

ABSTRACT

**BUILDING AN ALTAR PRAYER MINISTRY IN A LOCAL
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

by

Bob Moon

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip laypeople to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. The fruit of the project was ultimately to help people encounter the living God in Christ as trained intercessors came alongside them in prayer.

This evaluative study in the descriptive mode used a researcher-designed instrument for training fifteen participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, weekly feedback forms, and a congregational survey. The team identified growth in assurance and capability for intercessory prayer; the congregation affirmed the team's ministry.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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Internal Reader

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Date

Vice President of Educational Development

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Bob M. Moon

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DEDICATION

So much of what we assume is achievement is really a gift. Who can measure the blessings given to us from even before we can remember? So it is I dedicate this work to four missionaries who have changed my life by living Jesus before me.

1. My Dad, Bill Moon, who is buried in his beloved India. Perhaps my earliest memory is of bursting into Dad's office when I was only three. We were not to disturb him during his quiet time, but little boys forget. What I will never forget, though, is opening the door to find my Dad on his knees. It changed my life.
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FOREWORD

What began as a project ended up for me as a spiritual journey. Every step of the way, I became increasingly aware of my inadequacy. Furthermore, I felt under considerable spiritual attack. How deeply grateful I am to my 40+ faithful prayer soldiers who hold up the Pastor's Prayer Shield at Martha Bowman UMC. Only eternity will reveal the effectiveness of their prayers as well as the blows they took from the Enemy of our souls because they stood in the gap on my behalf.

Their intercession has been a living example of what it means to lift someone before the Lord. One reason I have learned so much about intercession is that I have been its beneficiary. Initially, I felt awkward about receiving prayer from so many people in the form of the Prayer Shield. Then I realized these dear ones were simply responding to God's call. Also, the truth is that no one knows better than I the depth of my need. I am truly blessed and grateful beyond words.

In preparing this study, my own spiritual journey has put within me a fresh hunger for more of God. More and more I desire a relationship that runs deep, one that seeks God himself and not merely his gifts.

The greatest joy and faith builder in my pilgrimage has been this recurring emphasis—intercession isn't about confidence in our words but about unshakable confidence in the sufficiency of Jesus.

“On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers” (2 Cor. 1:10-11, NIV).

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Seeing the Power

News about special stirrings of God's Spirit filled the air. In widely diverse settings geographically and theologically, people encountered the risen Christ in powerful ways that transformed their lives. Sometimes unusual manifestations accompanied these stirrings, but they were strictly secondary. Transcending geography and outward signs arose an unmistakable sense of God at work. No wonder people say, "When the Holy Spirit comes, prepare for disruption!"

In most of these situations, a common denominator became evident. In some fashion, people found their way to a place where they met God. In assorted settings, people left where they were to move to a place where they encountered God. While such movements inevitably spawn a certain number who fall away when the emotion wears off, still the unmistakable touch of God's hand clearly transformed many lives.

I had seen such transformation before. As a boy growing up in a missionary home in India, I witnessed people coming to the altar (even with no literal physical altar present) to meet Christ. What I will never forget, though, is coming to the altar one evening myself. An Indian evangelist, Augustine Solons, preached with passion from Revelation 2:4, repeatedly exclaiming, "You have lost your first love!" That night, God saved me at the altar of that church.

Years later I witnessed this transformation again in the United States. In a cold February in 1970, God's Spirit swept in with power as I have not witnessed before or since. Robert Coleman chronicled those days in a book entitled, One Divine Moment. I

did not need the book to tell me of God's revolutionary presence. I both saw and experienced the incredible power of God drawing people to himself. John Wesley would describe this as the movement of God accelerating prevenient, drawing grace and moving it to saving, transforming grace. God's penetrating, convicting mercy drew hundreds like a divine magnet. All knew they had to leave where they were and run to the heart of God. The altar flooded with those who sought God—and found him.

Seeing the Need

More recently, I met a friend who ministered at the altar in ways I had never seen. Rick Bonfim is a Brazilian-born, Conference-approved, United Methodist evangelist serving out of the North Georgia Conference. I watched as Rick invited people to the altar with unusual winsomeness. There he ministered with discernment, power, and authority. God rekindled in my heart a desire to see God do again what he had done before. God convicted me that having “nice” services are an abomination to him. For every church that withers by apostasy, far more perish through self-satisfied complacency. For every Judas who betrays Jesus, eleven disciples simply sleep when Jesus needs them most.

In a strange quirk, one can notice that many churches that give “altar calls” do not have actual altars. At the same time, many churches (such as United Methodists) have altars but rarely use them. I believe today's Church can and must reclaim together this means of meeting God that brings power for salvation and transformation in every circumstance. The Church's need is not a gimmick; the need is to meet God in Christ.

Biblical/Theological Foundations

Four intertwining biblical/theological issues undergird this project. Each has a

power of its own and stands alone, yet when brought together, a synergistic strength emerges that can empower the Church and transform the world. These themes are the power of intercessory prayer, the power of the altar, the power of lay ministry, and the power of the team.

Power of Intercessory Prayer—Theology of Sacred Encounter

Prayer has an indisputable, irreplaceable, and critical place in the life of the believer and the Church. Consider that only once did Jesus explicitly state the purpose of the temple—the place of worship and the house of God. He threw out the moneychangers and then authoritatively proclaimed, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Matt. 21:13, RSV). Consider also that no matter the demands of others or his own weariness of body, Jesus always took time aside to pray (Mark 1:35). Because of his intimate relationship with his Father, he could unabashedly but unpretentiously say, “I do nothing on my own, but I speak what the Father taught me” (John 8:28, NLT).

In the opening paragraph, Edward M. Bounds in his classic work, Power through Prayer, sounds the keynote of his book with these words: “The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men [and women]” (Complete Works 447). While prayer can be defined in an infinite variety of ways, Tom Albin, Director of the Upper Room Ministries, suggests prayer is best seen as relationship (14-22). Prayer is not about getting things from God. It is about getting God—and then people have all things. John Henry Jowett writes, “No, prayer is not always petition, sometimes it is just communion. It is the exquisite ministry of friendship” (54). One can hear Paul exclaim, “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10, RSV). Prayer is nothing less than intimacy with God (Eastman, Hour That Changes 36).

Intimacy with God gets to the very heart of the issue. In prayer, people draw near to God. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (Jas. 4:8, RSV). Nevertheless, James will not let the matter rest. In the following chapter, he counsels those who are sick to call elders to come and minister to them (Jas. 5:13-16). Prayer is not simply for one’s own benefit. God grants believers the gift of intercession for others. Paul practiced it (Eph. 1:17; 3:13, 16, 18) and asked for it (Eph. 6:18-20). Above all, Scripture notes that Jesus practiced it (John 17:9), demonstrated it (Luke 22:31-32), and counseled it (Mark 9:28-29).

The Church has always practiced intercessory prayer because it was supremely convinced that God listened and would act: “Call to me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know” (Jer. 33:3, NIV). In Acts, the Church is found consistently and persistently at prayer. Of course, the Holy Spirit came on believers praying together (Acts 2:42). Peter was set free from jail in response to the prayers of God’s faithful even though they seem astonished that God heard (Acts 12:1-19). Paul and Barnabas were commissioned with prayer (Acts 13:2).

Intercession simply means to take the place of another or to stand up on someone else’s behalf. Scripture reveals that God pleads for intercessors. Ezekiel movingly articulated God’s urgent appeal: “So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found no one” (Ezek. 22:30, NRSV). Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah to the point of embarrassment (Gen. 18:16-33). Moses interceded for the people of Israel by putting his own life on the line (Exod. 32:32). Paul’s intercession also ran so deeply that he was willing to be blotted out of God’s Book of Life if only his Jewish race would come to

faith in Christ (Rom. 9:3). Whether believers choose to embrace this truth or not, the destiny of others may well depend on their intercession. The greatest act of intercession that ever occurred was when Jesus died on the cross on behalf of a sinful humanity. There he offered up the ultimate prayer of intercession: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, RSV).

Intercessory prayer is far more than passionless delivery of a wish list to God. It incorporates the tenacious aspect of spiritual warfare, as well. Sometimes believers need to fight on behalf of those in need because they have an enemy of their souls (Eph. 6:12). Four friends fought through a crowd to bring a companion to Jesus (Mark 2:3). Paul confidently commanded a demon to come out of a woman (Acts 16:18), exercising what Richard Foster calls “authoritative prayer”:

In authoritative prayer we are calling forth the will of the Father upon the earth. Here we are not so much speaking *to* [original emphasis] God as speaking *for* [original emphasis] God. We are not asking God to do something; rather, we are using the authority of God to command something to be done. (229)

Of course, Paul speaks of such prayer when he counsels every believer, “Put on the whole armor of God.... Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:11, 18, RSV). Jowett challenges, “[I]t is in the field of prayer that life’s critical battles are lost or won.... In prayer we bring our spiritual enemies into the Presence of God and we fight them there” (56).

Power of the Altar—Theology of Sacred Place

In the Bible, the altar is ever a crucial place where people can always meet God in transformational power. The word “altar” appears in the Bible 380 times. One can hardly miss its centrality in Scripture. It is God’s gift; he provides it as a place where people can

come to meet him. Sinful people encounter a holy God at the altar. Apart from the altar, the holiness of God would consume people. Instead, at the altar God makes provision not merely for their survival but also for all to receive mercy, healing, restoration, and hope.

In the current use of the word “altar,” it refers either to an altar table typically used for candles, communion, or offering plates, or to an altar rail where people kneel to pray. Nevertheless, the essential understanding of the altar as a sacred place to encounter God remains constant. The encounter at the altar of sacrifice, the encounter at the altar of the Lord’s Table for communion, or the encounter in prayer at an altar rail all share the common ground of being places where God meets humanity and extends divine grace.

When Noah landed after the flood, his first act was to build an altar (Gen. 8:20). Abraham obeyed God in his baffling call to sacrifice Isaac. This act of remarkable obedience took place at an altar (Gen. 22:9). When Jacob realized he had encountered the living God, he built an altar at Bethel (Gen. 35:7). When Israel won a victory over the Amalekites, Moses built an altar (Exod. 17:15). Absolutely central to the Tabernacle was the altar, where God’s presence dwelt and the priests ministered (Exod. 30:20). Furthermore, one could seize the horns of the altar and there find a place of refuge (1 Kings 1:51).

In addition, God showed himself great in power by sending fire from heaven upon the altar Elijah built (1 Kings 18:20-40). When the exiles returned, they set up the altar so they could offer sacrifices (Ezra 3:2). Malachi reminded the people, however, that the altar was not magic. God desired not just sacrifice but a heart wholly seeking him (Mal. 1:10).

Jesus maintained an exalted view of the altar. He affirmed it as a place for those

with personal differences to find a way to reconcile and make peace (Matt. 5:23) At the end of time, John painted a picture in Revelation of incense being mingled with the prayers of the saints offered up on the golden altar before the throne of God (Rev. 8:3).

In early American Methodism, the church claimed the altar in its evangelistic ministry. Dr. Nathan Bangs, in his History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, reports a sweeping revival in 1806-07 through New York City. Some speculate that during this time the practice of inviting people to the altar was first introduced. Norman R. Oke comments, “There you have it: the evangelistic altar was born in the white-heat of a sweeping revival” (13). In Kentucky and Tennessee, the altar became known as the “mourner’s bench,” perhaps so named because of the intense weeping that often took place there or perhaps thus named because it was simply a rough plank that hardly deserved the term altar. Clearly, the altar did not exist as a thing of beauty but as a place for repentance and dealing straightforwardly with God (14). One can contrast the current view of the altar when one considers that more recent books like Hoyt Hickman’s United Methodist Altars deal with altar appointments and ornamentation surrounding the Christian year with no mention of it as a place of prayer. In that parlance, altar refers not to the kneeling rail but to what people today might identify as the communion table.

The Church squanders a means of great grace when it fails to embrace the altar. It has always been a place to meet God. For instance, when Abraham built the altar and prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the central feature was not that the angel stopped him but that God met him. God was waiting for Abraham at the altar. For Abraham to forsake the altar (despite all of its costs) would have been to forsake meeting the Lord. The altar became a geographic, tangible locale where Abraham encountered the omnipresent, intangible God.

The altar is a point of departure from sin, a point of contact with God, a place of revelation from God, a place of discovering truth, a place to die to self, a place to find refuge, a place of total surrender, a place of meeting the Advocate, and above all a place of worship (Johnson 9-10).

In the Old Testament, the altar was a place of sacrifice. The innocent died on behalf of a guilty humanity so that atonement was made. In the New Testament, the final sacrifice was made once for all in Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:12). When that happened, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the people was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). The perfect sacrifice now opens the altar to all. No longer must people find a mediator. The perfect Sacrifice now becomes the perfect Mediator of God's grace (Heb. 8:6; 12:24). Now access to the Father is available to all.

Power of Lay Ministry—Theology of Sacred Calling

"I remember serving a church," reports a friend, "where the chairs in the chancel area were ornate. But in the midst of it all was what could only be called the Throne. It belonged to the pastor" (Barnes). One might ask who sits on a throne. The obvious answer is the king. Consequently, if the pastor is the king, everyone else falls into the role of serfs and pawns.

The early Church knew nothing but lay ministry; everyone was a layperson. All of the disciples were laypersons. The early Church recognized the specialized ministry of the apostles but did not see them as in a class distinct from all believers. Rather, these laypeople received a special calling within the body of believers. Acts 8:1 notes that the believers scattered from Jerusalem in the face of mounting persecution. The exception was that the apostles remained behind. Something remarkable happened in the wake of

this dispersion. The gospel spread and new believers emerged. This advance by the gospel happened because all the believers recognized God had called them to be witnesses and because they embraced this ministry. Leaders, such as Peter and Paul, Priscilla and Aquila, have always been needed, but the whole populace of the Church accomplished the work of the Church.

The early Church saw itself not as an institution but as a movement. Many believed Christ's return was imminent. The urgency of the message and the brevity of time anticipated necessitated no structure. Nevertheless, as time passed by people realized Christ might not return until a date farther into the future. Consequently, the Church began to recognize the need for some order and structure. What began perhaps as some level of quality control evolved across time into a pattern of creating a clergy class to handle sacred things on behalf of the rest of the church. This pattern grew so rigid that what began as calling people *within* the body of the laity to lead the laity changed to calling people *out of* the laity to handle holy matters for the laity.

In 619, the Council of Seville actually asserted biblical ground for subordinating the laity by appealing to Deuteronomy 22:10, which states that an ox and a donkey should not plow together. One can imagine who was identified with the donkey (Garlow 56). Sadly, in only a short time, a bifurcation between clergy and laity appeared in the Church. While the biblical view sees the difference only in terms of function, the institutional church soon turned it into a difference in terms of power and position. By the Middle Ages, the clergy held a stranglehold on the Church. Laity were recipients of ministry, not participants in ministry. Salvation no longer came simply through Christ but through the Church. Since the clergy controlled the Church, they, indeed, held the keys to

the kingdom. This unbiblical pattern led not only to some terrible abuses among the clergy but, worst of all, to the marginalization of the laity. God's vast community of ministers was relegated to being spectators, to the enormous detriment of the Church and the kingdom of God. Into this milieu God birthed the Protestant Reformation.

During the Reformation, four vital truths resurfaced that had long been buried: (1) Scripture alone, (2) grace alone, (3) faith alone, and (4) the priesthood of all believers. The first three took root, but the last has still struggled. Regrettably, not long after the Reformation, the preacher replaced the priest as the preacher-expositor role overtook the priestly role. The Catholic seminary model was eventually adopted, guaranteeing enculturation of pastors into a clerical mind-set. Loren Mead well documents this tragedy in Five Challenges for the Once and Future Church.

One might expect that the laity would be outraged. Sadly, the laity have often been as ready to relinquish control as the clergy have been eager to seize it. In a dark collaboration, ministry has too often been both ceded by the laity to the clergy and simultaneously seized by the clergy from the laity. This system truncates ministry and keeps the church from fully being the body of Christ in the world.

A key biblical text concerning this subject is Ephesians 4:1-13. This passage needs priority attention because of the confusion attached to the "fatal comma." Verses 11-12 read, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints [*] for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (NRSV). At the point of the inserted asterisk [*], the King James Version and others inserted a comma. The comma indicates the pastor/teacher having the function of (1) equipping the saints, (2) doing the work of

ministry, and (3) building up the body of Christ. Conversely, removing the comma (obviously the original text had no punctuation) clearly delineates the function of the pastor/teacher specifically to equip *the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ*. Doing the work of ministry is not the exclusive property of the clergy. It becomes expressly the high calling of the laity. Gordon Cosby succinctly states, “I believe the primary task of the professional minister to be that of training nonprofessional ministers for their ministry” (qtd. in O’Connor 102-03).

Power of the Team—Theology of Sacred Partnership

Nature teaches that forces that work in concert accomplish far more than any part could do in isolation. Furthermore, the whole universe exists in connection and rhythm with every other part of the universe. For example, the solar system holds together only as every planet remains in dynamic tension with every other planet. Either the solar system holds together as one, or it disintegrates.

This truth transfers fully into the world of relationships. The sin of Adam and Eve was to think they could live outside of the proper relationship to God. They were wrong. Therefore, their lives—and, indeed, the world—disintegrated. In the true sense of the word, they and the world came apart. The persistent siren song of the world keeps luring people into isolation.

In contrast to such nonsense, the Bible teaches that the way to restore lives and save the world is found in restoring right relationships. Hope is found not in isolation but in association. The first connection must be between people and God. The second connection must be among people. These cardinal truths Jesus affirmed when asked which commandment was the greatest:

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31, NRSV)

Relationships provide critical settings for growth. Biblical examples abound regarding people who both worked in partnership with others and intentionally mentored others to continue their work. Such instances include Moses and Joshua, Aaron and Hur, Paul and Barnabas, and Priscilla and Aquila. Jesus modeled this truth by investing himself in a small group of disciples. While he spoke to the masses, he poured his life into his intimate circle of friends. This partnership becomes the model for the Church.

First Corinthians 12 indicates that God has given to every believer gifts for building up the body of Christ. Two pivotal truths stand out in this passage. First, *every person* is gifted, not just the clergy. Quite to the contrary, the far vaster numbers of laity hold the greatest store of gifts in the body. Second, the gifts are not given for the individual to hoard or display for personal gain, but they are given *for the good of the whole body* of believers. Paul humorously illustrates that no part of the body can dispense with any other part (1 Cor. 12:21-22). Every part depends on every other; every part needs every other; every part strengthens every other. The Church will only be the body God has called it to be when laity are raised up alongside clergy for ministry and embrace the calling God has given them. God’s plan is always for a partnership so integrated that the image is a single body.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip laypeople to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman

Church context. The fruit of the project was ultimately to help people encounter the living God in Christ as trained intercessors came alongside them in prayer. Yet the encounter alone can never suffice. The project's design was to initiate, accelerate, or mature an ongoing relationship with God. Because of the conviction that personal transformation occurs when people meet God in Jesus Christ, Christians believe prayer provides a primary arena within the ministry of the Church for such a meeting.

Furthermore, they believe that God has gifted his people through the Holy Spirit for helping others to a spiritual breakthrough. While, on the one hand, many agree with this assessment, many are, on the other hand, fearful of serving in such a capacity because they feel inadequate to the calling. The training was designed for the purpose of equipping people to come alongside those in need of prayer to pray with them confidently, competently, and comfortably.

Guiding Research Questions

In order to evaluate the efficacy of the altar prayer ministry, three guiding research questions directed the project.

Research Question # 1

What experience, confidence level, and knowledge about altar prayer ministry characterized the participants prior to the training?

Research Question # 2

What elements of the training contributed to changes in knowledge and confidence level of the altar prayer ministry team?

Research Question # 3

How did the participants in the altar prayer ministry team describe their awareness

of the presence of the living God during or after the altar prayer experience?

