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Prayer and Church Growth

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The Wesleyan Church

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Prayer and Church Growth

Marlin Mull

Time magazine recently reviewed the 20th-century. They positively portrayed it as a century of freedom, electronics, global awareness and the opening of mass markets. Negatively, they noted it for genocidal atrocities committed by people like Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Amin.

For the 21st century, *Time* predicted instant available knowledge, voice recognition, artificial intelligence, personalized marketing and increased biotechnology. Some of these predictions already exist in beginning stages. Notice their highlighted summary of the next century.

We'll encode our dreams and vanities and hubris.
We'll clone ourselves. We'll custom design our kids.
The challenge will not be scientific, but moral.
(*Time* magazine – April 1999)

The foremost challenge of the next century, according to *Time*, will be moral responsibility. I concur. We will ask ourselves, "Am I worth cloning? Does the world want and need another me? Do I have the intellectual ability and moral convictions to properly custom design the next generation, whether they be children or grand-children?"

Add to the above questions current tensions in the world. The church deals daily with adverse political and legal decisions, wars and rumors of wars, family problems, abortion questions, movements and isms of various kinds, and a declining standard of morality in the culture.

Churches, clearly in contrast to current conflicting condi-

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tions, sing choruses with words like these:

Look what He is doing all across the land. See His Spirit moving.

Feel His mighty hand - breaking chains of darkness, setting the captive free.

Look what God is doing to those who believe.

Hallelujah! Look what God is doing.

There's going to be a revival in the land.

From the north, from the south, from the east, from the west

There's going to be a revival in the land.

Other choruses written on overhead screens, ring out triumphantly with words of praise *How Majestic is Your Name, Our God Reigns* and *What a Mighty God We Serve*. Melodies and words of hymns, like *Great is Thy Faithfulness* and *How Great Thou Art*, fill places of worship.

Realistically, however, the church and culture travel in opposite directions.

Can the church make a defining difference in this difficult world? What can possibly enable the church to be more effective in reaching a lost generation? Obviously, the church must include in its spiritual armory faith, hope, love, witnessing, teaching, preaching and a concentrated commitment to outreach.

However, the church needs prayer ministries as a foundation for growth and outreach. Without prayer, the church can possibly do many seemingly spiritual activities with excitement and excellence, but none with eternal effectiveness.

Is the premise true that a correlation exists between prayer and church renewal? Does a pastor's personal prayer life make an impact on his church's ministries? Do organized prayer ministries make a spiritual and numerical difference in a local church?

I believe the answer to these questions is "yes."

SURVEY

A survey taken in The Wesleyan Church reveals some positive connections between prayer and growth in worship attendance and congregational vitality. Before looking at the survey numbers, let me highlight some of the history, customs and beliefs of The Wesleyan Church, my denomination, consisting of approximately 1,700 churches in North America.

One main segment of the current denomination began as the Wesleyan Methodist Connection (later Church) in 1843 in New York. Its leaders and churches separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issues of slavery and the episcopal system of government.

The second segment originated mainly in California around 1900 with many former Methodist churches and other smaller holiness groups. Through several mergers, it became identified as the Pilgrim Holiness Church in the 1930s.

Wesleyan-Armenian in beliefs, the two former denominations merged in 1968 to become The Wesleyan Church.

Always, prayer was considered and practiced as essential to the continued spiritual health and numerical growth of the denomination.

In those early years, a representative church (reflections of my home church) would have Sunday school teachers meeting thirty minutes before class for prayer. Evangelism was expected to happen during class sessions. And it did!

Before the Sunday evening service, men and women would gather in separate prayer rooms at least thirty minutes before the service. They expected something to happen when they prayed. And it did.

A midweek service would consist of everyone giving a praise report about a prayer answer and a petition. The emphasis given to prayer centered more on spiritual than physical needs, though they were included. The church believed in divine healing and prayed for it to happen. And it did!

Friday evenings, the congregation would gather in different parts of the community (small groups today) and have what they called cottage prayer meetings, preferably in a non-church home. A lay person would lead. The service always included singing out of a paperback revivalist songbook, special music, fervent prayer and an exhortation from the leader to accept and follow Christ.

I relate to this heritage with appreciation. That church, averaging between 200 and 250 for 75 years, continues to send out every year from its membership, an average of two or three people into full time Christian service. At one time in the North Carolina West District, consisting of 96 churches, twenty-five of the pastors originally came from that one church. In retrospect, I attribute it to the church's prayer ministry. That emphasis on pray-

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er, whether true for every Wesleyan Church to that degree, remains a vital part of our denomination's past and present.

Currently, other prayer ministries include church planters having to recruit 120 *Upper Prayer Room* partners before beginning a new church plant. Periodically we send a prayer request list to approximately 1,300 retired ministers. Their participation has made a tremendous difference.

Our annual denominational emphasis since 1990 on "Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting" has a participation rate of approximately 75% (1,200-1300 churches out of 1,700). Every year we provide at no cost each church with a theme poster, preparation guide book, sermon suggestions, drama ideas, worship resources, daily prayer calendars and personal spiritual journals.

With that background, let me return to the survey taken in the denomination in an attempt to relate prayer (intangible) with numerical growth (tangible).

