looking to God with anticipation of specific answers to specific prayers.

Again, steer your group away from allowing your prayer time to become mainly sharing. If you find that your time for prayer has become mostly talk about prayer needs, you may want to ask members to write down their prayer requests ahead of time and give them to the leader. The leader can incorporate these into her prayer or distribute them to group members for prayer.

What Makes for Effective Prayer?

Establishing a thorough prayer program will not necessarily result in lively and powerful prayer times. Other factors—intangible factors—play a key role in determining the quality and effectiveness of your Coffee Break prayer times.

Following are some key questions to ask yourselves as leaders—and to answer honestly. If you must answer “no” to one or more of these questions, ask God to show you how it might be blocking your prayers together and rely on God’s Spirit to show you how to best correct the situation.

1. Are leaders so reliant on Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit that they view prayer as an absolute necessity? One of our greatest weaknesses as Christians is to depend on our own strength and insight to accomplish the ministry we are called to do. We daily forget Christ’s words:

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ... If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ... If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:4–5, 7–8)

Paul also depended on the power of the Spirit, saying that he labored for the gospel, “struggling with all [God’s] energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:29). Paul linked God’s energy with the ministry of prayer: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is

at work within us ..." (Ephesians 3:20).

How much do we ask? How much do we imagine? All too often our requests and our imagination are limited by our human resources. Prayer is the believer's link to the power of the Spirit. Challenge yourselves as leaders to reach beyond your own limits in prayer, as Paul encourages you to do.

There is another question to consider here: Are you as leaders so in love with Christ that you feel impelled to talk to him daily? Do you long for those quiet times of prayer with him? This "falling in love with Christ" is a gradual, life-long process, so don't feel that you are a failure if you sometimes struggle to even want to pray. And don't put a guilt trip on leaders who find prayer difficult.

Instead, ask God to fill you with a hunger for prayer, a desire to spend time with Jesus, a sense of excitement and expectancy about prayer. If you see a failing in your prayer life, don't live with regrets and guilt, but look forward to growing. Strive for this ideal. Take comfort in the knowledge that Christ is holding onto you, drawing you closer to him. Make it your prayer as leaders that all of you may grow in your private and your group prayer disciplines, so that prayer becomes as vital to you as breathing.

2. When leaders pray together, is most of your time spent in prayer and only small amounts of time in sharing? Here again, look at the suggestions given previously to make your prayer times more efficient. Consider writing down requests beforehand, encouraging leaders to write out their praise and thanksgiving and to give thought during the week to the upcoming prayer time. Educate your leaders as to why you're doing this; help them to consciously work at spending as much time as possible in actual prayer.

3. Are leaders able to be vulnerable enough to make their real, heartfelt needs known? Is there a climate of confidentiality to encourage sharing? In order to model for their groups the honesty and vulnerability that prayer demands, your leaders must feel safe with each other, trusting each other to keep their struggles and weaknesses confidential. Talk about this as a group of leaders. Is this atmosphere present when you pray? If not, what could you do to create or nurture it?

When leaders are able to be themselves in prayer, they will be able to leave behind the image of a "perfect leader" and to dare to be vulnerable with each other. As a result, they will find their prayer times to be a place of healing. They will be able to receive ministry from others. Your prayer time will build community among your leaders.

This in turn will make them good leaders in Coffee Break: learning not to hide their weaknesses and fears from the women in their groups. Their groups can then learn that same honesty and trust with each other in prayer.

4. Do your prayers for the unchurched and unsaved come from a compassionate, deeply felt, loving concern for them? It's humbling to admit that our prayers for others often emerge from a sense of duty rather than compassion. Yet the gospels often note that Jesus "had compassion" on the crowds, on those who begged him for healing, on those who came to hear him teach. That compassion (which means, literally, to "feel with" someone else) was a mark of Jesus' ministry; we are called to mirror his compassion in our ministry as well.

Compassionate praying is hard work. It's easier to pray quickly, without emotion, in a "safe," distant kind of way

for the needs of the unchurched and unsaved. But in compassionate prayer we identify with the people we're praying for. We take their needs as our own. We feel the heaviness of their burdens as if they were our own. We also feel God's heart for them—God's love, his longing that they come to him, his desire to give them forgiveness in the name of his Son. Paul's letter to the Philippians gives us a glimpse of the compassion that filled his praying:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for you I always pray with joy. ... It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart. ... I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:3–4, 7–8)

In all of this, of course, our compassion is just a shadow of God's. But even our weak prayers are heard and translated: "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26).

Pray for the spirit of God's compassion to fill your prayers as well as your ministry.

5. Do the leaders and members of your congregation care enough about your ministry and the unsaved people you are trying to reach that they are given to pray for you? A number of Coffee Break leaders have expressed a desire to see their congregations in greater partnership in ministry with them. The prayer support you receive from your congregation is probably a good indication of their level of involvement in your ministry. Do you feel like you're not connecting with the people in your congregation? Then maybe you should look at the following questions:

- Have you communicated the needs of your ministry

and also your personal conviction concerning the power of prayer?

- How often do you pray for the needs of the congregation?
- How involved is your pastor in the Coffee Break ministry? How involved do you expect your pastor to be?

Much of the challenge may lie in communication—or lack of it. The more the congregation hears of your needs, of the people you are trying to reach, of the personal stories of faith and evangelism and struggle that you hear weekly, the more their hearts will be moved to become a part of your ministry. If you want prayer support (as well as other kinds of support) from your congregation, you must communicate effectively and often.