Definition of Terms

Altar finds its roots in biblical usage. In modern usage, it can signify either the table on which the Communion elements are placed or a kneeling rail at which people may come to pray. In this study, “altar” refers to the place where people come to pray; however, it is also used in a broader context to refer to any place where people can come into the presence of the Lord to offer prayer. While it will definitely include the altar rail, in this training it will not be confined simply to that physical location.

Prayer in this study context will refer primarily to *intercessory* prayer that one person offers on behalf of another. The sense of this prayer emerges from the intercession that Jesus does for all people. Scripture asserts, “Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25, RSV). In addition, Paul proclaims that the Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words ... because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26-27, RSV). Therefore, those who engage in intercessory prayer simply partner with the divine Intercessor in this heavenly ministry.

Ministry very specifically in this context refers to the work of the *whole* body of Christ, not just that done by the clergy. In fact, the specific goal of this project was to empower the laity for ministry. The clergy’s commitment here is to equip others for ministry, not hoard it. Ministry in this specific setting will involve laypeople praying for those who come asking for prayer. Those engaged in this ministry will serve in a dual context: (1) being conduits for God’s grace to flow to people and (2) being helpers to connect people to God.

Context of the Study

Martha Bowman Memorial UMC joyfully stands at the crossroads of Bass and Forsyth Roads in Macon, Georgia. Twenty-five years ago it stood at a crossroads for its very existence. As Macon grew toward it, this struggling country church, founded in 1901, had a decision to make. Either it would open its heart and its vision to bringing new people into its life or it could close its doors and a new church could be started. God positioned people with great dreams in that place at that time. With fresh vision, the church turned to embrace God's call. It became the fastest growing church in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church and today is one of the largest and most visionary churches in the area.

The current setting can be described in three ways: statistics, ministry, and worship styles.

Statistically, the church's membership grew from about two hundred to over 2,100 during the twenty-five years. Its attendance commensurately grew from under one hundred to over eight hundred (see Table 1.1). Sunday school attendance grew from around fifty to over five hundred (see Table 1.2). Building programs became routine. While the initial white country church building was retained, the church expanded it twice. When the latest major expansion occurred, the large new buildings preserved the classic design of the old church.

Table 1.1. Worship Attendance Averages at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC

1970	86
1975	103
1980	151
1985	284
1990	515
1995	608
2000	648
2003	807

Table 1.2. Sunday School Attendance Averages at Martha Bowman UMC

1970	86
1975	84
1980	104
1985	184
1990	382
1995	408
2000	389
2003	510

In terms of ministry, the church began to take a more active role in the community while multiplying lay ministries through the church. One of the key ministries added about four years ago was a dedicated and growing prayer ministry. That step bore particular importance for this study in light of the fact that this project and emerging altar prayer ministry would fit within the wider context of the whole prayer ministry. Notably,

Martha Bowman added a homegrown lay staff person with the title director of lay ministries. This action gave weight to the church's motto, "Spirit Led, Lay Driven." Martha Bowman earnestly strives to inculcate *every member in ministry* as a core value.

Variant worship styles, specifically adding contemporary worship to the current offering of traditional worship, have vitally impacted the church within the last five years. While having multiple services previously, all were traditional in style. The addition of a contemporary service brought together a small group initially. It has since grown to the point that about half of the congregation worships in the traditional settings while half worships in the contemporary service. This shift has created some notable tension in the church. Currently, these two groups have been able to affirm each other much more and understand themselves as co-laborers rather than competitors. Two traditional services (8:30 and 11:00 a.m.) bracket the contemporary service (9:30 a.m.).

Description of the Project

The origins of this project grew out of my conviction that Martha Bowman Church needed to take another step to obey Jesus' call to make the church a house of prayer. So many feel ill-equipped to pray. They want help as they come before God, yet many are like the paralyzed man in Mark 2. Unable to come to Jesus on his own, he needed the help of others. Many people paralyzed in spirit in the Church today need similar help. A trained and prepared altar prayer team could meet that need.

Prior to the inception of the project, a strong prayer ministry foundation was already in place. This included such prayer avenues as Sunday morning worship intercessors, prayer chain, e-mail prayer chain, youth group intercessors, prayer room, staff prayer warriors, pastors' prayer shield, and prayer garden. Building on this strong

foundation proved an invaluable asset.

The vision was that those who received prayer from the altar prayer ministry team would be helped to encounter God in Christ. A training course I researched and prepared served as the instrument to help participants in the project at Martha Bowman Memorial United Methodist Church (UMC) be better equipped for this ministry and more confident to engage it. The training covered key areas of prayer and ministry to provide both a framework for altar prayer ministry and practical tools for such ministry. The training lasted twelve weeks. The team met each Sunday afternoon for one-hour class sessions.

Methodology

This was an evaluative study in the descriptive mode that used a researcher-designed instrument for training. The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip laypeople to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. The fruit of the project was ultimately to help people encounter the living God in Christ as trained intercessors came alongside them in prayer. It primarily utilized the techniques of self-reporting and semi-structured interviews to assess transformation. No control group was used.

The teaching phase of the project included a threefold methodology—instruction, application, and feedback. In order to avoid a classic Western approach of didactic, unidirectional instruction, an interactive learning model was established to provide experiential opportunities to enhance learning. This experiential arm was seen as integral not simply to the classes themselves but to the entire instruction paradigm. Learning was never confined to what could be taught through lecture; rather, active, participatory learning through hands-on ministry provided both valuable experience and became the

seedbed of questions to spur the learning process. Most of the classes were designed to be one-third debriefing and feedback, one-third instruction, and one-third application and integration.

The text was the primary source of information for several reasons. First, the text provided a common ground for all the participants. Second, the text was deliberately formatted in a workbook style. This design helped break the material into manageable sections. It enabled people keep pace with the material. Most importantly, it allowed people to interact with the material. People who took the daily assignments seriously arrived in the class already engaged with the information and ready to interact with others.

For the training, I chose the class setting across time to allow the processing of information. No comparison was done for a weekend retreat setting in which more concentrated learning/experience would occur across a shorter time span. Neither was any curriculum other than what I created used for basis of comparison. I assumed a favorable response from the participants of the class since they had strong commitments to God, warm hearts for prayer, good relationships with me, earnest desires to be available to God for ministry, and firm commitments to Scripture as the foundation for the ministry.

The curriculum for the classes was designed to build the concepts sequentially so that participants grasped the ideas foundationally as well as practically (see Table 1.3).

Table 1.3. Subjects of the Altar Prayer Ministry Training Class

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vision for Altar Prayer Ministry—Catching a God’s-Eye View 2. Power of the Covenant Ministry Team—Theology of Sacred Partnership 3. Power of Intercessory Prayer—Theology of Sacred Encounter 4. Power of the Altar—Theology of Sacred Place 5. Power of Lay Ministry—Theology of Sacred Calling 6. Personal Prayer Life of the Intercessor—Learning to Know God in Prayer 7. Embracing the Ministry of Intercession—Learning to Partner with God in Prayer 8. Understanding Spiritual Warfare—Learning to Battle in Prayer 9. Developing the Church as a House of Prayer—Learning to Grow in Prayer 10. Discernment and Authority in Prayer—Learning to Listen in Prayer 11. Prayer and Healing—Learning the Language of Intercession 12. Joining in the Ministry of Jesus—Learning to Love in Prayer |
|--|

Since team—sacred partnership—was lifted up as one of the four core values in this project, I designed the classes to be highly interactive. The learning would occur not through mere presentation of information but primarily through experiential interaction with people. Discussion in the large group and in breakout smaller groups would bring a dynamic that would accelerate the whole learning curve. “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (Prov. 27:17, NRSV). Groups would interface when discussing material, when praying for one another, when debriefing experiences, and when sharing concerns. I began with the awareness that the team itself would bring a constellation of needs. The class would create sacred space in their own lives for God to

be at work. The hope was that the team would experience the power of God in their own circle before they even went to pray with others in a wider circle.

I also planned experiential opportunities for the team to pray for people in worship settings. A false logic insists that all conceptual input is required prior to engaging in ministry. Just as one learns to swim by swimming, the team would learn intercession by praying in a variety of settings. Application of what they had learned would affirm certain aspects and bring to light other areas where learning yet needed to occur. I also incorporated prayer opportunities into the class sessions where the class prayed both over concerns within the groups and over scenarios they might actually encounter. In most classes, they would spend time praying for one another. In a tangible effort to keep mutual prayer heightened, I gave each a bookmark for their manual. On the bookmark were printed the names of every person on the team. That tangible reminder kept the group praying for each other daily, moving forward not only as fellow learners but also as partners serving alongside one another.

The class incorporated four special events. First, in session # 1, I deliberately set aside time for team building so that people knew one another and became invested in one another for the journey ahead. Second, in session # 2, I served Communion to the group, using an interactive approach so the team served one another. This method also modeled my commitment to lay ministry. Third, in session # 7, I used a method of prayer inviting people to encounter Jesus in their sanctified imagination to deal with any personal issues of unforgiveness. Fourth, in the last session, I concluded with a ceremony of foot washing and laying on of hands with anointing for commissioning to the calling of altar prayer ministry.

Research information was gathered through two interviews—pretraining and post-training. In addition, weekly feedback forms returned ongoing information about both the individual and the learning taking place. These also served as prayer guides for me as I lifted these intercessors up in prayer. Since these were my primary tools, clearly this research was qualitative. The written and oral feedback helped me discern whether any changes were taking place in the team's confidence, competence, and comfortableness. When changes happened, this feedback helped me discern what those catalysts for change were. A final component of the feedback, which really had its focus on the fruit of the research, included getting written responses from the congregation on their experiences with the altar prayer ministry team and their opinions of the whole concept of altar prayer ministry.

Population of the Study

The study included two central populations. The primary population was the team trained to be altar prayer ministers. The study evaluated their awareness of growing in confidence, competence, and comfortableness in praying with others. The secondary population was the congregation itself. The congregation provided feedback on both its receptivity to the ministry and the perceived validity of the team's ministry.

The leadership of the prayer ministry handpicked the subjects of this study. The selection team included the prayer ministry coordinator, the director of lay ministries, the head of the Sunday prayer intercessors, the leader of the pastors' prayer shield, and the senior pastor. The participants in this study were selected with several criteria in mind. The selection team wanted to include (1) people with notable spiritual maturity, (2) those with a deep heart for prayer or those with a potential call for prayer ministry, (3) people

who were representative of the various worship services, (4) a sampling balanced in age and gender, (5) a group knowledgeable of the people who worship in their particular service, and (6) people more readily able to minister in their own worship context.

The selection team wanted the participants to make strong commitments to the Lord, to the ministry, and to the altar prayer ministry team. The participants received a covenant to sign at the end of the course if they confirmed a sense of God's call to this ministry (see Appendix G). The covenant focused on keeping faithful to personal spiritual disciplines before the Lord, serving within the context of the ministries of the wider church, and remaining accountable to the team for life and ministry.

I sent an initial group of twenty-five an invitation to participate and asked them to pray about their involvement. Recognizing that some would decline, the study was limited to those among the twenty-five participants who accepted my invitation to be a part of the altar prayer training class. I endeavored to balance them in numbers proportionate to their primary worship service setting. The goal was to have approximately three out of the 8:30 a.m. traditional service (112 average attendance), six out of the 9:30 a.m. contemporary service (343 average attendance), and six out of the 11:00 a.m. traditional service (352 average attendance). I followed up the letter with a personal contact by phone about a week later asking them about their response. Fifteen people accepted the invitation to participate.

Three key issues were important for them to understand. First, this undertaking was a dissertation project. Second, this venture meant far more than that in actual fact, because it really was a pilot for initiating a new arm of prayer ministry in the church. Third, a twelve-week training course comprised the heart of the project. Weekly, all

would turn in a one-page reflection on their experience/learning. They also understood that they would participate in two semi-structured interviews to help ascertain growth in their understanding and application of altar prayer ministry.

As for the congregation, a survey at the end of the training allowed the church to give feedback on the altar prayer team and the church's perceived value of the ministry itself. This kept the ministry evaluation from taking place in a vacuum where the team had no feedback beyond itself.

Variables

The independent variable in this project was the altar prayer training class offered across the twelve-week period. I prepared this class by researching and gathering materials that I molded into an appropriate curriculum.

The dependent variable was the transformation experienced by the altar prayer ministry team and the response from those with whom they prayed. Most of the subjects had little to no experience in altar ministry at all. The intervening variables that could have impacted the outcomes included spiritual maturity, prior experience, age, gender, service setting, and length of time at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC. The service setting, in particular, was worthy of noting because the altar is used far more commonly in the contemporary worship setting than in the traditional services.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Three primary instruments were used for collecting data in this project. First, all participants submitted a one-page weekly personal reflection during the course of the classes. Second, two semi-structured interviews added the partner component to the weekly feedback. The initial interviews were designed to assess the starting point for the

participants. The interviews helped note what knowledge and experience the participants brought into the process. The concluding interviews had two goals. First, self-assessed feedback helped ascertain whether the participants in the team gained in confidence, competence, and comfortableness. Second, the feedback also enabled me to discern what proved to be most helpful and least helpful in the training process. This critical feedback loop allowed for learning that could enhance future training. The questions allowed analysis of both theoretical learning and transformed praxis.

In addition to the feedback from the participants, with the third instrument I solicited written feedback from the congregation, asking them to assess the effectiveness of their encounters with the altar prayer ministry and asking for opinions on the value of the concept of altar prayer ministry as a whole. This data gave vital information so that the team was not left to wander through a maze of assumptions or guesses as to the value of their ministry.

One further element was incorporated as part of the training class. Every week I sent a letter to each participant including three elements: a note recapitulating central content from the last class, a word of encouragement, and a specific prayer I was praying on behalf of them all that week (see Appendix H). Furthermore, I made myself available for personal spiritual direction if that need arose during the process.

Delimitations and Generalizability

One can perhaps generalize similar outcomes to this study if it is replicated in a congregation of similar size, demographic makeup, spiritual vitality, worship styles, and prayer ministry grounding. One may possibly generalize less closely concerning smaller churches that approximate one particular worship service's size/style at Martha Bowman

Memorial UMC.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides a selected review of literature on the four key subjects pertinent to this dissertation. These are (1) intercessory prayer, (2) the altar, (3) lay ministry, and (4) team ministry. This study is strongly integrated with Scripture to give it both foundation and cohesion. Chapter 3 provides a more detailed description of the development and use of the instruments applied to assess the research. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 reflects upon these results and draws conclusions. In the end, some recommendations are made for others who may want to initiate a training program such as this one in their church setting.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Four foundational assumptions drove this project, each firmly rooted in Scripture. First, prayer connects people intimately with God. Intercessory prayer has transformational power as it helps provide the connection to allow God's grace to flow toward the person in need.

Second, the altar is a crucial place where people can meet God in powerful ways that transform lives. The altar (rightly used) has always been a place of intimate communion with God in the Scripture. When people meet God at the altar, their most profound needs are met. This truth is accurate in the deepest sense because people's greatest need is God himself, not merely some *thing* he bestows.

Third, the ministry of intercession can be exercised with as much power and authority by the laity as by clergy. In fact, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers necessitates the gift of shared ministry among all God's people. Regrettably, that ministry has too often been either ceded by the laity to the clergy or seized by the clergy from the laity. The Church will engage the world and transform it more fully as ministry is reclaimed as the calling of the whole Church.

Fourth, integrated team ministry has a more dynamic impact than individual ministry. Harnessing the synergy of a team serving God together encourages and strengthens any ministry; therefore, the team of intercessors can help each other both in the learning and practice of altar prayer ministry. Team learning is one of the key tenets in the training process.

Knitting together the four central assumptions above, this study considers one primary idea: What people need more than anything is a vital, growing relationship with God. This relationship can begin, grow, or mature through a dynamic encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ. The altar is one biblical and primary place where people can meet God. Equipped intercessors, serving as a team and empowered by the Holy Spirit, can effectively help connect the seeker and God. This divine-human encounter can lead people to life transformation.

Power of Intercessory Prayer—Theology of Sacred Encounter

Prayer is one of the greatest privileges available to every person. That privilege can be extended by praying for others, helping to lead them into the presence of God.

An old saying asserts one finds no atheists in foxholes. Something instinctively cries out to God in times of crisis. Every people in every age in every place have prayed in some way. Intuitively, people know a spiritual world exists beyond this visible world. Prayer is the soul's hand reaching out to grasp that reality. Through the ages, people have wanted to know how they are to pray and whether their prayers make a difference. Furthermore, people want to know if they can pray effectively for others in a way that makes a difference. Believers cannot find a better source that speaks to these issues than the Bible.

Key Biblical Texts

Sin's nature clamors for people to live isolated, self-reliant lives. Prayer teaches that life need not be lived in isolation but in communion with God and people. Prayer becomes an avenue for reconciliation with God and connection to others.

Moses. "But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the

book that you have written” (Exod. 32:32, NRSV).

If rebellion appropriately described the people of Israel, intercession described Moses. Repeatedly, the biblical account shows the people turning from God followed by Moses pleading to God on their behalf. In this passage, Moses had just returned from Mt. Sinai only to discover the people had made a golden calf, turning from God and turning to idolatry. God’s anger burned white hot. Even as judgment fell, Moses begged for mercy. He went to make atonement. He did not want God to start over with him to make a great nation; rather, he pled for God’s mercy upon his people for God’s own glory. In one of the most passionate intercessions ever recorded, Moses identified with the people, asking God to blot him out if that was what God did to the Israelites. That kind of plea is intercession with identification. In the true spirit of intercession, he was “numbered with the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12, KJV). Rees Howells comments on this issue:

Never before in a crisis, such as at the Red Sea, had Moses offered himself as a mediator, but now he stood between the wrath of God and the people. He had the offer to take the place of Abraham to be the founder of a new nation, but he refused. All personal ambition had gone long before. He was responsible for these people, and the man who has accepted a commission from God has authority over him. (qtd. in Ruscoe 107)

Rees Howells continues this theme:

Without the intercession of Moses, God would not have gone with the people any further, but as the intercessor, Moses brought God again into their midst. He had been a leader before: now he was an intercessor. (qtd. in Ruscoe 109)

Daniel. One of the most striking instances of intercession comes from Daniel’s prayer of passionate and sacrificial crying out to God:

[I]n the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and

supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession. (Dan. 9:2-4, NRSV)

Daniel had laid his life down for God at the lions' den. Now he lived only for the glory of God. He prayed for the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy with fasting and supplication. Self had gone; he identified himself with the people as he prayed, interceding for forgiveness. Especially clear is that the ground of his appeal was nothing less than a cry for the glory of God and the honor of his name among the nations. Daniel found the clearest foundation for intercession—the character, purpose, and glory of God.

Daniel based his appeal for the deliverance of his people not on the nation's merit but on God's mercy. Daniel confessed that his people had sinned against God and rejected him. While their character crumbled, Daniel cried out for God to deal with his people on the basis of God's perfect character. He asked for Israel's restoration so that the wicked would see God's glory in God's mercy and so God's own character would be vindicated. Israel and all the nations would see and know the righteousness, faithfulness and grace of God. God keeps his covenant.

Paul. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3, NRSV).

Paul likewise interceded with self-sacrifice as he wept over the apostasy of his own people, Israel. Only one man before him had prayed quite like that—Moses (Exod. 32:32). Indeed, Paul laid aside all for Christ, counting all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, the Lord (Phil. 3:7-8). Visibly throughout Scripture, true intercession is costly, indeed. The deepest intercession comes not from one looking on from without but from one who identifies from within (Jackson 79).

One might have expected Paul to pray for the Israelites as though he were set aside from them by his faith. He did not. Instead, he identified with his people. He cried out before God for mercy on his people, putting himself squarely in their midst. He had not forgotten his own blindness to the truth nor had he forgotten the astonishing mercy of God in saving him. Thus Paul stands before God on behalf of his people, willing even to be cut off from God if only his people might be saved (Rom. 9:3). This love makes people willing to lay down their lives for their friends (John 15:13).

Jesus. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35, NRSV).