The Wesleyan Church in North America has experienced a gradual growth, though small, in morning worship attendance during the nineties. We did not grow in the eighties. That growth has been almost evenly provided by large churches (from 19 churches in 1990 to 39 churches in 1998 averaging over 500) and new church plants. Total morning worship attendance figures for all Wesleyan Churches in North America were: 1990-142,879; 1995-155,663; 1999-172,432. The two main areas of growth are new churches 55% and large churches 45%.

The prayer survey, taken in January 1999, compared morning worship figures of 1993 with 1998 (the latest statistics at the time of this report), a five year comparison, to separate growing and non-growing churches.

It went to 1,393 senior pastors with 634 (46%) responding. Growth churches in the survey were 713 or 51% of the total churches. Non-growth churches were 680 or 49% of the total churches. Using a five-year comparison meant statistics from new churches, started in 1993-98 of the comparison years, were not available. That explains the difference of less churches in the survey when the number was 1,649.

Currently (November 8,1999) The Wesleyan Church numbers 1,728 churches.

Characteristics of the Survey

1. The questions were identical to both growth and non-

- growth churches.
2. Growth churches received their questions on one color of paper.
 3. Non-growth churches received their questions on a different color of paper.
 4. It was purposely kept to one sheet to have better participation.
 5. To fill out the survey only required checking the answers provided.
 6. A postage paid reply envelope was enclosed with the survey.
 7. Percentages may not equal 100% because of some unanswered questions on the survey sheet.

Pastor's Personal Prayer Life

1. Are you a member of a prayer cell or small group?
Yes _____ No _____
2. Do you meet and pray regularly with an accountability partner?
Yes _____ No _____
3. Do you have people pray with you before the Sunday worship service(s)?
Yes _____ No _____
4. How much time do you spend in daily prayer?
Up to 30 minutes _____ More than 30 minutes _____

Church's Prayer Ministries

5. Do the men of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?
Yes _____ No _____
6. Do the women of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?

Yes _____ No _____

7. Does your church participate in the annual denominational program of "Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting" or a similar program like "50 Days of Spiritual Adventure?"

Yes _____ No _____

8. Does your church have other regularly scheduled prayer ministries or programs?

Yes _____ No _____

SURVEY 1993 to 1998
COMPARING GROWTH AND NON-GROWTH CHURCHES
634 (46%) of 1,393 churches responded: Growth 357 (56%) and
non-growth 277 (44%)

Pastor's Personal Prayer Life

1. Are you a member of a prayer cell or small group?

Growth-72% Non-Growth-56%

2. Do you meet and pray regularly with an accountability partner?

Growth-43% Non-Growth-34%

3. Do you have people pray with you before the Sunday worship service(s)?

Growth-66% Non-Growth-56%

4. How much time do you spend in daily prayer?

Up to 30 minutes: Growth 73%
Non-Growth 69%

More than 30 minutes: Growth-27%
Non-Growth-31%

Church's Prayer Ministries

5. Do the men of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?

Growth-47% Non-Growth-29%

6. Do the women of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?

Growth-46% Non-Growth-37%

7. Does your church participate in the annual denominational program of "Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting" or a similar program like "50 Days of Spiritual Adventure?"

Growth-71% Non-Growth-78%

8. Does your church have other regularly scheduled prayer ministries or programs?

Growth-85% Non-Growth-75%

*COMPOSITE COMPARED TO GROWTH AND NON-GROWTH
Pastor's Personal Prayer Life*

1. Are you a member of a prayer cell or small group?

Composite-65% Growth-72%
Non-Growth-56%

2. Do you meet and pray regularly with an accountability partner?

Composite-39% Growth-43%
Non-Growth-34%

3. Do you have people pray with you before the Sunday worship service(s)?

Composite-62% Growth-66%
Non-Growth-56%

4. How much time do you spend in daily prayer?

Up to 30 Minutes daily
Composite-69% Growth-73%
Non-Growth-69%

More than 30 minutes daily
Composite-28% Growth-27%
Non-Growth-31%

Church's Prayer Ministries

5. Do the men of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?

Composite-39%	Growth-47%
	Non-Growth-29%

6. Do the women of the church meet at regularly scheduled times or days for prayer?

Composite-41%	Growth-46%
	Non-Growth-37%

7. Does your church participate in the annual denominational program of "Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting" or a similar program like "50 Days of Spiritual Adventure?"

Composite-73%	Growth-71%
	Non-Growth-78%

8. Does your church have other regularly scheduled prayer ministries or programs?

Composite-80%	Growth-85%
	Non-Growth-75%

On the survey we asked an additional question. Of the 634 responding to the other questions we had 603 (44%) pastors answer this one. Of them, 337 (56%) were growth churches and 266 (44%) non-growth churches.

How long have you been pastor of this church?

	<u>0-5 yrs</u>	<u>5-10 yrs</u>	<u>11-15 yrs</u>	<u>16-20 yrs</u>	<u>20+yrs</u>
Composite	52%	31%	9%	3%	5%
Growth	44%	37%	12%	3%	4%
Non-Growth	62%	24%	5%	3%	6%

In conclusion, the results clearly lean in the direction of prayer being a positive force for growth. Churches that place prayer at the top of their priorities will certainly have a greater potential for growth in the 21st century.

Writer

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