Praying for each other in God's family is not a one-sided affair. The congregation needs to know that you also pray for their concerns. How much do you as leaders care for their concerns? How much time do you spend in prayer personally for the needs of the congregation? Your Coffee Break ministry does not exist in a vacuum; you are all part of one body, the congregation of believers in which God has placed you. Your prayers for your congregation should reflect that.

Involve the leadership of your church as much as possible in Coffee Break. Consider inviting the pastor and the elders (especially those involved in evangelism) to visit your groups. Ask your pastor to lead some of your prayer times—both in the leaders' group and the regular Bible studies. The more contact your church leaders have with your ministry, the more fervent and faithful their prayers for you will be.

6. Are you and those who pray thoroughly con-

vinced that prayer is the basic and single most effective thing you can do to touch the lives of the unchurched? If there is only one thing you learn from reading this booklet, it should be this: Only God can change hearts, and prayer is the avenue by which God works. If you put this into practice, your Coffee Break ministry will become a powerful force in God's kingdom. If you don't, your ministry will run on human resources, not on the power of God.

Again, the best way to measure your faith in the power of prayer is to look at the amount of time you actually spend in prayer. All the fine-sounding words you can use to talk about the effectiveness of prayer are meaningless if you spend more time talking than praying.

And, if you believe that prayer is powerful and effective, you will also put feet on your prayers. You will follow up on them by being bold in evangelism, in caring, in speaking the Word of God.

7. Is there regular, constant prayer (many times each week) for specific unsaved persons on your prospect list? Listen to Paul's prayer requests for his ministry to the unsaved:

"Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message."

"Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly."

"Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. ... Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."

When you pray for specific people on your prospect list, doors will open. The message of the Lord will spread

rapidly. Your leaders will “fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.” Make this list of unsaved people the most dog-eared and thumb-worn part of your list of prayer concerns for Coffee Break.

8. Is your church providing regular educational opportunities for members and nonmembers to learn more about and develop skills in prayer? Beyond sermons, bulletin inserts, and occasional Sunday school class presentations, the members of your congregation need a place for solid teaching on prayer, a place in which to actually pray together, practicing the skills that they will be learning.

This “school of prayer” can take many different forms: weekend retreats, small prayer groups (or “cell groups”), a pastor’s class or new members’ class, a preaching series, a midweek course for adults, a youth group study on prayer (a good one is *Can I Call after Midnight?*, a six-session course offered by CRC Publications), or a video course. Church Development Resources offers an excellent seven-session course, either live or on video, entitled *Passion and Power in Prayer*. Evelyn Christenson’s *What Happens When Women Pray*, available from Word Educational Products, is another fine video course.

For more information on resources available for starting a school of prayer in your church, read *The Praying Church Sourcebook* (available from Church Development Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560).

9. In your leaders’ group, is prayer more than just asking? Do you spend time adoring God, thanking God, confessing your sins, and surrendering yourself to the Spirit of God? All of these elements are vital in prayer. If your prayers are lopsided in this regard, chances

are that your spirituality will be, too. Following the pattern of the Lord's Prayer or the ACTS model will help your prayers become fuller, richer, more life-changing. See the suggestions given earlier on how to integrate these elements into your prayer time.

10. Has your church identified members who have gifts of intercession and challenged them to beyond-normal ministries of intercession? Though all Christians are called to pray, God has given some believers the gift of intercession: the ministry of believing, disciplined, fervent prayer, along with a faith in God's promises and a heart for God's purposes. These may be hidden in your congregation—or waiting to hear God's call on their lives.

If such gifted intercessors have not yet been identified, encourage your pastor or council to offer a spiritual gifts testing for all the members of your congregation. From the results, you can put together a spiritual gifts inventory, including a list of those who are gifted in prayer. From that list, you can personally contact members who will faithfully pray for your ministry.

You might feel that this extra effort is not necessary. After all, won't people pray if you just communicate this request to the entire congregation? Perhaps, but it is more likely that if you simply put out a general request for prayer to the congregation, no one may respond, thinking that others are doing it.

Consider, for example, the case of the child who was drowning in turbulent waters. A man in the crowd along the shore grabbed a rope, tied it around his waist, and jumped into the water. As he did so, he threw the other end of the rope into the crowd, saying, "Someone grab onto this and pull me ashore when I've got the child in my arms!" The child and this man went to their deaths,

however, because everyone in the crowd assumed that someone else had picked up the rope. They didn't realize their mistake until it was too late.

Might the people in your congregation assume that everyone else is praying for you? Is your ministry floundering because no one has picked up the rope? Make sure that this doesn't happen to your group. Approach your congregation's gifted intercessors one by one and share your vision for the Coffee Break ministry and your need for prayer. Then, when you enter the turbulent waters of Satan's opposition to your ministry, you can count on firm hands holding onto you with the lifeline of prayer.



A final word of encouragement

Are you a Coffee Break leader? Then you have the ministry of bringing people to Christ and encouraging them to grow through the Word. None of this has ever been done by a single human's wisdom, strength, or energy. You are completely reliant on God's power for all the fruits that your work will bear—renewed lives, changed marriages, healed relationships, sins forgiven. Only God can do this work.

The Spirit is waiting for your prayers in order to touch the lives of people around you. Do not wait even one day. Begin now to pray for God's power in your work, for a firmer faith in the effectiveness in prayer, for greater discipline in your prayer life. As you put down this booklet, ask God to show you how to make prayer the top priority in your own life and in the ministry of your Coffee Break group. Listen for God's response, and then *put it into practice*. God will reward those first, shaky steps of obedience with ample evidence of his power and faithfulness. And you will know the truth of these words:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

(1 John 5:14–15)

The CORE VALUES SERIES reinforces the principles and practices necessary for Coffee Break leaders to experience the fruit of the Spirit and the joy of the harvest.



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