Jesus had finished a very busy—and successful—day of ministry. The stage seemed to be set for pursuing more of the same strategy. How astonished the disciples were to discover that Jesus had other plans altogether. What they did not understand until later was that his decisions were birthed in the womb of prayer. Only Jesus could ever say, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19, NRSV). He could no sooner forsake praying than he could forsake breathing. As his disciples spent time with him, they understood clearly that not merely what Jesus did but also who he was grew out of the time he spent in prayer. No wonder Scripture records but one request from the disciples—“Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1, NRSV). In the human penchant for quick “how-tos,” people easily miss the disciples’ request. They did not ask him to teach them *how* to pray but to teach them *to* pray (Murray, With Christ 10-13).

James Thompson comments on Jesus’ lifestyle of prayer:

When Jesus Christ lived on earth He did really pray. That is a fairly obvious thing to say, but it does require to be said because the chances are

that we do not take sufficiently seriously the fact that Christ *did* [original emphasis] pray when he was on earth.... He taught us how to pray not in word only but also in act. Christ showed us how to pray by praying. It was when He was “praying in a certain place” that one of the Twelve said, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). It was not His teaching on prayer that evoked the request. The request leaped to the lips when one day the disciples, with hushed and awed hearts, actually watched the Son of God at prayer. Looking at Jesus Christ praying they suddenly realized what prayer was. If that was prayer they had not yet started to pray. (34)

John 17:1-26. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one” (v. 20, NRSV).

No greater prayer of intercession (outside of Calvary) ever ascended to the throne of God than Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. Jesus appealed to his Father on behalf of his disciples through all the ages. After Jesus prayed for himself (vv. 1-5), he interceded for his disciples (vv. 6-19) and the whole Church (vv. 20-26). He asked the Father for their security, sanctity, and unity. Jesus unmistakably revealed in this prayer his passion for the Father, the Church, and the world. Jesus interceded—and intercedes—so fervently because people live in a world that is deceived, dangerous, defiled, and divided (Wiersbe 17, 19-20).

Jesus’ passion for the Father is visible in Jesus’ desire to bring him glory. Jesus’ desire is that people might know the Father and the Son whom he has sent (vv. 1-5). Jesus’ passion for the Church manifests itself in his high priestly prayer as he asks the Father to keep his disciples through the ages. In an unholy and hostile world, Jesus asks the Father to sanctify and save the Church by his word (vv. 9-19). Jesus’ passion for the world reveals his heart. The unity he asks the Father to foster in the Church ultimately is so that the world may believe (v. 21). This same heart beats with the certainty that “God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him

should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, KJV).

Luke 23:34. “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’” (NRSV).

Here is the sweetest, costliest intercession of all. This intercession comes not of words but of life. The Incarnation itself was pure intercession. The life and ministry of Jesus was intercession. Now the climactic surrender of his life for the sins of the world became the supreme act of intercession. “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:5, NRSV).

Jesus did not run from the cross. He came into the world precisely to bear it to Calvary. “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (John 12:27-28, NRSV). Nor did Jesus revile his murderers. Instead, he interceded for them with the words, “Father, forgive them.” Then he committed himself into the hands of God as he completed his life of intercession by dying on the cross.

This passage reveals with the clarity of God’s own light that intercession demands personal, costly mediation. The intercession is so deep that Jesus actually bears the sins of the world so that the world may be set free from its penalty. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5, RSV). In this intercession, God does not keep distant from sinners. Instead, Scripture says of the Messiah, “He was numbered with the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12, RSV) and took their punishment. Such intercession grew out of Jesus’ passionate love for his Father and for his prodigal world.

Hebrews 7:25. “Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (NRSV).

If any exclamatory note could arise to compare with Christ’s intercession at Calvary, it would be his continuing intercession for the Church before his Father. What peerless power and joy belongs to those who realize that Christ’s intercession for people continues still, but now it is offered in the presence of his Father. Hope should grip people when they realize their Judge is also their Advocate. “Even now Jesus continues to help any people who are tempted by strengthening them and pleading for them (Heb. 2:8; 7:25 *entugchano*)” (Spencer and Besancon 115).

Dutch Sheets gives a different perspective:

Christ’s intercession, in keeping with its literal meaning (“to go or pass between; to act between parties with a view to reconcile those who differ”—Webster), was not a *prayer* [original emphasis] that He prayed but a *work* [original emphasis] of mediation that he did.... He is now functioning as our representative, guaranteeing that we have access to the Father and to our benefits of redemption.... So what is He doing as He makes intercession for us? He is mediating or going between, not to clear us of charges against us as He did to redeem us from sin, but to present us to the Father as righteous and one of His own. (Intercessory Prayer: The Lightning 42-43)

Paul describes the divine transaction succinctly: “For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and people. He is the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5, NLT). Precisely this intercession opens free and gracious access to the Father. Jesus has made the perfect way because he has been the perfect sacrifice. The perfect High Priest has himself been the perfect Lamb to bring people back to God (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:10, 19-22; 1 Pet. 3:18).

Review of Selected Literature on Prayer Related to the Altar

The literature on prayer can only be described as vast. Amazon.com lists over

69,750 book titles on the subject (“Prayer”). The selected literature has been chosen because of its primary focus on intercession. The key areas explored in the following pages parallel the key areas taught in the class on Altar Prayer. In no way does this purport to be exhaustive or exclusive. In this context, altar prayer and intercessory prayer are used interchangeably in most respects. Altar prayer has the added dimension of personal, on-site, immediate intercession in most cases, whether this takes place at a site known as an altar or not.

Four Foundational Biblical/Theological Assumptions—Learning God’s Call to Prayer

Four essential components weave the fabric of this project—a holy calling, a holy place, a holy people, and a holy partnership.

Connecting intimately with God through intercession. Intercessory prayer has transformational power as it helps provide the connection to allow God’s grace to flow toward the person in need.

William Evans describes the current crisis:

It would be easier to conceive of a city without electricity, transportation, telephone service, water and police protection, than it would to conceive of the Church without prayer. Yet the unhappy truth is that many churches have “supper rooms” for eating and drinking, but no “upper rooms” for prayer and waiting on God (qtd. in Eastman, Change the World 27/13).

Only once did Jesus say his house was to be a place for a particular thing. He proclaimed it must be a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17; Matt. 21:13; Luke 19:46). He did not make this proclamation quietly with sweet words. He spoke with passionate zeal and holy fury. He made sure his word echoed with overturned tables and scattered animals. His message rang out as clearly as the clatter of coins crashing onto the

floor. He drove his point home emphatically with a homemade whip as the exclamation point. Here was no meek and mild Jesus. Here was Jesus full of fire for the purpose of his Father's house. If it were not a house of prayer, it was nothing at all.

Jesus' anger at the money changers was because they had usurped the purpose of the Temple. The problem was not simply that they cheated people and exchanged spiritual realities for cold cash. The critical problem was that their activities usurped the central activity of the Temple—prayer. Prayer connected people to God. Money changers kept them from God. No wonder Jesus was outraged.

The question is whether he would be any less outraged with the Church today. Christians have made their churches houses of preaching, singing, eating, dancing, projects, and even aerobics, but they have relegated prayer to leftovers of time and shuffled the responsibility to some people they vaguely think of as super spiritual. That prayer should occupy the central place in the time and priority of every believer is dismissed as hopelessly unrealistic even if it were taken seriously. That for which Jesus fought, Christians so quickly surrender. R. A. Torrey sounds an unwavering warning:

The devil is perfectly willing that the Church should multiply its organization and its deftly-contrived machinery for the conquest of the world of Christ, if it will only give up praying.... Satan laughs softly, as he looks at the Church today, and says under his breath: "You can have your Sunday schools, your YMCAs ... your grand choirs, and your fine organs, and your brilliant preachers ... as long as you do not bring into them the power of Almighty God, sought and obtained by earnest, persistent, believing, mighty prayer." (qtd. in Eastman, Change the World 12/59)

The truth is that no change occurs unless the leaders and people get dissatisfied with the status quo. The time may be present once more for Jesus to come and cleanse his Temple. Rather than money changers, Jesus would likely throw out church projects, the

church's busy activity, and people's study about him substituting for time with him. Jesus might find in the modern Church as much resistance as he encountered then.

Ray Fulenwider offers a blueprint for change. It begins with fundamental dissatisfaction with the status quo. From there it moves to action, vision, and communication. The final ingredient is prayer. Using a simple acrostic, he says change comes with these ingredients:

Cause for unhappiness

Hard work

A new vision

New plans with a good chance for success

Good communication

Everyone prays (165).

Rather than consider prayer as the last item in the list, it must be considered the foundational item undergirding the entire process. Fulenwider asserts that is the only way the Church can embrace God's plan. God releases power to every member when the church becomes prayer driven. Prayer must always be primary, never secondary.

Meeting God in power at the altar. From earliest history, people met God at the altar. The word "altar" appears in the Bible 380 times. One can hardly miss its centrality in Scripture. It is God's gift; he provides it as a place where people can come to meet him. Sinful people and a holy God meet at the altar. Apart from the altar, the holiness of God would consume them. At the altar, God makes provision not merely for their survival but also for them to receive mercy, healing, restoration, and hope.

When Noah landed after the flood, his first act was to build an altar (Gen. 8:20).

Abraham obeyed God in his call to sacrifice Isaac. That sacrifice of obedience and faith would take place on the altar (Gen. 22:9). When Jacob realized he had encountered the living God, he built an altar at Bethel (Gen. 35:7). When Israel won a victory over the Amalekites, Moses built an altar (Exod. 17:15). Central to the Tabernacle was the altar where the priests ministered (Exod. 30:20). The altar was also a place of refuge (1 Kings 1:51).

When Elijah prayed, God demonstrated his power in defeating his enemies (1 Kings 18:30-40). When the exiles returned, they built an altar to reconnect to the God who had brought them back to their land (Ezra 3:2). Nevertheless, Malachi reminded the people that the altar was not a place for heartless transaction but for wholehearted seeking after God (Mal. 1:10). John envisioned the end times including incense being mingled with the prayers of the saints offered up on the golden altar before the throne of God (Rev. 8:3).

In the Old Testament, the altar was a place of sacrifice. The innocent died on behalf of a guilty humanity so that atonement was made. In the New Testament, the final sacrifice was made once for all. The perfect Sacrifice now opened the altar to all people. No longer must they find a mediator. The perfect Sacrifice ever lives as the perfect Mediator of God's grace. Now access to the Father is available to all.

Recognizing lay authority in the ministry of intercession. Lay authority in the ministry of intercession is discussed in more detail later. In First Corinthians 12:1-31, Paul shows that both laity and clergy possess this power of intercession through the Spirit's distribution of spiritual gifts:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is

the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (vv. 4-7, RSV)

Here Paul uses the powerful image of the Church as a body. Once again, he paints his picture on the canvas of unity and integrity (holding together) within the Church. Nowhere in this passage does he exalt one gift over another. On the contrary, his position is exactly that all the gifts are needed for the body to function properly. Those whom people might consider weaker, in fact, are given the greater honor. The point is that believers need each other desperately. Furthermore, God has designed this need on purpose, not by divine error or oversight. His intent is that believers function not alone but in concert and unity with one another. That they are made dependent on one another is God's gift to them.

In particular, note that God's gifts are freely distributed to *everyone* within the body of believers. Gifts are not restricted to clergy; consequently, when the Church fails to embrace the ministry of the laity, it actually spurns the gifts of God. Surely such action could never be pleasing to God. In fact, Paul's plea in this chapter is for connection and cooperation among the whole. By divine inspiration, sandwiched between two chapters on the gifts (1 Cor. 12 and 14), Paul spends an entire chapter on love (1 Cor. 13). With godly insight, Paul sees that despite the proliferation of gifts, lack of love is the very thing that brings division and fragmentation in the body. To exalt one's own gifts above another's is to repudiate the body and the One who is its head, Jesus Christ.

Long overdue is the time to restore a biblical understanding of the gifts of the Spirit and the calling/gifting of the laity. At least five keys must be grasped in this context: (1) The Holy spirit gives the multiplicity of gifts *to the whole body*; (2) Laity, no less than clergy, are recipients of the gifts; (3) These gifts are to be used to implement

God's work in the world; (4) The gifts are not to be used in isolation but in cooperation; and, (5) The gifts are not for self-gratification but *for the common good*.

Rick Warren has provided a helpful model for discovering one's giftedness. Believers discover their S.H.A.P.E. by asking, "What are my Spiritual gifts, my Heart, my Abilities, my Passion, and my Experiences?" (369-75). Often, asking people what their passion is (i.e., "What would you love to do if you knew you couldn't fail?") unlocks a door to how God has created them. Those gifts equip people for the specific ministries to which God has called them (99). Now the Church's task is to deploy these gifted people, lest it be found guilty of burying its God-given talent (Matt. 25:18, 25-30).

The Church must recognize anew that the laity is called to ministry in every sector of life. A partial truth recognizes the giftedness of the laity but assumes that if they really get sincere, they will become clergy and get out of "profane" life. The fuller truth not only recognizes their giftedness but also further acknowledges that giftedness is the very thing that God uses to deploy them into "profane" life. This truth abolishes forever the mistaken notion that believers' lives somehow can be bifurcated between sacred and secular. God does not call laity *from* the world but *into* the world. Indeed, daily work is the locus of the Christian vocation; thus, only a false premise assumes that a really consecrated layperson ought to become clergy (Hertz 11).

Six sectors of service can be identified: personal, family, congregational, community, occupational, and civic/personal (Feucht 75). The five beyond the church are not to be eschewed but to be embraced. A biblical understanding sees more than just ministry *while* laity are at work. It sees ministry *in* the very work itself. Every person should have the dignity of recognizing the work they do ministers to the needs of those

around them. “Don’t just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you’ll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance” (Peterson, Col. 3:23). Gus Gustafson has captured the concept in his book entitled I Was Called ... to Be a Layman!

Three views can prevail in this matter of laity in life. First, the laity leave the church, make a raid into the enemy territory of the world, then retreat to the sanctuary of the church. Second, life exists in sectors with the religious dimension as one sector. Laity simply move into the appropriate sector at the appropriate time. Each has little to do with the other, and the faith sector hardly informs the others at all. Third, the church is at the heart of the world with the world at its heart. Each sector of life is intimately interrelated, and the church enters every sector to flavor it as salt seasons food (Weber 11-12).

Jesus always gave ministry away. Notice the significance of the fact that he gave it to his disciples, and all of them were laymen. His goal was not to do it all but to train his disciples for their ministry. When Jesus fed the five thousand, as recorded in all four Gospels, he commissioned the disciples to organize the people, distribute the food, and gather the leftovers. When he wanted to reach many villages, he sent out the seventy, two by two. He knew that changing the world would require every believer at work so he trained and equipped his disciples that way. Unfortunately, the Church sidelined that model before too long, opting for professional clergy. In so doing, the Church circumvented the plan of God and hamstrung the mission of the kingdom of God. The church’s great need is simply to return to the pattern Jesus taught and modeled.

Unleashing the power of a team of equipped intercessors. In a culture persistently exalting the individual, God’s kingdom brings to light the power of the

whole. The biblical culture always maintained clearly that God chose a people, not select individuals. Israelites stood under God's blessing not because of their individual righteousness but because they were part of the nation God had chosen. Their heritage birthed their identity.

The New Testament picks up this theme in Paul's wonderful image of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). Nowhere can a single part exalt itself above another nor separate itself from another. Mutual interdependence clarifies at least six facts. First, no individual can succeed apart from another. Second, no individual can survive apart from all the others. Third, the fortunes of the whole depend on the integral cooperation of all the parts. Fourth, ultimately the entire body thrives together or it will die. Fifth, God has designed his people to be interdependent. Interdependence is a blessing, not a curse. Sixth, the very purpose of the individual gifts is to benefit the whole body. The future and success of every individual in the kingdom of God is bound up with every other person. In sum, believers need each other. To exalt oneself or demean another only destroys oneself and the other by destroying the body.

Biblical models abound where sacred partnerships developed between learners and mentors. Wise leaders recognize they are part of a far larger drama than the brief moment they have on stage. Thus, these leaders will equip new leaders so the whole drama of God's grace will only keep building to its final climax even after they are gone. Among many examples in the Old Testament, Moses trained up Joshua, Eli mentored Samuel, and Elijah passed his mantel to Elisha. In the New Testament, Barnabas trained Paul, and Paul, in turn, mentored Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and a host of others.

Of course, Jesus provides the finest model for ministry in all of history. He

deliberately gathered disciples around him. In God's plan and wisdom, the salvation of the world would be secured at the cross, but the spread of that Good News would require the investment of every believer. Note these key truths from Jesus' strategy. First, he did not choose superstars but teachable people. Second, he let them spend time with him. Third, he let them watch him. Fourth, he let them help him. Fifth, he sent them out two-by-two with instructions. Sixth, he debriefed them when they returned by listening. Seventh, he taught them more as their experiences grew them. Eighth, he sent them again to keep learning (see Coleman, Master Plan). This model should guide every Christian leader.

John Wesley engaged this powerful biblical dynamic of discipleship, teamwork, and growth through small groups. This plan not only gave impetus but also lasting vitality to the Methodist movement. Incidentally, to the extent the Methodists ignore the wisdom of Wesley's method, that movement will lose the power it once had.

Personal Prayer Life of the Intercessor—Learning to Know God in Prayer

While the focus of this paper is the public altar, the work of altar ministry begins with the private altar. Until people know God, God cannot effectively use them. They cannot give what they do not have. Furthermore, this personal, intimate relationship with God must be nurtured to remain strong and vibrant.

At the outset, people may rightly ask why they should even pray. Two profound reasons can be set forth, one personal and the other providential. On a personal level, people pray precisely because they desire for God to gush forth a river of living water into their lives, the Church, or the world, usually into an area of particular need. When that flows, they do not want to be found standing far off on dry ground. They want to

jump into the river of God. On a providential level, in prayer they encounter the mystery of God's self-limiting interaction with the world. How astonishing that the omnipotent God has so bound himself that in some things he cannot work until his people cry out to him. Consider this parallel dynamic that is at work. People realize that children cannot grasp certain truths until they are capable of understanding them. The truth is that not until people ask are they prepared to receive what God wants to give; therefore, God has chosen not to barge into people's lives but to wait for their intercession.

Watchman Nee offers several key insights on watching and praying: First, prayer is a service to God and must be placed in a preeminent position. Second, Satan will turn people from prayer at all cost so they must guard time for prayer. Third, believers must seek to remain alert during prayer so they keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, the beginning and end of their faith. Fourth, prayer must be focused so that they do not offer scattered, vacuous prayers. Focused prayer will answer the question Jesus asked in Mark 10:51: "What do you want me to do for you?" (NRSV). Fifth, believers must confess sin then stand strong against Satan's accusations. They must truly receive the forgiveness and mercy of Christ. Maxie Dunnam writes, "The confession of our sins is a key to effective intercession. In intercession we seek to be channels through which our love and concern and God's love and power can flow into the lives of others" (126). The channel is kept clear through confession. Sixth, believers need to keep prayer from being vague. "Put on the whole armor of God," counsels Paul, "Pray at all times with all prayer and supplication" (Eph. 6:10-20, RSV). Seventh and finally, believers should watch after prayer to see how God is at work, either answering the prayers through changes in circumstances or changes he is making in them (Nee 111-28).

Nee warns believers against distracted, powerless prayer:

During prayer, we must in addition guard against all that is not real prayer. We should know that Satan will not only prevent us from having time and power to pray, he will also cause us to waste the prayer time by our uttering many scattered, unrelated, unimportant, empty words as well as numerous vain requests. Our prayer time is so fully occupied with these things that our prayer is equal to zero. (119)

Nothing in the world is easier—or harder—than prayer. On the one hand, any child can pray because children know they are utterly dependent. Children are not guarding egos or trying to impress anyone. Children simply come in love and with simple, clear requests. When believers come as children, prayer is easy. On the other hand, the deeper believers go in prayer, the more they recognize how utterly difficult it is. It is difficult for them because they have forgotten how to be childlike. They want to assert their self-sufficiency and guard their egos. Prayer calls them to lay these down. Prayer is a call to die to self. Prayer is a journey to the cross. Prayer is where believers admit they cannot and only God can. Maxie Dunnam clarifies this surrender:

Prayer is a death-process. It is dying to our lower self and coming alive to God. We put self-will, self-control, and self-centeredness to death that Christ may work and reign.... In prayer we cease leaning on the staff of self-will and put all our confidence in God. (98-99)

D. L. Moody picks up this theme:

In view of the difficulty of bringing our hearts to this complete submission to the Divine will, we may well adopt Fenelon's prayer: "O God, take my heart, for I cannot give it; and when Thou hast it, keep it, for I cannot keep it for Thee; and save me in spite of myself." (105)

Before believers can ever be with people in the presence of God, they must be alone with God (Murray, With Christ 23). Nothing can take the place of the prayer closet. Nothing can take the place of time in the presence of God to know him intimately. Out of this love relationship alone can flow the depth of ministry that is true intercession. "Apart

from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NRSV).

Embracing the Ministry of Intercession—Learning to Partner with God in Prayer

David Seamands says that in counseling, counselors are only temporary assistants to the Holy Spirit. This could be equally said of prayer at the altar. What people need is to meet God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Intercessors do not heal people or help them on their own. Instead, they become temporary assistants to the Holy Spirit. The ministry of Jesus saves, helps, and restores. In other words, intercessors do not carry out the ministry as though it were their own. They simply become partners with Jesus in extending *his* ministry (S. Seamands).

John Wesley once commented, “God does nothing save in answer to prayer” (Oxford Edition 11: 437). This theme appears repeatedly in Scripture. Rain stopped and rain started when Elijah prayed (Jas. 5:17-18). Hannah became pregnant after she prayed (1 Sam. 1:9-18). Demons fled when disciples had prayed (Mark 9:29; Acts 16:18). Ezekiel sounded a critical appeal that God is seeking desperately for intercessors: “And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one” (Ezek. 22:30, NRSV). The Church should grieve that thousands of years after Ezekiel, God yet finds so few to intercede. More sadly, he still finds so few intercessors thousands of years after the world-changing ministry of Jesus Christ. God passionately seeks intercessors to partner with him in his ministry.

Two marvelous images can guide intercessors here. S. D. Gordon compares the prayers of the intercessor to a switchboard. The power is not in the switchboard but in the supply. The switchboard, however, with a small toggle can span a connection that makes

the power accessible to those who need it. The intercessor is the one at the switchboard (16-18). Andrew Murray offers the picture of intercessors as a pipeline. They do not themselves give the Living Water the seeker needs. They do, however, provide the channel for the Living Water to flow to the thirsty soul. As pipelines, they are conduits enabling the stream to reach those in need (With Christ 223).

The fact is that God chooses to work through, not independent of, people:

The only logical answer to the question of why Elijah needed to pray is simply that *God has chosen to work through people* [emphasis mine]. Even when it is the Lord himself initiating something, earnestly desiring to do it, He still needs us to ask. (Sheets, Intercessory Prayer 30)

Andrew Murray concurs: “God’s giving is inseparably connected with our asking.... Only by intercession can that power be brought down from heaven that will enable the Church to conquer the world” (Ministry of Intercessory 22, 23).

Doris Ruscoe gleans seven key principles of intercession from Rees Howells.

1. Absolutely central is the principle that all intercession is based on the victory of Jesus Christ won at the cross and confirmed at the empty tomb. Intercessors do not attempt to do a work; they simply appropriate victory from Christ’s finished work (Ruscoe 50).

2. A constant warfare rages in the heavenly realms. Intercessors engage the forces of darkness in prayer, not in their strength but in the Lord’s. This is why they put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-13; Ruscoe 51)

3. Nothing is automatic in this conflict. Intercessors must in prayer engage the forces of darkness if a victory is to be won in such circumstances. The intercessor identifies with those in need and engages the battle on their behalf (Ruscoe 51).

4. At times intercessors may find themselves engaged in very real combat with

the forces of darkness. At this time, the intercessor must cry out for God's Holy Spirit and put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:12; Ruscoe 52).

5. The intercessor recognizes the responsibility given that cannot be dismissed once God has called. Intercession may be undertaken at great cost, but the intercession must be carried out to the end. God is counting on it; those in need desperately count on it (Ruscoe 53).

6. Intercession can apply in the daily work God gives to his servants. Taking up their work in an attitude of prayer and on behalf of God, that work can itself be an intercession impacting all those touched by it (Ruscoe 53).

7. Intercession is not only the path of the cross in cost for the intercessor; it is also the way of fellowship with Christ. The true intercessor knows the passion, hope, and joy of Paul, who exclaimed from prison, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11, NRSV; Ruscoe 54).

The timid in spirit might question where intercessors find boldness to plead with God with such confidence. Intercessors know their confidence lies not in their own power nor in their own righteousness. Still less is it in their wisdom. It is in the appropriated victory of Jesus Christ:

There is a godly confidence that we rightly claim when we go to pray for others. Not the arrogance of one who sets himself up as Chief Adviser to the Most High, but the confidence of one who knows he does not go alone into the courts of heaven, but enters with the covering authority of the Son and the interpretive wisdom of the Spirit. (Pritchard 7-8)

Believers come in intercession not simply *to* Christ but *with* Christ. Intercessors know that they do not come to persuade an unwilling God but to meet a God more eager to pour

out blessings than they are to ask (Murray, With Christ 27-29).

Understanding Spiritual Warfare—Learning to Battle in Prayer

One cannot read the Bible with integrity without coming to a clear knowledge of the fact that people are engaged in spiritual warfare. Even as people live their lives in the earthly dimension, a battle is engaged in the heavenly dimension. Jesus established a clear connection between what happens in the earthly and heavenly realms (Matt.18:18-19). Believers have been given authority on earth to engage the forces of darkness with weapons of light and gain the victory. Therefore, Paul sounds this warning in Eph. 6:11-13:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (KJV)

Dutch Sheets humorously asserts that many believers abbreviate the passage to simply say, “We wrestle not” (Sheets, Intercessory Prayer 138).

People need look no farther than the ministry of the Lord Jesus to find this truth confirmed: “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, NRSV). While James 4:7-8 counsels believers, “Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you (RSV),” many read it as though it says, “*Ignore* the Devil, and he will flee from you.”

One important corrective needs to be asserted in this matter. Some get so consumed with the demonic that they are prone to see the devil behind every bush. Some prayers get so focused on casting out the devil that Jesus gets little mention. James 4:8 picks up this corrective by giving the counterbalance to resisting the devil—“Draw near

to God and he will draw near to you” (RSV). People might wonder how they can draw near to God. Verses 8-11 unveil the answer: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (NRSV). Intercessors understand that repentance, turning from sin, and humbling themselves before God are primary.

These verses from James teach intercessors that warfare prayer engages the heavenly in two directions. Downward prayer is directed at Satan and taking authority over him. “What is praying downward? It is standing upon the heavenly position Christ has given us. It is using authority to resist all the works of Satan by commanding that whatever God has commanded must be done” (Nee 94). Conversely, upward prayer is directed toward God, taking his promise as good as money in the bank and applying it to the need at hand. When people say, “Amen,” it does not so much mean “let it be so” as “*thus shall it be* [emphasis mine]” (95).

In warfare prayer, believers must learn to use their position in Christ. They never actually battle and defeat the devil. He *is already* defeated. God gave Adam authority over the earth. Adam gave up that authority to Satan when he sinned. God sent a perfect Man to win back that authority. Jesus did so at the cross and empty tomb. Intercessors now have the responsibility to apply the victory already won to the battle with the devil. He is defeated but has not yet surrendered. In fact, his goal is to wrest back control of the world from Christ. Since he cannot do that (though he is trying), his next tactic is to attack believers and the Church to strike at the heart of God. The Church must learn to stand by faith in God’s power and claim the victory already won, applying it in each case,

asserting the incredible power of the cross (Sheets, Intercessory Prayer 150, 153). Only when believers sigh and give up in the battle do they cede back to Satan territory over which he has no legal right. Intercessors have the blood-bought right to evict Satan and his minions from the hearts of the faithful. The contract that Satan had, signed by Adam in his sin, no longer is valid. The debt has been paid in full. Another contract signed by Jesus with his blood supercedes and nullifies the former contract. The children of Adam have a right to be restored as sons and daughters. Satan's rights have been revoked, and he has no right to be present there. Intercessors should not allow Satan to trespass where God has forbidden him access (56-58).

Another key biblical passage on spiritual warfare cries out from 2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ. (NRSV)

Believers must ever guard against the illusion that the weapons are something granted them apart from the presence of God. Quite to the contrary, warfare prayer arises out of the intimacy of a loving relationship with God (Eastman, Jericho Hour 180). Intimacy with God will not spare people from the battle; it will take them into the battle precisely because that is where Jesus is. In fact, intimacy would seem to subject the believer to greater danger. Believers need neither deny the heat of the battle nor that it may be fought at great cost. Nevertheless, believers should not be blind to the deep truth that those nearest to Jesus in the battle are the least subject to defeat (Winger 243). The believers' authority over the powers of darkness in intercessory prayer is born of their

placing themselves under the authority of God (Dan. 6:22).

Developing the Church as a House of Prayer—Learning to Grow in Prayer

One day Jimmy Buskirk passed by a group of ladies who prayed constantly. “Ladies, if you’d put some legs on your prayers, you wouldn’t have to pray so much,” he said. They responded, “If you spent more time in prayer, you wouldn’t run your legs off so much!” (Teykl 58). One can almost hear Mary and Martha’s voices in that conversation. The Martha voice exclaims, “Do more.” The Mary voice responds, “Pray more.” In the face of these competing voices, people might wonder which of these two should be in the Church. Very simply, the answer is that the Church needs both Mary and Martha. At the same time, the Church needs them in that order. First comes the call to pray and then the call to do. In a Church so prone to ask God to bless what people do, God is looking for a Church that will first pray and then do what God blesses (Blackaby and King 24)

If believers are looking for a reason to make the Church a house of prayer, none greater can be found than Jesus’ proclamation: “My house shall be called a house of prayer!” (Matt. 21:13, RSV) Prayer is that incredible medium in which people meet the living God in intimate communion. Anything that hinders that communion with God hinders the most fundamental relationship in the universe. It must be ruthlessly rooted out. Driving out hindrances is precisely why Jesus made a whip and drove out the money changers. Preaching is good; singing is wonderful; food is fine; teaching is essential. Nevertheless, under all these, like the foundation beneath the church building, is prayer. If it is missing, all that remains is a house built on sand (Matt. 7:26).

An important distinction must be understood at this point. One might identify

three types of churches. First, churches exist that think prayer is good, but it has no priority in the church. What prayer is lifted up takes place individually or by chance. Second, churches exist that step prayer up a level and give it a position as one of the key ministries of the church. It has equal standing with other ministries of the church. Third, churches exist that see prayer as foundational to *every* ministry of the church. They could no more see proceeding in any area apart from prayer than they could imagine flying in a plane without wings. Therefore, altar prayer ministry (intercessory prayer) will find its greatest effectiveness when set properly within the context of a wider prayer ministry in the Church. “Praying together is a key element for building up the community and testing the spirits. The quality of communal prayer becomes an indicator of the group’s ability to grow as the body of Christ” (Doohan and Doohan 118).

Believers must never miss this central point—what people need more than anything is a vital, growing relationship with God. This relationship can begin, grow, or mature through a dynamic encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ. The altar is one biblical and primary site where that can take place. Equipped intercessors serving as a team and empowered by the Holy Spirit can effectively help connect the seeker and God. This divine-human encounter can lead people to life transformation.

Prayer is partnership with God. Intercessory prayer is joining hands with Christ in his great ministry of intercession. Jack Hayford writes, “Prayer is essentially a partnership of the redeemed child of God working hand in hand with God toward the realization of His redemptive purposes on earth” (92). In intercession, believers bring people to Jesus and allow him to do the healing ministry needed. Their models here are the four friends in Mark 4 who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus. Their act of bringing

him to Jesus, then persevering by tearing through the roof, was itself an intercession.

These friends had one overriding motivation behind their drive to bring the man to Jesus.

Believing that Jesus could heal the paralyzed man, these four friends' faith released healing into their friend, as intercession always does.

Intercessory prayer accomplishes things in two directions. The intercessor in both cases is a go-between. First, as intercessors pray for others, they serve as go-betweens to reconcile people to God, mediating grace, mercy, and love. Second, as intercessors pray, they interpose between the person in need and Satan as go-betweens to separate them from the enemy of their souls (Sheets, Intercessory Prayer 40). D. L. Moody tells of meeting a woman at the altar when he had given a call for salvation. "Are you not already saved?" She assured him she was; yet she replied, "I have a son who has gone far away; I thought I would take his place today and see if God would not bless him" (84). That is intercessory prayer.

The Church fulfills another function in two directions. The Church must raise up watchers on the ramparts. Isaiah 62:6 says, "On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest for yourselves" (RSV). Dutch Sheets comments on this passage:

From the walls of the cities, they watched for two things: messengers and enemies. Their purpose in watching for messengers was to inform the gatekeepers when to open the gates and when to keep them closed.... Seasoned watchmen are often alerted by the Holy Spirit, before ever having any concrete evidence, that certain messengers are not to be trusted. (Watchman 32-33)

Watchers must look for the enemies. Scripture gives explicit warning to watchers who fail to watch carefully and sound the warning in the day of danger (Ezek. 33:1-6). The most serious judgment falls on watchers who fail to watch. They have forsaken a sacred

trust and others pay the price. In addition, watchers must also look for messengers of good news and open the gates to them. Neither responsibility can be shirked.

Three great truths stand unshakably for the Church as a house of prayer. First, God works through the Church. It is the channel through which Living Water flows (Matt. 18:18-19). “How big is the pipe, and how clear is it?” are questions the Church must never stop asking. Second, God wants harmony and unity in the Church, or his work is hampered (John 17:11, 22). The indispensable ways of maintaining unity are through speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and through forgiving one another (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:21-35). Third, when God’s people gather, the Lord is there. In fact, he is the One who has *called* them together (Nee 16-35).

Discernment and Authority in Prayer—Learning to Listen in Prayer

Discernment is both a gift of God and a gift of relationship. While some may have the gift of discernment, all may learn to be more discerning. This happens naturally as people learn to be more observant. It happens spiritually as people draw more intimately close to God so they may more clearly hear his voice. In this relationship, they can ask for guidance and receive it. Believers are specifically told to ask, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (Jas. 1:5, NRSV). In fact, failing to ask can be the very root of ignorance. “You do not have, because you do not ask” (Jas. 4:2, NRSV). Since many have grown up in a church where they were taught not to expect God to speak to them (other than by Scripture, for example), they neglect asking.

Dallas Willard offers what he calls guidelines for hearing God (30-40). I prefer to think of them as a framework in which to hear God, not a series of trite “how-tos” that

people are so prone to seek for an easy quick fix.

1. People can learn to live in a love relationship with God. Prayer is more than hearing from God; it is being in an intimate relationship with him. That is why people recognize his voice (John 10:4; Willard 30).

2. People can learn to recognize that God does, indeed, speak to and work through ordinary humans. The heroes of the Bible were ordinary people (Acts 4:13; 14:11-15). They simply allowed the extraordinary power of God to flow through them (Willard 32).

(3) People can learn to understand that Bible experiences were much like they would have experienced had they been there; otherwise, they will relegate the biblical accounts to dusty shelves of unreality they could never experience. God really connected with ordinary people then; he still does (Willard 34).

4. People can learn to be available. God is not remote; he is near. He wants to interact with this world. He wants to use people—if they will allow him. Unless people believe this they will never hear him, because his voice may speak all day but it will fall on deaf ears. “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35, KJV; Willard 36).

5. People can learn to be meek before God so their desire truly is for his will to be done. Jesus’ prayer, “[N]evertheless, not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV), was no prayer of resignation or defeat. It was pure affirmation that the best that could be was God’s will. “*Meekness is a real preference for God’s will* [emphasis mine]” (Pierson 185; Willard 37).

6. People can learn to embrace humility before God:

This brings us to the *third* [original emphasis] preliminary truth that we must keep constantly before us in our search for a word from God: When

God speaks to us, *it does not prove that we are righteous or even right* [original emphasis]. It does not even prove that we have correctly understood what he said. The infallibility of the messenger and the message does not guarantee the infallibility of our reception. Humility is always in order. (Willard 39)

Willard further suggests the helpful approach of lining up what are called “the three lights.” First, intercessors should note the quality of the voice speaking to them. God’s will has the ring of authority even if people are tempted to argue with it. Second, intercessors should note the spirit of the voice. If it is of God, it will have the timbre of peace, joy, goodness, and Jesus. Third, intercessors should note the content of the message. God’s voice will always be consistent with his revelation in the Bible (174-78).

In terms of understanding the need of the one for whom the intercessor is praying, Rick Bonfim suggests being aware of four possible “roots” out of which the person’s need grows—rejection, rebellion, bitterness, and unforgiveness:

Often these roots govern our responses to God and to others as satan uses them to manipulate, intimidate, and dominate us. Rejection and rebellion are horizontal relationships in that they primarily affect our relationship with others. Unforgiveness and bitterness are vertical relationships that directly affect our relationship with God.

A root is the primary area where prayer should begin. When praying, attack the root of the problem. Be specific enough so that the prayer can proceed toward other areas of the soul. It is the area where the Holy Spirit will focus, giving more information to formulate the prayer. (Bonfim Freeland, and Tillman19)

Typically, these will manifest themselves as binding in the area of will, mind, or emotions.

Rick Bonfim’s method follows seven steps.

1. One starts by asking God for discernment—asking the Holy Spirit for *in-sight*. “[T]hey look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7, NRSV; Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 54)

2. Then one seeks confirmation from God's Holy Spirit—waiting on the Lord:

When praying at the altar one can ask questions of the individual, but the best information is that which comes from the Holy Spirit. Many times an individual comes to the altar in desperate need but they are unable to realize or verbalize that need. The storm of stress and anxiety creates much noise and confusion, which interferes with their ability to see the condition of their soul. (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 54-55)

3. One then looks for revelation of root work—trying not to get lost in the symptoms but moving to the roots of rejection, rebellion, bitterness, or unforgiveness (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 54).

4. Next one invests prayer in soul service—asking the Holy Spirit if the person is bound in will, mind, or emotions (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 55).

5. The person now learns to understand command and authority—speaking words that imply a command under the authority of Jesus Christ. Bonfim suggests intercessors actually stand as they pray to take authority over the need in Jesus' name (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 55).

6. The intercessor next recognizes the power of contact and transmission—laying on hands to facilitate the flow of the Holy Spirit for healing and cleansing. This must always be done appropriately, especially when touching a person of the opposite gender (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 56).

7. When finished praying, the person checks around—in tune with the Holy Spirit, seeing where he may lead next (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 56).

Authority comes not from the believers' words or actions. The intercessors' authority comes from the fact that they stand under the authority of Christ. His authority flows through them. "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20, NRSV). This is the authority of the ambassador whose words

bear the authority of the king:

When Ephesians 2:6 says He “raised us up with Him,” Christ is saying, “It’s not only My victory, it’s yours.”

He is also saying, “What I have done, you must enforce. I have put them under my feet legally—under My authority—but you must exercise that authority in individual situations, causing the literal fulfillment of it.” (Sheets, Intercessory Prayer 71)

Timid intercessors must grasp this divine truth—intercession is not about power but about authority. When they take hold of the authority, power automatically is released. The Church must recognize that it has authority to act on Christ’s behalf in the world. The altar intercessor has authority to act on Christ’s behalf in that situation. Watchman Nee likens this delegated authority to a man giving his friend the seal to stamp his bank check. The point is that the man trusts his friend to be faithful in its use (72). D. L. Moody likens this authority to a check that becomes valuable the instant the signature is put to it (88). Such is the reason believers pray “in Jesus’ name.”

Moody adds a homey story that illustrates the power of the name. A certain man’s son, Charlie, went to war. One day a wounded soldier just back from the field came to the man. The soldier handed the father a note written by the man’s son. It read, “This is my dearest friend. He has been wounded and has no one to care for him. Would you please help him?” He signed it, “For Charlie’s sake.” Here lies the secret; here lies the power. The father could hardly do enough for him. He poured out his favor in response to the request from his beloved son, Charlie. Surely our heavenly Father could be no less willing to help when we ask “for Christ’s sake” (115-16).

One note is in order. Believers do not always get what they ask. The old saints help with the simple word that God can answer yes, no, or wait. What believers do know is God always works for their best (Rom 8:28). They often cannot see it at the moment;

that is why they trust. “Thy will be done” (Matt. 6:10, RSV) is not resignation but the highest affirmation of trust. If believers have lived any time at all, they understand that they would have been in deep trouble if God—or even their parents—had given them all they asked (Hanegraaff 47). Gordon Fee elaborates on this theme:

Our asking is based on our limited knowledge, and all too often it is colored by our self-interest. We can only praise God that he does not answer every prayer “prayed in faith.” Hezekiah, after all, had his prayer answered and was granted fifteen more years, but it was during those years that Manasseh was born! (22)

Every true child of God in the end would far rather pray, “Thy will be done,” than “my will be done” (Moody 103-04).

With that caution having been spoken, however, believers may indeed take up the staff of Moses and the authority God grants his children. They have authority toward people (Acts 3:2, 6; 4:12), toward the devil (Acts 16:18; Luke 10:17), and toward God (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24).

If the answer is different than requested or delayed in its coming, Oswald Chambers grants wise counsel:

Men ought always to pray, and not lose heart. Jesus also taught the disciples the prayer of patience. If you are right with God and God delays the answer to your prayer, don’t misjudge Him. Don’t think of Him as an unkind friend, or an unnatural father, or an unjust judge, but keep at it. Your prayer will certainly be answered, for “everyone who asks receives.” Pray and do not cave in. Your heavenly Father will explain it all one day. He cannot just yet because He is developing your character. (120)

Prayer and Healing—Learning the Language of Intercession

Jesus sent his disciples out (Matt. 10:7-8) with three assignments—preach, heal, and cast out demons (confront the forces of darkness). Healing and dealing with those who have been demonized must be recaptured as part of the ministry of the Church.

Ignorance and fear have often been obstacles in believers' paths. In addition, frauds and caricatures of true healing have made them draw back. The Church must step past these barriers to reclaim what Jesus sent it forth to do.

In truth, most believers are dominated by the question, "What if the healing does not come?" It is a legitimate question but one born of fear rather than faith. The problem is that many have defined healing in too narrow a framework. They have reduced healing to an idea of people demanding certain things of God. If they do not get them, God is shown to be powerless, and believers are embarrassed.

Believers must break this pathetic little box and let God be God. The Church needs to recapture in faith the polarities of God's power and God's purpose. All people are in a sin-fractured world. Certainly, God could heal every disease; however, in his sovereign wisdom and purpose, he chooses not to heal physically in every case. The Church needs to step forward in such unutterable confidence in God that it will let God be God. Believers can, indeed, trust ultimately in his sovereignty. The Church at its own peril foolishly attempts to reduce God to a divine bellhop who jumps at people's every whim. Believers have quickly turned the concept of human submission to the perfect will of God to requiring God's submission to the "perfect" will of humanity.

The purpose of this word is neither to examine why prayers are not always answered nor to give a final prophetic answer to the problem of pain and suffering in the world. It is, however, to acknowledge that God is sovereign. Believers can come boldly, ask God, and then they leave the answer in his hands. They trust him and understand he knows best and his will is perfect. The believers' goal in praying about human will and God's will should be to pray until God's will becomes their will. To this day I remember

the little rhyme taught me by Dr. Bill Arnett, one of my Seminary professors:

I will my will to do God's will
and then to will is well.
The willing will that does God's will
within God's will will dwell.

While that may be bad poetry, it is good theology. The psalmist proclaims, "Those who know your name put their trust in you. For you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you" (Ps. 9:10, NRSV).

Having acknowledged that God operates with insight in areas where people are without sight, believers can proceed in this matter of healing to *ask*. "You have not because you ask not" (Jas. 4:2, RSV). Maxie Dunnam writes on this matter:

Our petitions and intercession are effective and powerful when they are concrete expressions of our trust in the goodness and love of God. If we trust God's goodness and love, we can confidently put others and ourselves in God's hands. (78)

Prayer, then, leads people far beyond themselves. Dunnam again offers keen insight:

There is mystery in pain. We should not hesitate to affirm that God wills physical as well as spiritual wholeness.... Yet, Christians know pain and infirmity from which they are not delivered. The lesson is clear: the goal of our praying is not primarily deliverance from pain and suffering, but that ... God's purposes shall be accomplished, that Christ's sufficient grace shall be realized. (28)

Intercessors come prepared to pray and ask boldly. They do not come cringing. After all, they are coming to their heavenly Father who is more eager to give than they are to ask (Matt. 7:11). They do not come hesitantly for they come to a King who is sufficient for every need:

Thou art coming to a King;
Large petitions with thee bring.
For His grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much. (Newton 459)

Intercessors do not come fearfully because the Son who has redeemed them by his blood escorts them into the throne room of Almighty God. “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16, NRSV). Believers can come with confidence and ask, as children would trustingly ask parents who love them. With equal confidence, believers can ask then trust that the Father has a perfect plan. Understanding God’s will can wait; obeying God’s will cannot.

Georgia Ellis writes with utter confidence in God through life’s storms:

If there were no sickness, we would never know that God could heal; if there were no storms, we would never know that God will speak peace; if there were no hurting people, we would never know that he binds up the wounds of the brokenhearted. (144)

As believers intercede for those God brings to the altar, they can do so with grace. In fact, every time someone prays, grace is released. They can speak with authority but always with ethical integrity. They never embarrass or humiliate. They pray quietly and deal with people privately in matters of sensitivity, just as Jesus did (Bonfim, Freeland, and Tillman 52-53). The manner in which intercessors lead people before God should liberate, not induce guilt (Pritchard 150). Sample prayers using language that gets to the root while praying in a way that does not demean are found in Appendix D.

Joining in the Ministry of Jesus—Learning to Love in Prayer

Intercession is love on its knees. Prayer is not the *least* believers can do but the *most* they can do. They can do *more* than pray, but they cannot do more *until* they pray. In prayer, they join those who are dear to them and enter into the presence of Jesus to ask him to help them. No privilege could be greater. The four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus loved their friend and were persuaded Jesus could help the man.

They persevered, undeterred by the crowds. They found a way to bring the man to Jesus. They could not help their friend, but they knew Jesus could. This story paints a powerful picture of intercessory prayer. Love on its knees led to love on its feet. It also led to their friend being put on his feet. Such can be the result when believers intercede at the altar for those who come with needs.

Believers never intercede for someone for whom Jesus has not already interceded and for whom he is not interceding at that moment as well:

Day by day and hour by hour Christ prays for us.... He intercedes for us compassionately, for ... he knows exactly what we need.... His effective intercessory ministry was not confined to his life on earth; it is continued in heaven. (R. Brown 137)

Ray Anderson is right:

There is only one ministry—it is the ministry of Christ, all other ministry is rooted in this ministry and is the continuation of this ministry through the church, in the power of the Spirit, and on behalf of the world. (62)

Intercessors need never fear because they are merely operating hand in hand with the divine Intercessor, Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:25). “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26, NRSV). They simply partner with the Son and the Spirit to ask of the Father who delights to welcome his children. They are not burdened with doing ministry *for* Christ. They are merely doing ministry *with* Christ. They are only extending his ministry of grace to a world that needs it desperately but usually does not know it.

Jesus never intercedes casually or trivially. Hebrews 5:7 explains that he often prayed with “loud cries and tears.” Note also that his prayers were heard not for their volume but because of his submission. That is precisely how believers are to come to the

altar to pray. The disciples knew nothing of prayer until they saw the Master at prayer.

When they saw him at prayer, that became the one thing they asked him to teach them.

Prayer was not a part of Jesus' life; it was the artesian spring from which all of his life flowed:

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 strength. To Christ Jesus prayer occupied no secondary place, but was exacting and paramount, a necessity, a life, the satisfying of a restless yearning, and a preparation for heavy responsibilities. (Bounds, Reality 73)

Here intercessors arrive at the remarkable truth that in prayer believers actually partner with Jesus in his ministry. They can develop the same concerns he has. As Jesus interceded in John 17, believers, too, can ask God to give them a passion for the glory of God, for the work of his Church, and for the salvation of the world. A guest in the home of A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, told of coming upon Simpson early one morning in his study. There sat Simpson alone with his arms encircling a globe of the world. Tears coursed down his cheeks. He was literally weeping for a world lost in sin (Ortlund 72). That is intercession that enters into the very heart of God. Such intercessions will always be heard in heaven.

Clearly, Simpson prayed with burning passion; however, the secret was not that he himself was so passionate. The powerful truth is that *Jesus was praying through him*. He was able to see the world as Jesus does, feel for the world as Jesus does, and plead for the world as Jesus does. Indeed, the Spirit of Christ prays in every believer (Murray, With Christ 235).

Intercessors can find fresh strength, courage, and confidence when they recognize that not only is Christ praying *in* them and *through* them, but he is also praying *for* them.

Among the intercessions he lifts for them, what joy to consider that he prays for them as he did for Peter: “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32, NRSV). Here is a prayer for believers to be kept from sin. Here also is a prayer that should sin overtake them they would be restored both personally and for ministry. Here is their joy as intercessors. Those who have been redeemed have the privilege of bringing others to the Redeemer. He is the One who calls them; he is the One who meets all their needs. He allows them the high privilege of being the conduit of that healing grace.

In order to prepare to intercede for their friends, Barbara Wentroble suggests four steps (49-55). “Wisdom directs on how to sharpen our ax and put an edge on us to cut through obstacles that hinder breakthrough in intercession” (49). The focus is not so much on the ax as the God who sharpens it:

1. They can seek from God a cleansed heart. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10, NRSV; Wentroble 49);

2. They can ask God for deliverance from fear. “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear” (1 Pet. 4:8, NRSV; Wentroble 51);

3. They can ask God to give strong faith. “Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes’” (Mark 9:23, NRSV; Wentroble 53); and,

4. They can ask God to clothe them in his righteousness. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27, NRSV; Wentroble 54).

Intercessors stand with the one for whom they intercede as though they were

Christ himself. This is not brash arrogance as though intercessors pointed to their own righteousness. The truth is that intercessors do not simply represent Christ; they *re-present* Christ. In that moment, they do not vaguely point the seeker to heaven, but Jesus comes to meet them on earth. Robert Law is quoted as saying, “The purpose of prayer is not to get man’s will done in heaven, but to get God’s will done on earth” (Wiersbe 29). The intercessors’ goal is God’s glory.

Power of the Altar—Theology of Sacred Place

The altar has always been a place to encounter God. It is a place that stands ultimately for mercy and reconciliation.

Introduction

In creation, God met in the cool of the evening for wonderful fellowship with Adam and Eve. Sin broke that relationship. Everything changed. The pair was evicted from Eden. Every outward sign indicated no hope. Nevertheless, one thing transformed despair and brought hope—God followed them beyond the Garden. Adam and Eve may have run from God, but God pursued them.

As the biblical story unfolded, God kept revealing a way for the broken relationship to be restored, which could not happen by ignoring the transgression. Sin always brings penalties, and the ultimate consequences are death. God stepped in and provided a way of atonement by means a substitute taking the penalty at the altar. The parties who had been estranged—God and people—reconnected through God’s mercy. The penalty was satisfied, and atonement secured at great cost, for the debt was paid and freedom secured at an altar of death.

Alex Reed tells of trying to learn the Otetela word for altar when he went to the

Belgian Congo as a missionary. He showed them a simple kneeling rail he had created for prayer. “We have no such word,” they said. He persisted further in explaining the Old Testament concept of sacrifice. “Oh,” they said, “We do have a word for that. It is *ediakelu*. It means ‘the killing place.’” Reed recounts how he explained to the people that the kneeling altar precisely reflected that definition. It is a place where believers die to self and become alive to God (Davis).

Key Biblical Texts

Throughout the Scriptures, the altar plays a key role in the work of God among his people.

Noah. “Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.... God blessed Noah and his sons” (Gen. 8:20; 9:1, NRSV).

Although one could reasonably contend that Cain and Abel presented their sacrifices at some sort of altar (Gen. 4:1-5), the first explicit mention of an altar occurs in the Noah narrative. Following the flood, Noah took some of the animals that God had preserved on the ark and sacrificed them to God on an altar. The fundamental expression of this offering was deep gratitude.

Good reason exists to believe that the need for altars was revealed to people very early as basic in approaching God. Long before the Mosaic instructions relating to worship, the altar had become an established meeting place between God and humanity (Estep 14). God had, indeed, proved himself faithful. Beyond simply telling God of his gratitude, however, Noah’s sacrifice demonstrated it. In response, God gave him and his heirs a blessing and a promise.

Abraham. One can trace Abraham's entire spiritual journey through his altars (Parrott 36). When God promised to give his heirs the land, Abram built an altar to acknowledge God's grace and Abram's gratitude (Gen. 12:7). In the next verse (Gen. 12:8), as Abram moved to a new area, the altar became a place to invoke God's presence and God's blessing. Noteworthy is that he revisited that altar after his failure in Egypt to reconnect to God (Gen. 13:4, 18).

In all the Old Testament, perhaps no meeting with God at an altar occurred more poignantly or intimately than when Abraham, now an old man, faced God once more on Mt. Moriah with his son and all his dreams at stake (Gen. 22:1-19). Now it was an altar of absolute surrender to God and utter confidence in God. He obeyed God in the face of everything that cried out for him to turn away. Abraham laid Isaac—the son of promise—on the altar of sacrifice. When Abraham built the altar and prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the central feature was not that the angel stopped him but that God met him. God was waiting for Abraham at the altar. To forsake the altar (despite all of its costs) would have been to forsake meeting the Lord.

Moses. Moses received directions from God to build an altar that became the ultimate place where the people of Israel met the Lord:

You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. (Exod. 20:24, NRSV)

When the Lord showed his hand strong in the defeat of Amalek (Exod. 17:15-16), Moses built an altar to signify the might of the Lord to defend his people. This was an altar of trust; yet God had a greater altar to reveal to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Sacrifices of burnt offerings and well-being were presented there. God met Israel, brought blessing,

and caused his glorious name to be remembered there. In the climactic moment of Exodus, when the tabernacle was complete and the altar was ready, God descended in glory:

[Moses] set up the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and put up the screen at the gate of the court. So Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exod. 40:33, NRSV)

In Exodus (29:37) and throughout Leviticus (e.g., 4:3; 8:11, 15), the altar became a place of atonement for sinful people and consecration for God's servants. Those who were far off were brought near in the infinite mercy of God.

Elijah. One of the most dramatic encounters in the biblical narrative occurs at Mt. Carmel:

Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD.... "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. (1 Kings 18:31, 37-38, NRSV)

The altar had been often seen as a place of meeting in atonement, in gratitude, in submission, in refuge, in obedience, in praise, in worship, in repentance, in consecration, and in spiritual renewal. Here God met his people in blazing power. In response to the unwavering faith of his servant, Elijah, God showed himself strong on behalf of his name. God exposed the powerless sham of those who followed false gods. Those who served false gods used altars, as well, but they proved to be only form without substance. The power lay not in the altar itself but in the God who met his people at the altar.

Jesus. Jesus acknowledged the significance of the altar:

And you say, “Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.” How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (Matt. 23:18-19, NRSV)

Jesus reiterated the point that outward form without inward substance made the altar moot. To quibble on technicalities missed the entire point. The gift on the altar was sacred because the altar was sacred. The unspoken extrapolation was that the altar’s sanctity stood unquestioned. This sense of the sacred could only be because God met his people there. For that reason, one never approached the altar casually. Priests consecrated themselves, yet so must all God’s people. They approached him with sacrifices, but Jesus added that externals could no longer suffice. The one who conformed to tradition without heart surrender only made a mockery of the altar. The one who truly came seeking God must come in prayer. That was why Jesus drove out the money changers. They substituted ritual when people sought the reality of prayer. Furthermore, the one who approached the altar must come in a heart right not only with God but with people as well (Matt. 5:21-24).

Spiritual altar. Hebrews in a remarkable way tied the old covenant ritual to the new covenant reality:

Therefore he [Jesus] had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.... For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.... But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb. 2:17; 9:24, 26, NRSV)

Although the word altar is not mentioned, its presence is clear as Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for sinful humanity. The altar in this case was not an earthly one but

one in the heavens. His atonement was the perfect and complete one of which earthly sacrifice could only be a dim shadow. The best lamb was imperfect at best; the Lamb of God is spotless and without blemish. The best atonement by a priest must be made repeatedly; the sacrifice of Jesus is complete forever (Heb. 9:25-26). The finest priest could only offer an impure sacrifice for he was impure (Heb. 5:1-7); Jesus is the perfect High Priest who enters the very courts of heaven on behalf of a sinful humanity (Heb. 2:17; 9:24).

Heaven's altar. "Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne" (Rev. 8:3, NRSV).

In heaven, an altar stands before the throne of God. Under it are the souls of the martyrs (Rev. 6:9). On it are poured out the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8:3). On it burns the fire of God's judgment (Rev. 8:5; 14:18; 15:7). The heavenly throne is a place where the divine plan is being fashioned. Yet in the new heavens and new earth, not only will no altar exist but neither will a temple exist. The glorious reason is that God himself will be in heaven so people will have no need for a place to meet him. "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22, NRSV).

The people of God will live in his presence.

In summary, the altar is a point of departure from sin, a point of contact with God, a place of revelation from God, a place of discovering truth, a place to die to self, a place to find refuge, a place of total surrender, a place of meeting the Advocate, and above all a place of worship (Johnson 9-10).

Review of Selected Literature on the Altar

In no manner did the altar of the early Church resemble the kneeling rails of today. The altar was viewed in a symbolic way in terms of Christ mediating the way for sinful humanity into the presence of God. While the altar was little present in early Church architecture, from the birth of the Church the call to self-giving commitment symbolized by the altar was always there. For instance, to the crowd's query upon hearing his first sermon, "What shall we do?" Peter unhesitatingly replied, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38). No literal altar was present where the people could meet God, but without a doubt the multitudes encountered him in profoundly life-transforming power, responding in repentance and self-surrender. The altar had been a foreshadowing of God's place of mediation, reconciliation, and restoration. When Jesus died on the cross and the curtain into the Holy of holies was torn (Matt. 27:51), once and for all the way to the altar became accessible to all humanity.

Reformation and the great awakenings. With the institutionalization of the Church under Roman Catholicism, this invitational preaching diminished. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the other Reformation leaders restored the evangelistic call:

Though history does not record any of the reformers issuing the kind of public invitation practiced today, they did conclude their messages by calling sinners to Christ through personal repentance and faith. Those who heeded the appeal were dealt with privately, and later were presented before the congregation to receive communion. (Streett 82)

Invitational preaching reemerged strongly in America's Great Awakenings. In many respects, the public invitation is a uniquely American phenomenon (Thompson 25).

The American culture's emphasis on individualism lent itself to the call to personal faith. Individual responsibility before God called for individual response to God. Jonathan Edwards, for example, became a forerunner of the invitation. His preaching called forth not simply an intellectual but also an emotional response:

Although he did not have class meetings as John Wesley did, Edwards encouraged seekers to meet in groups in their homes to pray and help each other.... There is no indication Jonathan Edwards ever gave an invitation for seekers to come forward for prayer, but he did open the door for the future development of the public invitation. (Parrott 90)

In England, John Wesley broke the bonds of tradition by reaching common people through outdoor preaching, ending all of his sermons with an appeal to come to Christ. Wesley may have originated the mourner's bench or anxious seat, which was a pew reserved for those anxious for salvation or personal counsel. Those under conviction or in need could come forward for prayer (Streett 91-92).

Back in the United States, Dwight L. Moody and Charles G. Finney employed the personal call for public decisions, frequently inviting seekers to an inquiry room. Often people were asked to stand to their feet or respond in a public way that confirmed their decision:

After a sermon Mr. Moody "drew the net," expecting immediate decisions for Christ. He would ask those who decided there and then to receive Jesus Christ as personal Saviour to say out loud "will," or to raise a hand or rise to their feet, actions that publicly clinched and confessed their inner decision of heart and will. (Fitt 60)

Not everyone supported this new movement in the church. Some decried the innovation as heretical. In 1843, John W. Nevin attacked the innovation in a missive called The Anxious Bench. Interestingly, he did not deny its popularity or seeming success; rather, he insisted it lacked true spiritual power and gave a false security to the

conscience (29). In a pejorative broadside, he called any type of public invitation “quackery” (32).

The kneeling altar. While consensus exists on the fact that the kneeling altar is uniquely American, less unanimity is found in discerning its origins. Nathan Bangs points to an 1807 or 1808 meeting in New York (46). Others claim the first altar call was given in Virginia or Maryland in 1798 (Coleman, “Origin of the Altar” 22) or at a Methodist camp meeting at Red River, Kentucky, in 1799 (Johnson 17).

The kneeling altar hit its full stride in the camp meeting movement. Bishop Francis Asbury and his circuit-riding preachers used the kneeling altar with great effectiveness (Parrott 30). The usually crude and simple mourner’s bench came to be called an altar by the faithful, but mockers called it the “pen” (Thompson 91). Likely, the term altar as used for the kneeling rail originated when seekers were invited to come pray at the rail where communion was served, hence the “altar”:

Instead of the “mourner’s bench,” sometimes distressed persons would be invited to come to the communion rail for prayer from which was derived the association of “the altar call.” This was particularly applicable to those churches which had an altar constructed at the front of the sanctuary where communicants could receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. (Coleman, “Origin of the Altar” 24)

The altar provided a powerful place for people to meet God and receive immediate help. This movement provided a shift not so much in theology as methodology. This methodology developed out of the growing American spirit of individualism. The methodological shift toward personal invitational calls resonated well with the cultural shift toward individualism. Streett identifies three essential values of the kneeling altar:

It gave those needing spiritual help an opportunity to indicate their need

by going forward. The altar was also a symbol that one must be willing to take a public stand for Christ. Finally, it was tangible proof of the seeker's willingness to take decisive action in order to be saved. (95)

Undoubtedly, the kneeling altar has proved to be a method richly blessed by God in the last two hundred years. While its evangelistic use so prevalent in the past within certain denominations (such as Methodism) is fading, the fact is that God has used it tremendously. In the nineteenth century, some wrote about the altar:

When we consider the fact that more souls in modern days have been saved at the altar than by any other method, we believe in it with our whole heart, and shall use this method on every fitting opportunity, until we can find some other method by which more souls can be led into the light. We shall say to those who criticize this method, what J. S. Inskip said to those who said, "We do not believe in your methods of doing it." He replied, "I do not like your methods of not doing it." (Carradine et al. 90-91)

Cautions and emerging trends. Recalling that the kneeling altar was an innovation in the Church at one time, the Church would do well to remember God is still a God of new things. The Church ought not canonize the kneeling altar because God may raise up a new methodology. Neither should the Church lose the true heart of the kneeling altar, which is the invitation to make a present response and meet the Lord in prayer.

Three powerful new emphases have emerged in recent years, innovations of their own. First has been the powerful influence of lay involvement in altar prayer. No longer was this sacred ministry seen as the exclusive property of the clergy but the ministry of the whole Church. The Church began to take seriously the Petrine doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Second has been the amplification of altar prayer ministry to include needs of all kinds. No longer is the altar exclusively for calling the lost to salvation. It has become a place for believers to meet God for many other needs, as well. There they can find mercy, guidance, healing, strength, and purity. Third, the invitation to

the altar can be given at some point other than the conclusion of the service. For example, it can be given during the pastoral prayer time or communion so that people can bring their concerns before God.

As with any method, abuses inevitably accompany it. Dangers can include relying on emotionalism, counting success by numbering bodies at the altar, making going to the altar a work that saves, or insisting that going to the altar is an essential precursor to true conversion:

If we are consciously or unconsciously leaving the impression that a well beaten path to and from the altar is the type and ideal of Christian experience and the final analysis of obedience to God we are fooling the public, displeasing the divine, [and] misleading souls. (Lienard 4)

Many churches have been cultivating a new openness to the altar, reclaiming it as a place to meet God no matter what their concerns or needs. The so-called “open altar” helps promote “a new attitude toward the altar as a place of love and victory instead of an unfriendly place where people publicly admitted their failures” (Parrott 187). The altar becomes a place for healing of hurts and healing of hearts. Forgiveness and restoration can be dispensed joyfully.

The Church finds itself at a new cultural crossroads. If individualism was the cry of emerging America, today’s culture extols personal rights and privacy, fosters widespread suspicion of emotional appeals, and roundly resists anyone asserting they have the truth. Evangelism has shifted from being seen as a crisis to being seen as a process (Hunter 57-61). Above all, today’s culture clamors not to make anyone uncomfortable. So in this new dynamic, the Church must again walk the tightrope between connecting to the culture and confronting the culture, all the while avoiding the trap of accommodating itself to the culture.

Conclusion

The upshot is simply the fact that Christians must embrace the fundamental idea that every believer (and the Church as a whole) has a right to meet God. It has always been an altar experience where one dies to the old self that God may bring a new self to life. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17, NRSV). This resurrection of life and hope is true whether one comes for salvation, for sanctification, for healing, or for intercession. Whatever the means or the place, meeting God is what must remain central, not necessarily the methodology. At the same time, the Church should be adequately self-introspective to see whether the abandonment of a means reflects an abandonment of a tool or a genuine abandonment of theological principles. If it signals the latter, the Church more desperately than ever needs to find its way back to an “altar” to meet the living God.

Power of Lay Ministry—Theology of Sacred Calling

God’s original plan in the early Church invested all believers equally in ministry. No separate clergy class existed with special gifts or privileges. Unfortunately, the priesthood of all believers lost traction after a few centuries, but it is being reclaimed in this time.

Introduction

In colonial Williamsburg stands a stately and beautiful church. Many others have modeled their own sanctuaries after it. The most striking feature of the church is its remarkable pulpit. Entering by a circular staircase, one stands high above the congregation—remote, exalted, separated from the congregation. One gets the impression

that not only is the pastor high enough to speak for God, he or she is high enough actually to *be* with God. This loftiness stands in contrast to the people who remain among the profane confines of the world while the pastor ascends the sacred stairway to heaven.

In post-Reformation English culture, the pastor was even given a new title—the “parson.” One requires little imagination to see this as an adaptation of the word “person.” The parson was *the person* in that society. He was not like everyone else. He was set apart. Others were less educated and ordinary. He was holy and extraordinary.

Both of these pictures set a striking illustration of the persistent and still-common misunderstanding of the role of the laity. This problem is also integrally woven into the misunderstanding of the role of the clergy and the relationship between the two. Rather than being viewed in a complementary manner, the clergy and laity have most often been pictured in either adversarial roles or in contrasting roles consisting of the activity of the clergy and passivity of the laity.

Melvin J. Steinbron identifies one dominating attitude. The clergy have historically (with many happy exceptions, such as John Wesley) viewed the laity with native distrust (Lay Driven Church 129). Nevertheless, even Wesley began with a suspicion of lay competency until God and his mother helped him see otherwise:

Perhaps the early Methodists’ greatest break with tradition was in the use of laypersons as preachers. Wesley was horrified when he learned that a convert named Thomas Maxfield was preaching. He started to reprimand him, but fortunately he heeded the advice of Susannah Wesley (his mother). She cautioned, “That young man is as surely called of God to preach as you are.” She went on to suggest that Maxfield be judged by the results. Wesley could not deny that people were responding and being converted by this layman. In time, other lay converts followed suit. Within two years, John Wesley had approved 35 such preachers. (Watts 27)

Clergy have for years distrusted lay competency, concern, and capability; thus,

clergy have seized control of the Church to the extent that in common usage “ministry” immediately brings to mind work done by clergy rather than by the laity or the Church. Clergy have cast themselves in the role of channels of God’s grace and interpreters of God’s Word. Although the Reformation ostensibly overthrew this understanding (and did make some notable strides), the Church easily reverted to seeing the pastor in the traditional role.

One might rightly expect that the laity would be outraged. Sadly, the laity have often been as ready to relinquish control as the clergy have been eager to seize it. Often, the laity have found themselves extremely comfortable in their position of sitting back and handing the work to the clergy. I believe this lay passivity was not always the pattern; however, as clergy asserted their authority, the laity were slapped down often enough that they finally acquiesced into their role as lame assistants to the clergy, allowed to do only menial tasks. In fact, lay incompetence made them fit only as recipients of ministry, not purveyors of it. Furthermore, when laity were given opportunity to do anything, frequently they received neither training nor support. Consequent failure only solidified clergy scorn for lay competence and lay terror of stepping out into ministry.

This prevailing view has found expression in a variety of sources. For instance, Pope Pius X issued a Papal Encyclical in 1906 entitled *Vehementer Nos*, stating, “[T]he one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors” (# 8).

Whatever its origins, clearly this attitude has created an improper focus on the clergy, side-tracked the enormous power and potential of the laity, and crippled the work

of the kingdom of God in the world. A look at both the biblical teaching and the biblical model quickly clarifies the total inaccuracy and inadequacy of such wrong-headed thinking. Not only is it biblically and theologically upside down, the very nature of reality militates against it. One recalls the humorous assertion that football is twenty-two people desperately in need of rest being watched by 22,000 people desperately in need of exercise. The Church would be foolish to assume that God's work could be done by a handful of clergy while the masses of laity sit idly by, whether by their volition or clergy rejection.

Key Biblical Texts

Nowhere in Scripture is lay passivity and clergy domination counseled. On the contrary, the power of Christ is unleashed when the whole Church is engaged, laity and clergy alike.

Ephesians 4:1-13. The Pauline passage in Ephesians 4 needs priority attention because of the confusion attached through the famed "fatal comma." Verses 11-12 read, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints [*] for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (NRSV). At the point of the inserted asterisk [*], the King James Version and others insert a comma. At issue are where ministry lies and what the responsibility is of the pastor/teacher. Keeping the comma assigns all the work of ministry to the pastor/teacher. Removing the comma changes the ministry landscape completely. The pastor/teacher is responsible for equipping the saints. The laity, in turn, are the ones who do the ministry. At stake is whether the ministry of the church is done only by a handful of leaders or by the entire body of Christ. Scripture makes clear that

ministry belongs to the whole body, especially the laity.

Verses 1-6 explicitly focus on the unity within the body of believers. Within this unity the diversity of gifts is celebrated. Clearly, gifts are given to all in the body (v. 7). Furthermore, pastor/teachers are not set aside as being given some priority. On the contrary, they are not primarily to function in the role of “doing ministry.” In fact, their ministry is a sub-ministry of the body. The pastor/teacher’s function is to equip the rest of the body because real ministry exists *in the laity*. One can observe this vital distinction—*the clergy minister to the body of believers; the body ministers to the world*. The clergy, far from restricting the ministry of the laity, are the very ones called to enhance it. The organized Church, clergy and laity alike, seem to have conspired to create a bottleneck in ministry. Satan can only rejoice over a situation he would love to create but that the Church seems to have voluntarily embraced.

Romans 12:4-8. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom. 12:4-5, NRSV). Once more Paul returns to his timely theme of the Church as the body of Christ. Once more, diversity stands with meaning only within the framework of unity. Since *believers are members one of another*, the only logical extrapolation can be that embracing others is vital to the survival of both. No person is an island. Every believer needs every other believer. Once more, Paul focuses his next verse on the theme of love: “Let love be genuine” (Rom. 12:9, NRSV). Apart from love, the body disintegrates.

Furthermore, one would do well to note that the unity-within-diversity exists as a contrast to the way of the world. The world establishes hierarchical systems that exalt

some and debase others. Not so for the Church, says Paul. Believers must not be squeezed into the world's mold on how the Church should work but have a Church view solidly transformed by the renewed mind from God (Rom. 12:2). Here the focus clearly rejects pride but embraces humility (v. 3).

Exodus 17:8-13. Some passages teach but others model shared leadership:

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. (Exod. 17:11-12, NRSV)

With regret, I recall seeing a partial truth in this passage that ended up being a whole error. One can easily ascertain from this passage that Moses realized he could not fulfill God's work on his own. He needed others to help him. Aaron and Hur rose to the occasion. I extrapolated from this fact that as surely as Moses needed Aaron and Hur (laypersons) to help him, the pastor needs laypeople. Unfortunately, what I thought Moses (clergy) needed was for Aaron and Hur (laity) to help *him* do *his* ministry.

Seeing Aaron and Hur as Moses' untalented assistants misses the point entirely. Aaron and Hur helped Moses, to be sure. Yet, *Moses was not doing the "ministry" that day. Joshua and the soldiers were doing the "ministry."* They were the ones in the heat of the battle. On them hung the victory or defeat that day. Moses, Aaron, and Hur together helped these brave hearts accomplish *their* ministry. As surely, the clergy's function is not to get laity to help them accomplish their ministry; the clergy's function is to help the laity accomplish *their* ministry. Furthermore, clergy must recall that while many times they have an Aaron and Hur to help them in one area, at other times, one of the laity is the best gifted in an area and *clergy* become Aaron and Hur to support them. Much wisdom in ministry comes from knowing when to be Aaron and when to be Moses.

Exodus 18:13-27. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, counseled him wisely:

What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. You should also look for able men among all the people. (Exod. 18:17, 18, 21, NRSV)

Moses found himself in a quandary once again. Overwhelming needs buried him until he came to the brink of exhaustion. Fortunately, his wise father-in-law, Jethro, saw the situation and addressed it with sage counsel. He told Moses that he could not do all the work by himself. Instead, he needed to gather competent leadership and share the burden. Note that Moses' inadequate way of dealing with things wore out not only himself but the people, as well.

Resolution to this problem was found when Moses sought wisdom from God, sought out capable people to help, trained them, organized them, commissioned them, established accountability with them, and offered support to them. The integrity of the trained leaders and the clarity of the system allowed everyone in leadership to survive and sent the people all home in peace. These other leaders were laity. They did not share Moses' ministry in a secondhand way. In fact, the vast majority of the work was done by them, done competently, and never needed the attention of Moses. In sharing ministry with the laity, everything was done better.

One can observe another key concept here. Jethro, who was a clergyman himself, came alongside to offer the wisdom of the power of lay ministry. He is the one who opened Moses' eyes to the incredible untapped value and resources available in the laity. They were available, wanted to be utilized, and could, indeed, be trusted. One cannot help but believe that these truths had been proven in the experience of Jethro. Interestingly, Moses (whom readers would identify as clergy) may have heard this advice before but perhaps never accepted it until it came from another clergyman. One of the tragedies of clergy blindness to the awesome ministry of the laity is that clergy are often unaware of their own blindness.

Review of Selected Literature on Lay Ministry

Reclamation of the idea that ministry belongs to the laity may be the greatest movement of God in this time. While lay ministry is clearly taught in Scripture, it was buried in Church practice for centuries. The Reformation made an effort at restoring the ministry to the laity but fell short in actual praxis. Lip service to the idea fell short of actual implementation. This burgeoning move of lay ministry is pivotal in both the life of the Church and the move of God's kingdom. In fact, the idea is so critical that one author has entitled his work on lay ministry The New Reformation (Ogden 12). Truly embracing lay ministry could be that transformational in the Church.

Laos and kleros in the New Testament. In biblical parlance, *laos* refers to all the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Acts 15:14). It is never used in the New Testament to distinguish a group from the *kleros*. All have been called, and all are one body (Eph. 4:1, 4). In Greek language of that day, a related word was often found in common usage—*laikos*. *Laikos* referred to a “non-professional” person in a given area. This person would be distinguished from the ones who really were skilled in that area. It meant “belonging to the common people” (Bietenhard 795). This word is *never* used in the New Testament.

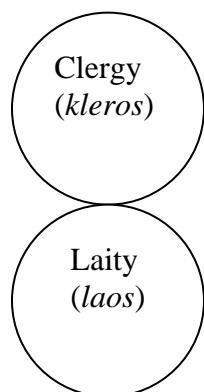
Likewise, a third word used for laity in common Greek was *idiotes*. Though it did not carry the baggage of the English word *idiot*, it did refer to a layperson in contrast to an expert. This word, also, is never used in the New Testament. *Laos* always refers to the *whole* people of God powerfully set aside for his purpose (Stevens 27-29).

Kleros does not occur in Christian literature as referring to “clergy” as separate from “laity” until the third century AD. The Greek word *kleros* comes from a word that means “lot” or “share” (Eichler 295-6). Peter and John thus tell Simon Magus he has no

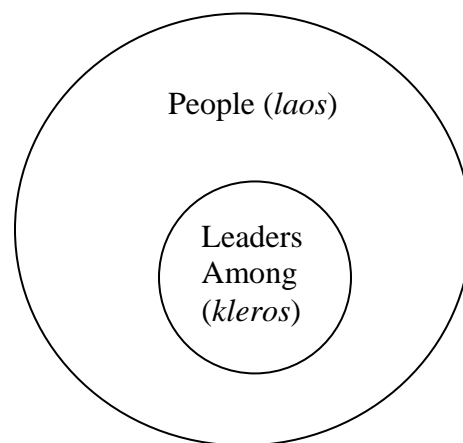
“share” in this ministry (Acts 8:21). Paul is told he is sent to “turn people from darkness to light so they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place [*kleron*] among those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ]” (Acts 26:17-18, NRSV). R. Paul Stevens contends “the church in the New Testament has no ‘laypersons’ in the usual sense of the word, and is full of ‘clergy’ in the true sense of that word” (31-32). The real scandal of clericalism is witnessed against the biblical backdrop of equality and unity (Eph. 2:12, 13-16; 3:28; Rom. 8:14-17, Gal. 4:4-7). What God has joined together, man has put asunder.

Laos are never distinguished in the Bible from the *kleros*. They are the same people. The *kleros* do not exist outside the *laos* but within the *laos*. Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship beautifully. It graphically portrays the true relationship of *kleros* and *laos*.

CONTEMPORARY CHURCH-VIEW



NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH-VIEW



Source: Fee 3.

Figure 2.1. Relationship between *laos* and *kleros*.

Scripture knows no separation between *kleros* and *laos* but recognizes a

distinction between the two. The distinction is in terms of office or function, not in terms of essential nature as a believer, as both Martin Luther and John Calvin agreed (Feucht 63). People speak in an unbiblical and incorrect manner when they identify laity in distinction to clergy in fundamental kind. The truth is that while the two are distinguishable, they are interdependent. “There is no ontological difference between leaders and people. The call to leadership in the church comes from the church” (Stevens 146, 155). Interestingly, while much is made of the primacy of Peter, Peter’s own epistles vividly articulate the pivotal doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (especially see 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

In fact, the *laos* are the Church deployed in mission to the world, while the *kleros* are appointed to serve them (within the body of the *laos*) by equipping them to fulfill this very call God has placed upon them to change the world (Stott 38). In a tangible example, Paul and Barnabas were not set apart *from* the *laos* but commissioned *within* the *laos* to their mission (Acts 13:2). The Orthodox churches emphasize that “clergy and laity make together the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Church” (Kraemer 96). Yves M. J. Congar, in Lay People in the Church, rightly states, “Fundamentally, there can be only one valid theology of the laity: a total ecclesiology” (16-17). Such holistic ecclesiology is found in the early Church. “The Book of Acts is the best documentation of the priesthood of all believers and the chief resource for its recovery in our day” (Feucht 33-34).

Jesus as the supreme model. One cannot ignore the fact that Jesus did not seek out religious leaders as his disciples. Instead, he called those whom the Church would term laity. They came from the normal sectors of life. Jesus deliberately chose “laity” over “clergy” for at least two reasons. First, they had fewer presuppositions that had to be unlearned. Second, having come from the fabric of the world, they understood the fabric of the world and were willing to return to it when Jesus sent them. As surely as Jesus

incarnated the gospel by coming to be a person, his disciples incarnated the gospel by going among the people they knew intimately from the common walks of life.

The point simply is that Jesus took *laity* and gave them ministry because *he* (*Jesus*) modeled it. One ought not miss the point that *Jesus was a layman himself* with a career as a carpenter. He never intended the ministry to have disjuncture with common life. His intent was that ministry be lived in common life. That is the model and message of the Incarnation. Ministry was not for a segmented few; it was the property of all believers.

The disciples grasped one further key concept. They understood eventually that they were not doing ministry for Jesus. *Jesus was doing his ministry through them* (S. Seamands). They were doing nothing on their own (John 15:5). *They were simply extending Jesus' ministry* by letting his hands work through theirs and his words speak through theirs (Pittinger 9). That conviction is why Peter could deflect praise when the lame man was healed by, in effect, saying, “*Why do you look at us—look at Jesus!*” (Acts 3:12-13).

Perhaps the disciples emulated Jesus' model because they saw it lived before them. On the other hand, perhaps believers have few truly biblical models to follow in the present day, blinding them so they miss God's plan while following false substitutes. The superstar clergy and sedentary laity model is certainly one that has paralyzed the Church. The time has come to reclaim Jesus' model. The goal is not to draw everyone into vocational ministry. The goal is to return everyone to his or her own life's calling with a vision to extend Jesus' ministry there.

Failing to embrace Jesus' model. If the first two hundred years of Church

history were marked by a unified vision of the *laos*, believers would do well to identify the reasons it changed its course.

The simple fact exists that the larger an entity becomes, the more structure is necessitated. Structure, however, need not restrict function; rather, it should enhance it. Nonetheless, growing structure cannot help but impact an organism or an organization. A child has incredible flexibility, but stronger bones are required as the child grows to maturity. Flexibility is lost, but strength is gained. In an analogous way, a growing and expanding Church (especially as it got farther distant from those who had actually known Jesus on earth) developed structures for organization and “quality control.” Unfortunately, the structuring turned what God made as an organism (body of Christ) into more of an organization.

The Church began to imitate secular Greco-Roman culture with its hierarchical machinery. One can hear the echoes of the people of Israel saying in effect, “Give us a king so we can be like everyone else!” (see 1 Sam. 8:5). A vertical model soon replaced a horizontal model. A control model soon replaced a servant model.

The Church returned to the Old Testament model in which clergy were separate from the people. A separate order of priestly or clergy class began to emerge for sacred functions. The very concept led to the bifurcation of life into sacred and secular realms. This polarization placed laity in the realm of the secular from which they would make an occasional sortie into the sacred, only to return once more to the profane. The clergy remained in the sacred, thus raising them above the laity or, perhaps more accurately, subordinating the laity beneath the clergy.

The Lord’s Supper was elevated to a level of mystery with need of a priest to

administer the rite. Prior to this, it had been a collegial meal shared among family. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the clergy now held the keys to the kingdom. They became the avenues through which grace was dispensed. Laity were not only unequal; they were hostage to the clergy for eternal life itself.

No separate place to worship existed in the early Church (Chafin 8). Churches simply met in the homes of believers. With no place, ritual had less presence. With the emergence of Christianity as a safeguarded religion, place and ritual emerged with the need for a special group to administrate these things.

The language of the Church ceased to be the language of the people. The Church reversed the model of Incarnation that Jesus had modeled by coming to earth. Instead of leaders entering the common life of people, they made God appear remote and above life.

Clergy became celibate, thus distancing themselves from the normal experiences of the laity. The assumption was that by distancing themselves from the common ways of life they drew closer to God. The striking implication is that association with the common ways of life actually distances one from God. Such thinking saps hope from laity whose lives are inextricably intertwined with life in the world.

Ordination emerged as an absolute act so that congregations were no longer necessary for the celebration of the Eucharist (Stevens 45). The priest was enough for the church was present in the priest. Laity moved from the center to a distant periphery.

One might expect that things took a radical turn in the Reformation but such was not the case. The Reformation held out four great truths: (1) Scripture alone, (2) grace alone, (3) faith alone, and (4) the priesthood of all believers (Ogden 51). The first three took root, but the last has struggled. Regrettably, the preacher replaced the priest as the

preacher-expositor role overtook the priestly role. The Catholic seminary model was eventually adopted, guaranteeing enculturation of pastors into a clerical mind-set.

Kingdom ministry was almost totally eclipsed by church ministry. Ordination is still almost universally retained while no adequate recognition exists for lay ministries in society. Spirituality is still focused on experiences or a deeper life of faith that stands apart from the common life in the midst of the totality of life (Stevens 46-48).

To truly recapture the biblical idea of ministry with *laos* and *kleros* in proper place would transform the Church. Elton Trueblood states this truth powerfully:

If in the average church we should suddenly take seriously the notion that every lay member, man or woman, is really a minister of Christ, we would have something like a revolution in a very short time.... Suddenly the number of ministers in the average church would jump *from one to five hundred* [emphasis mine]. This is the way to employ valuable but largely wasted human resources. (9)

Mark Gibbs and T. Ralph Morton, in their classic volume God's Frozen People, say recapturing the ministry of the laity would be for the Church equivalent to discovering a lost continent or finding a new element (158). However, reinstatement of the ministry of the whole people of God "will be realized only if the 'nonclergy' are willing to move up, if the 'clergy' are willing to move over, and if all of God's people are willing to move out" (Gillespie 327).

Interestingly, Nazi Germany proved a key player in God's revelation to the Church that its view of ministry was skewed. When pastors were drafted into the military or sent to concentration camps, laypersons took over leadership. The Nazis had a rude awakening. By removing the pastor, they had not halted the ministry of the Church. One pastor speaking out they could stop; a hundred laypersons taking up their ministry and speaking out they could not. The Nazis revealed the worst in the Church (dependence on clergy to do the ministry) but brought out the best (laypersons taking up their ministry)

(Ayres 13-14). Indeed, history has taught that when persecution has left the Church without clergy, it has often flourished the most rapidly (i.e., in Russia and China). That fact is not to demean clergy, whom God has called to equip the *laos*. Rather, that reality simply illustrates what happens when the whole *laos* takes up its calling to ministry.

Reclamation of the Biblical Model

Reclaiming the biblical model begins by giving the ministry back to Jesus. How presumptuous of believers to think of service as “their” ministry or, worse still, as the clergy’s ministry. The truth is that if the ministry is authentic, it is always Jesus’ ministry. Believers simply extend that ministry as his hands to touch the world. Dr. Steve Seamands clarifies that Christian ministry is not believers asking Christ to join them in their ministry as they offer Christ to others. It is believers joining with Christ in his ongoing ministry as he offers himself to others through them. Acts 1:1 clarifies that the record in the Gospels only outlines what Jesus began to do and teach. Clearly, he manifests his continuing action in the work of the Church, starting in Acts and stretching to the present moment.

Further, believers dare not forget *Jesus is the Head of the Church, not the clergy*. Headship implies that Jesus is both the source of the Church’s life and that the Church stands under his authority (Ogden 33). The broadest implication of this vibrant truth proclaims that neither clergy nor laity need fear trusting one another or deferring ministry to one another. Believers can trust Jesus to answer his prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10, RSV). Jesus did not found the Christian community and leave; he is present in the midst of his people right now.

Next, reclaiming the biblical model happens when believers give the ministry

back to the Church. Jesus said, “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21, NRSV). Then he breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples. If the Church can learn anything from Pentecost, it learns that the Holy Spirit was poured out on *all* believers without distinction. The impartation of the Holy Spirit anticipates nothing more than that Jesus says to the *whole* Church, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21, RSV). Laity and clergy alike (clergy being a subset *within* the *laos*) are the *ekklesia*, the “called out ones.” Clergy, especially, need to accept their limitations in giftedness as a blessing from God. By this realization they embrace *the gift of being part of a whole body*.

In a presentation to the Beeson Institute for Advanced Church Leadership, Dale Galloway extrapolates two contrasting results in this matter of either hoarding or sharing ministry:

Whenever clergy become the elite, hoarding and doing ministry all by themselves, the church stagnates, declines and dies. Whenever ministry is shared and entrusted to laypeople, the church stops just trying to survive and starts thriving and making its impact in changing lives and changing the world.

Any honest observer of today’s Church landscape cannot help but recognize a growing dissent among the *laos*. The laity are no longer content to pay up, pray up, and shut up. The laity do not want trivial pursuits. One author commented on the gap between clergy and laity, titling his book The Gathering Storm in the Church (Hadden).

In fact, clergy exacerbate the problem by hoarding ministry because “we communicate a lack of trust by refusing to delegate” (Price 62). Kenneth Chafin rightly observes that laity want more than just to vote yes at board meetings and to install linoleum in the kitchen on Saturday at the church (3). Those are valid and vital ministries

exercising God-given gifts, but those are not the only things laity can do. On the reverse side, the laity often encourage lay passivity, inertia, and ignorance (Stott 46). Richard C. Halverson says the net result of putting the laity off from ministry is the “tragedy of the unemployed” (9-10). Consequently, church staff are called to multiply, not monopolize, ministry.

One other critical note must be sounded in today’s climate. Francis O. Ayres wisely points out that Paul teaches the Church “you are the temple of God” in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19. The first time “you” is plural; the second time it is singular. “Do you not know that you [plural] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [singular]? (1 Cor. 3:16, NRSV). The critical point is that *individuals cannot be the temple of God without abiding in the whole body, which is the temple of God* (39). Faith and ministry alike are personal but not private. No more than clergy should attempt solo ministry should laypersons cut themselves off from the body of Christ.

Reclaiming the biblical model creates a culture of mutual servanthood. Mutual distrust must be counteracted by the pattern of Jesus whose life and ministry modeled service. Jesus did not just *do* ministry; Jesus *was* a servant. The clergy must recapture the truth that they are called to serve the *laos*, not the other way around. *Laos* are not the clergy’s helpless assistants. The *laos* must recapture the truth that they are called to serve the world. Jesus served his disciples, washing their feet. He then commissioned them—and all believers—to serve others. When the locus of each person’s calling becomes clear, the Church becomes what God intends it to be.

Ben Patterson uses the image of mountain climbers being on belay. Those climbing the dangerous places have placed trust in those who have them on belay. Those

holding on literally hold the lives of the others in their hands. These roles may be exchanged repeatedly as the heights are scaled (29). What a powerful image for *kleros* and *laos* to seize. Believers each keep the other on belay. In truth, their very lives depend on serving one another and trusting one another implicitly.

Creating such a mind-set or culture requires time. These enormous conceptual changes require dramatic alterations in actions and expectations. For clergy, change means laying down certain callings; for laity, change means taking up ministries long left to clergy. Stevens and Collins suggest ten key principles for liberating laity for ministry. The first five are (1) work with the whole, (2) cultivate healthy interdependence among the members, (3) lead the process, not the people—evoke the gifts, (4) cultivate the culture, and (5) make changes slowly and indirectly (128). To attempt too much too soon fails to recognize systems reality and short-circuits the entire process.

The Church's model for this culture cannot be other than Jesus, himself. Believers must imitate the model of the one who is the ultimate Servant-Leader. This vision drives them back to the biblical picture, perpetually warning them against being squeezed into the world's hierarchical and domineering mold. Jesus calls believers to serve. The most fundamental reason believers serve is because Jesus himself came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NRSV).

Reclaiming the biblical model includes restoring a biblical understanding of the gifts of the Spirit. At least five keys must be grasped in the context of the spiritual gifts: (1) The Spirit gives a multiplicity of gifts *to the whole body*; (2) Laity, no less than clergy, are recipients of the gifts; (3) These gifts are to be used to implement God's work in the world; (4) The gifts are not to be used in isolation but in *cooperation*; and, (5) The

gifts are not for self-glorification but *for the common good*.

These truths must be embraced with new fervor in this increasingly isolated culture. The Church must proclaim that no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian exists. Every believer needs every other. The gifts in totality only exist within the body as a whole. Paul's humorous analogy is right on target. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Cor. 12:21, NRSV). To embrace the foolish idea that "I am saved and don't need anyone else" is not only to arrogantly state one has no need of others but also reflects cocky self-centeredness, which is the very essence of sin and the antithesis of the spirit of Christ.

Reclaiming the biblical model means the Church recognizes the laity is called to ministry in every sector of life. When Satan could not get the Church to turn from ministry completely, his ruse took the step of minimizing it by truncating its participation and scope. The first step was to suggest that ministry ought to be left to the real professionals. They are the ones who can do it correctly. Just as one would not expect laypersons to perform surgery, one should not expect laypersons to do ministry. If some persistent laypersons insisted ministry belonged to them, as well, the second line of deceit was to limit its scope by allowing that ministry could be done by laity, but only on Sunday or at church. Nevertheless, it certainly did not belong in the rest of the week or rest of the world.

The truth is precisely to the contrary. Believers are called and gifted to minister in six sectors of service: personal, family, congregational, community, occupational, and civic/political (Feucht 75). The five sectors beyond the church are neither second class nor an afterthought. Rather, ministry in the church is precisely for the development of the

gifts for use beyond the church. God's calling is not to retreat from the world but to equip believers to go into the world to transform the world by his grace. "Whatever your task, put yourself into it, as done for the Lord and not your masters" (Peterson, Col. 3:23).

Three views can prevail in this matter of laity in life. First, the laity leave Church, make a raid into the enemy territory of the world, then retreat to the sanctuary of the Church. Second, life exists in sectors, with the religious as one sector. Laity simply move into the appropriate sector at the appropriate time. Each has little to do with the other, and the faith sector hardly informs all the others. Third, the Church is at the heart of the world. Each sector of life is intimately interrelated, and the Church enters every sector to flavor it as salt seasons food (Weber 11-13). This third view is at the heart of God.

Reclaiming the biblical model happens as believers reclaim the Church's call to kingdom ministry and mission. The Church is truly a "missional Church" (Guder et al.). It does not exist to *do* ministry. It exists *by* ministry as surely as a fire exists by burning. Mission and ministry are neither optional nor peripheral. They are the heartbeat of the Church:

Paul and the other writers of the New Testament, and many in the Old, simply take office-bearers for granted as necessary in the church. What they insist upon explicitly, insistently, and incessantly is that all men are ministers equally important in the task that God has given to the church.... The church exists to serve the world and has no being except as a servant. (Ayres 26-27, 31)

Tragically, clergy have frequently "allowed" laity to do only the most trivial or meaningless tasks. Not only has this attitude crushed the spirit of the laity, but it has also squelched the vision for the laity. "The problem is that *we have substituted involvement for direction* [emphasis mine]" (Walker 46). The Church needs new eyes to see the laity not as volunteers, but as ones who have sworn allegiance to the kingdom of God

(Patterson 29). Clergy ought not ask laity to do small things for God precisely because God has no small things to be done in his kingdom. Everything done for God is great. The clergy's mission is not to make the Church comfortable but to reach out to a world hell-bent for destruction. The call is not to ease but to conquer. The Commander calls his faithful to forsake everything and follow him into the battle.

Reclaiming the biblical model happens when the Church restructures delegation of clergy time and energy commitment. So much clergy time is spent in caring for the sick, lonely, and needy. The point is not that the clergy should be unconcerned about these things; the point is precisely the opposite. The clergy should be so concerned about these needs that they marshal the resources of all God's people to meet the needs. Those who are comfortable in the old ruts will not quickly accept this change; however, believers must discern their motivation, whether it is to please people or to please God. What the *kleros* cannot do alone, the *laos* and *kleros* can do together.

This change in mind-set can be illustrated by the difference between offering care for the injured at the bottom of a cliff or building a fence at the top so people do not fall off. This paradigm shift means that the clergy and laity alike need to understand the clergy must allocate far more time to spend with the healthy, who in turn will go to the sick and lonely (Steinbron, Can the Pastor 40). Thus, the *laos* provide the care, not simply the *kleros*. "The saints are to be equipped *for their own ministry* [emphasis mine]. The pastor should not be trying to replicate his or her own ministry but to release theirs" (Williams and Gangel 31).

This understanding comes slowly. A woman went to the hospital, but the pastor did not get by for a week. When he came, she accused him that the church did not care;

however, he discovered that an average of three people from the church had visited her each day. He commented with regret that she failed to recognize that the *church* had indeed ministered to her. Nevertheless, since the *pastor* had not come by, she thought she had not received real ministry from the church (S. Seamands).

Parenthetically, this concept often calls for a changing role in the pastors' own minds. They must let go of some things that they really enjoy. In fact, this hoarding of ministry has tragically become a hindrance and bottleneck to providing ministry. Often the question must be asked of both clergy and laity if they really *want* to grow with the attendant changes involved (Mathison 28).

Reclaiming the biblical model means the Church learns to reclaim ministry out of weakness, not strength. So often fear becomes the dominant mover instead of grace. Clergy fear the laity will be inadequate for the task. Laity want noteworthy meaning and ministry but fear the same inadequacy. The whole Church must honestly ask with Paul, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16, NRSV). The honest answer is that no one is—neither clergy nor laity. Their sufficiency is in Christ alone. When believers settle that issue, a new trust can infill them. *Since all ministry is Christ's ministry and is done through the Spirit's giftedness, God will enable the ministry.* This truth does not cut the laity and clergy apart from one another but binds them together in harmony. When clergy equip the laity, neither need fear inadequacy; rather, clergy are affirmed as laity are released to effective ministry, affirmed by the body.

In fact, believers discover that their brokenness is precisely what makes them available to God:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our

affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4, NRSV)

Again Paul records Jesus' words to him:

[B]ut he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Cor. 12:9, NRSV)

Reclaiming the biblical model includes clarifying the authority and responsibility of the pastor. If pastors must release ministry to the laity, the laity must also release the pastors from expectations wrongly held for centuries that they are to do ministry alone. The Church (and especially the clergy) must repudiate the world's viewpoint and mind-set. They must recognize their calling as inverse to that of the world's way of thinking: (1) Their call is to serve, not command (Mark 9:33-35); (2) Their call is to be respectful, not condescending (Rom. 12:3); (3) Their call is to be exemplary, not domineering (1 Pet. 5:3); (4) Their call is to be equal, not superior (Rom. 12:10); and, (5) Their call is to be mutually submissive, not coercive (Eph. 5:21; Steinbron, Can the Pastor 113).

Conclusion

The conductor steps to the podium and taps his baton. A hush falls across the audience. The conductor motions and beautiful music swells majestically and washes across the hall. No one assumes the conductor created the music; everyone knows the orchestra did. At the same time, everyone is equally aware of the fact that the orchestra could not create the music apart from the conductor.

In the same way, the *kleros* operate with the *laos* as the conductor operates within the orchestra. While the conductor does not play the music, neither does the violinist ignore the conductor. The quality of the symphony depends on their mutual interdependence (Steinbron, Can the Pastor 147). *Kleros* are not called to power but to

service of the *laos*. Conflict between conductor and symphony creates only “dis-chord.” Cooperation creates majesty.

Today’s Church, if it is to be what God created it to be, must grasp God’s plan for the *kleros* to operate as servants within the *laos* to equip, inspire, and empower the *laos* for ministry. The world awaits the symphony of praise that will proclaim the wonders of Jesus Christ and the salvation he has bought by his own blood at the cross. What is at stake are the future of the church—the Bride of Christ—and the eternal souls of God’s children across the world.

Power of the Team—Theology of Sacred Partnership

In order for any team to function in a healthy fashion, a healthy environment must be present. For the altar prayer ministry team to operate as a truly credible arm of the church’s prayer ministry, the members must understand their roles, make a commitment to be faithful to that calling, and remain in accountable community with others on the team.

Key Biblical Texts

God never intended for people to live in isolation. From the dawn of creation, God asserted, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion to help him” (Gen. 2:18, NLT).

Old Testament mentors. Scripture abounds with examples of those who mentored others along life’s journey. Moses developed Joshua so that he was prepared to take leadership at a critical time in Israel’s history. Elijah passed his mantel on to Elisha. Eli mentored young Samuel, sadly neglecting to do the same for his own sons. Samuel anointed young David to take the place of Saul in guiding Israel. Jehoiada raised and taught Joash godly values. In fact, the biblical account states, “All his life Joash did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight because Jehoiada the priest instructed him” (2 Kings 12:2, NLT). By contrast, the times of greatest chaos in Israel’s history were times when no leaders were being developed. Occasional leaders came and went but their influence

lasted no longer than their lifetime (see Judges).

Jesus. Jesus called disciples to come be with him. Jesus called them to follow him so they could learn from him (Matt. 4:19). Before they went out to serve him, they took time to be with him (Matt. 16:24; 19:21; John 8:12). This presence with Jesus was abiding in the richest school of experience. Jesus never lost sight of team ministry. He sent out disciples two-by-two (Luke 10:1). He helped his disciples learn in the laboratory of experience. When he fed the five thousand, he empowered the disciples working together to organize the people (Matt. 14:19). He spent time with a core group of disciples—Peter, James, and John—to empower them for ministry (Matt. 17:1-8). In fact, one can observe that the disciples' greatest failures resulted from times when they lived in isolation (Mark 14:68-71). The lone separated disciple after the resurrection—Thomas—lacked faith when the others believed Christ had risen. Most tragic of all, Judas went out into the night and took his life in the darkest hell of loneliness (Matt. 27:5).

Paul. Paul keenly appreciated the wisdom of team ministry. He learned it when Ananias came to lay hands on him to receive his sight (Acts 9:17). He experienced it when Barnabas came alongside to give him a chance to be trusted by the church (Acts 9:27), to teach him (Acts 11:25-26), and ultimately to partner with him on the first missionary journey. The early Church understood by divine guidance that ministry is best done in concert with others. After praying, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas to undertake their missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3). Verse 4 adds that being sent out by the Church is tantamount to being sent out by the Holy Spirit. Paul continued to try to pass this concept along by mentoring Mark (a partially aborted effort), Timothy, and Titus. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus continue to provide keen insight for those who are learning how to be Christian leaders. Paul reached out to many more, including Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:3), Onesimus (Philem. 10), and Tychicus (Eph. 6:21).

Review of Selected Literature on Team Ministry—John Wesley

John Wesley was not the only leader God used in his day; however, Wesley's

genius and enduring impact emerged from his use of small groups. These societies, classes, and bands had the common thread of holding one another accountable to commitments upon which all had mutually agreed. To that end, such accountability was far from restrictive; rather, it linked people to one another that they might find strength from one another to break the chains of sin and forge a new life of freedom in the Spirit. David Lowes Watson speaks to this issue of commitment:

The fact of the matter is that Christians throughout the history of the church have found the means of grace to be altogether trustworthy. Compared with the unreliability and volatility of individual Christian commitment and experience, these seasoned habits are foolproof. And just as people willingly bind themselves to contracts which they wish to keep inviolate in the midst of their own inconsistencies, so Christians need to bind themselves willingly to those means of grace which empower their works of obedience, and thereby maintain their relationship with God in Christ.

One need only note how readily persons sign financial and real estate agreements, often committing decades of their lives to repayments, to make the obvious contrast with Christians who are unwilling to make even a minimal commitment to what are self-evidently the basics of their discipleship. (99)

Class meetings in the Wesleyan tradition held members accountable for personal Christian discipleship, availing themselves of the means of grace, living in the world through service, remaining connected to the Church, and abiding in the Holy Spirit (Watson 44-51). Albert Outler makes this comment on Wesley's class meetings:

[Wesley was not] a theologian's theologian. His chief intellectual interest, and achievement, was in what one could call a folk theology: the Christian message in its fullness and integrity, in "plain words for plain people." (vii)

These covenant groups typically had written agreements. Failure to keep them would result in the group helping to correct the wayward person or, if the person persisted in waywardness, expulsion from the group. Neither of these responses was harsh or legalistic because their intent was always to speak the truth in love. The essential

role of these accountability groups was remedial. In other words, they were to “remedy” the situation to help the other person. This goal follows the same spirit Jesus had when he spoke of dealing with one who had sinned. “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back” (Matt. 18:15, NLT) Even the expulsion of a person from a group would show the seriousness of the situation, hopefully leading to repentance.

Practices enjoined for Wesley’s class members fell into two categories—works of mercy and works of piety. Works of mercy included two inverse categories. The first was doing good and the second avoiding sin. Works of piety included worship, sacrament, prayer, Scripture, fellowship, and fasting (Watson 39-40). Wesley thus kept from being exclusively inward or outward. The participants balanced personal faith and public practice. Practice grew of faith and faith informed practice.

Martha Bowman Altar Prayer Ministry Covenant

While discerning the covenant for the altar prayer ministry team, three primary foci emerged—commitment to the Lord, commitment to the ministry, and commitment to the team. The commitments were to be clear without being legalistic. To that end, broad strokes were used, asking the participants to be accountable to others in the group and to monitor their own hearts. If integrity were compromised in the prayer ministry leaders, the entire ministry could be compromised. Individual and team integrity were considered foundational to ministry integrity. Ministry integrity, in turn, reflected on the fundamental integrity of the Church and its Lord.

Commitment to the Lord, without a doubt, was the most critical arena of all.

The participants bore witness to their faith in Christ. With that common ground, all were

asked to commit to keeping personal devotional disciplines, availing themselves of the means of grace. At a basic level, they were asked to remain consistently in worship within the body of Christ. The corporate means of grace, such as Holy Communion and prayers, should be used whenever possible. The gifts are given to the Church and operate within the Church. To attempt to minister apart from the Church would be equivalent to an arm hoping to live apart from the body or a branch expecting to live apart from the vine.

Personal spiritual disciplines were understood to be means of grace rather than legalistic rules by which participants were bound. Personal disciplines included prayer, Scripture reading and meditation, fasting, and “formative listening to the voice of God” (Martyn, “Lay Pastor’s Covenant”). Not to grasp the means of grace would be as self-defeating as failing to eat when hungry or to sleep when tired. Grace only builds up. In the covenant context, the group recognized that often the times people feel least willing to be held accountable is when they need it the most. Believers thus bind themselves to a covenant in a moment of strength so that they cannot release themselves from the covenant in a moment of weakness. The team helped one another to remain steadfast when emotions and feelings would otherwise set them adrift on their whims or ungodly desires.

Commitment to the ministry included a willingness to share the spiritual gifts God had bestowed. The participants recognized that their ministry was simply an extension of Christ’s ministry. Consequently, faithfully maintaining the connection to Christ was essential. The ministry could not be accomplished by techniques, secret words, or manipulation. It must depend utterly on Jesus. Jesus said, “Apart from me you

can do nothing” (John 15:5, RSV). Part of the commitment to the ministry further included a strong commitment to absolute confidentiality. When engaged in this kind of personal ministry, those in need grant the gift of trust. To abuse that trust would be for them to have cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6).

Commitment to the team was a commitment to live in the Spirit and the life of the body of Christ. Each person’s fidelity built up the others’ spirits and validated the ministry. This mutual connectedness meant that each committed to a one or two-year initial participation, renewable annually thereafter. Partnership meant committing to a bond that held two ways. Not only would others hold a participant accountable to the covenant, but also that person would likewise bear a responsibility to hold others accountable.

One can observe a vital distinction here. Accountability fits beneath partnership. The focus on partnership meant that the primary role of each participant was to build up, strengthen, and encourage the others. Accountability was only one aspect of that process. The picture was not one of a faultfinder standing over a person to catch them doing wrong; rather, the picture was of mountain climbers attached to other persons to catch them if they fall. The goal was not to criticize but to save them and lift them up.

Commitments to the team included confidentiality, ongoing learning, and a desire to keep growing both as individuals and as partners in the ministry. Ongoing team commitment further was a commitment to pray for others on the altar prayer ministry team and to meet together at least once a month as a whole group, with another small group meetings periodically. The commitment meant a desire to be encouragers, beginning intercessory prayer on the team’s own doorstep.

The spirit of humble self-surrender and service is articulated profoundly in John Wesley's "Covenant Service":

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee; exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen. (607)

This spirit of submission gave the classes the spirit of grace apart from which the covenant would be dead legalism. These meetings provided the connective strength of the Methodist movement and the means by which members "watch over one another in love" (Wesley, Oxford Edition 8: 269).

Conclusion

Paul's analogy of the Church as the body of Christ unfolds the concept of team ministry so powerfully. The human body functions properly only when every part does what it has been designed to do in cooperation with every other part. Team ministry functions well, also, when the parts synchronize with one another. Cooperation, not competition, must be the watchword of the group. Integrity provides the bedrock for the ministry because if trust were violated, the relationships on which the ministry depends (both with God and with people) are in jeopardy. Confidentiality cannot be compromised. The participants are entrusted with things close to people's hearts. These things—and the people who share them—must be treated with all the dignity and respect accorded to them by their heavenly Father.

In summary, the four pillars of the power of prayer, power of the altar, power of the laity, and power of the team provide a foundation that authenticates both the premise

and practice of the intercessory prayer ministry designed in this project. The literature validates personal ministry in a corporate context. Ministry exists within the gifting of the body of Christ. Transformation comes as people connect to God. Furthermore, transformation often happens as equipped intercessors come alongside those in need of grace. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in setting up the parameters of the project as well as the means by which the results were gathered and assessed.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The goal of this project was to design a course of training that would help equip laypeople at Martha Bowman Church to minister at the altar with confidence, competence, and comfortableness. The anticipated fruit of this ministry was that people would encounter the living God in Christ in transforming power as these lay ministers came alongside them in prayer.

The methodology involved training and equipping laity at Martha Bowman Memorial United Methodist Church (UMC) in Macon, Georgia, to serve in altar prayer ministry. The goal was to establish an effective and ongoing arm of Martha Bowman's prayer ministry that would effectively minister to people in personal, face-to-face intercessory prayer. The ultimate objective of this project involved the establishment of a mind-set in the church where people know that their greatest need is an ongoing relationship with God. That relationship is initiated by a vital encounter with God. One means by which it can happen is through the help of a trained intercessor at the altar.

Review of the Problem and Purpose

Scripture warns people to stay vigilant lest they have the form of godliness without any power (2 Tim. 3:5). This warning calls God's people to constant renewal. New wine must have new wineskins (Matt. 9:17). Old forms must be infused with new life.

The Problem Revisited

While many churches have altars, many neglect to use them. The altar has been utilized powerfully, particularly in America since about 1800. While its initial focus lay

in calling sinners to repentance, the altar (without losing the earlier emphasis) can be expanded to become a place where people meet God for help regardless of their circumstances or need. Whether fear, ignorance, or imagined sophistication have led to the altar's declining use in many churches, it can be reclaimed for the glory of God, the building up of believers, and the redemption of the lost.

The Purpose Revisited

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip lay people to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. The fruit of the project was ultimately to help people encounter the living God in Christ as trained intercessors came alongside them in prayer. Nevertheless, an encounter alone can never suffice. Its design was to initiate, accelerate, or mature an ongoing relationship with God.

The methodology involved training a team of laity for altar prayer ministry at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC. Because of the conviction that personal transformation occurs when people meet God in Jesus Christ, Christians believe prayer provides a primary arena within the ministry of the Church for such a meeting. Furthermore, they believe that God has gifted his people through the Holy Spirit for helping others to a spiritual breakthrough. While on the one hand many agree with this appraisal, many are, on the other hand, fearful of serving in such a capacity because they feel inadequate to the calling. The goal of the project was to evaluate the training to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Although the project was conducted within the context of Martha Bowman Memorial UMC, a further goal was that transferable concepts may emerge that could benefit other churches interested in similar ministry.

Another key component of the methodology was the gathering of information to construct a training course that would enlighten, encourage, and equip the laity for altar prayer ministry. A survey of available literature discovered a wealth of information on prayer, including intercessory prayer, a growing body of literature on lay ministry, but a small number of works on the altar. In fact, most of the information on altars (and the little bit on altar ministry) is fairly old. Research has discovered, by and large, a surprising paucity of information on altar prayer ministry.

Consequently, much of the syllabus was developed through synthesis of available information, gathering such training materials as were available at some local churches and learning from some individuals who engage effectively in altar prayer ministry. Many churches doing effective altar prayer ministry focus primarily on leading people to salvation. Others have a distinctly charismatic flavor. My goal has been to provide training that would equip people to minister at the altar comfortably, competently, and confidently in the Martha Bowman Church context.

Worthy of special note is that one essential component of the training included opportunities for these subjects to do hands-on prayer ministry both in the classes and in the worship services. This practical experience kept the class from becoming simply a Western-style didactic format of pouring out information. Learning and practice happened in synchronicity.

The nature of these classes was not to be exhaustive in any one area. The goal, instead, was to instruct people in the meaning of intercession, to inspire people to want to be involved in intercession, and to equip people with some tools to enable their intercession with a notable degree of confidence, competence, and comfortableness.

Guiding Research Questions

In order to evaluate the training involved (as well as the ministry given), the general framework included examining movement through the process. I tried to see where people came from, where they moved, and how they made the transition. This information enabled me to look at the process by means of the from-through-to concept (Martyn, Personal interview).

Research Question # 1

What experience, confidence level, and knowledge about altar prayer ministry characterized the participants prior to the training?

A brief semi-structured interview at the inception of the class garnered information concerning the participants' sense of preparedness for altar prayer ministry. Of particular interest was information about issues such as knowledge, experience, and confidence level.

Research Question # 2

What elements of the training contributed to changes in knowledge and confidence level of the altar prayer ministry team?

Once again, a second semi-structured interview provided core information about the value of the training and its impact on the participants. A consistent series of open-ended questions guided the interviews (see Appendix E). In addition, participants turned in a one-page reflection each week regarding their learning, their experience, and their own spiritual journey.

The critical goal here was to attempt to identify what factors were most beneficial in acting as a catalyst for participants to grow in confidence, competence, and

comfortableness. Learning that information would notably help not only evaluate the training but improve it. Since the purpose of the training was not simply the project itself but opening a new and ongoing arm of ministry, this feedback loop was critical to me.

Research Question # 3

How did the participants in the altar prayer ministry team describe their awareness of the presence of the living God during or after the altar prayer experience?

This feedback came through two sources. First, questions were incorporated into the semi-structured interview that allowed participants to speak out of their experience. In addition, written responses were secured from the congregation, many of whom were recipients of altar prayer ministry. They would be able to evaluate their own experience of meeting God, if that occurred. They could also evaluate the helpfulness of the altar prayer team participants who prayed with them.

Methodology

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training to equip laypeople to minister effectively and comfortably at the altar in the Martha Bowman Church context. The ultimate goal was to help people meet God in transformational power as intercessors prayed with them. This research was an evaluative study of a qualitative nature. It used the techniques of semi-structured interviews and written weekly reflections from the participants to assess transformation.

In the study, the participants were asked to identify the components most helpful in effecting personal transformation as well as confidence to engage in prayer ministry. The training was specifically designed to develop in participants knowledge that would guide them, inspiration that would motivate them, and confidence that would empower

them. To that end, the course was designed with the following flow in mind. God calls laypeople to pray. God calls laity into a personal relationship with himself. God invites them to partner with him, battle the forces of darkness with him, and grow in him, making his house a house of prayer for all nations. As they learn to listen to God and learn the language of healing intercession, God births love in their hearts so that they may be used as his agents for true wholeness.

The intent was never to create a fabricated how-to template for altar prayer that could be dropped onto any situation or person. Instead, the goal was to equip the participants with a variety of tools out of which they could draw something helpful as the person and circumstance dictated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The contrast is analogous to the difference between teaching someone *what* to think and *how* to think. No comparison group was used.

Population of the Study

The leadership of Martha Bowman's prayer ministry handpicked the participants of this study. The selection team included the prayer ministry coordinator, the director of lay ministries, the head of the Sunday prayer intercessors, leader of the pastors' prayer shield, and the senior pastor. This team was selected to include people representative of the various worship services and knowledgeable of the people who worship there.

The participants were chosen based on this team's assessment of them as people who showed noteworthy spiritual maturity and who seemed to have a particular heart for prayer ministry. In the selection process, the team endeavored to balance the participants based on the relative populations of the worship service they represented. This equilibrium was maintained for three reasons. First, I wanted people to be available in

every worship setting. Second, I wanted ministers who knew many of the people in their respective worship service. Third, I wanted people who would be comfortable ministering in that particular worship context. “Above all, we want people called by God and equipped for ministry at the altar” (Martyn, Personal interview).

In order to have a broad-based group available for ministry in three different worship services, the selection team chose an initial group of twenty-five to which I sent an invitation to participate, asking them to pray about their involvement (see Appendix A). Recognizing that some would decline, the goal was to train a group distributed fairly evenly among the three worship services. I followed up the letter with a personal contact by phone about a week later asking them about their response. The selection was made with an attempt to balance age, gender, primary service of worship, and length of time at the church.

The selection team set the minimum age for this particular group at 17. I wanted to make sure a certain maturity level was present in each participant. While the selection team might not normally have included participants this young, through the years the church has developed a level of maturity in some youth that could not only be trusted but could be a great asset to this ministry. Furthermore, Martha Bowman has a notably large youth presence especially at the contemporary service and the selection team thought a mature youth could make an important contribution.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

I sent each of the initial participants a letter explaining the Doctor of Ministry project (see Appendix A), asking them to pray about their participation. Included was a copy of the Altar Prayer Ministry Team Covenant that participants would be asked to

sign (see Appendix G). The letter was sent on church stationery. It informed the potential participants that I would personally contact them after about a week. This time frame would give them a week to pray and to seek God in this matter.

I wanted them to be sure they understood that while this was a project for the dissertation, it was far more importantly an emerging arm of the prayer ministry of the local church. That is why the selection team chose the finest people for this cause. Each person understood the overview of the project. A twelve-week training course comprised the heart of the project. Each participant knew the ultimate goal was to train intercessors that could confidently, competently, and comfortably help people encounter the living God in Christ through altar prayer. They also knew they would turn in weekly reports of their learning, experience, and spiritual journey.

Two primary instruments were used in this project for data collection. First, the participants turned in a one-page summary weekly of their insights and personal experience so I could do ongoing evaluation and assessment. The goal of this feedback loop was more than academic; rather, its purpose ultimately was to improve the training so that others could be more effectively equipped for altar prayer ministry in the future.

Second, semi-structured interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the project allowed me to garner key information. At the first interview, I could assess where the participants began in terms of their personal confidence and competence concerning altar prayer ministry. It could also help me understand what elements subsequently served as catalysts to effect positive growth both personally and in altar prayer ministry. In the final interview, I could assess what transformation ultimately occurred in the participants' confidence, competence, and comfortableness as a consequence of the training and praxis

involved in the project.

One further element was incorporated as part of the training class. Every week I sent a letter to participants that offered a word of encouragement and shared a prayer I was lifting up to the Lord on their behalf that week.

At the conclusion of the project, one other key data-gathering instrument was utilized. I distributed a half-page evaluation sheet to the congregation one Sunday and asked for their feedback on the idea of altar prayer ministry as a whole and feedback in particular if they had been recipients of altar prayer. Although the primary instruments focused on the project's goal—the training, this helped assess the ultimate fruit emerging from the ministry.

Variables

The independent variable in this project was the altar prayer training class offered across the twelve-week period. I prepared this class by researching and gathering materials that were molded into an appropriate curriculum. The twelve classes dealt with the subjects noted in Table 1.3 (p. 20).

The dependent variable was the transformation experienced by the altar prayer ministry team and the response from those with whom they prayed. Most of the subjects had little to no experience in this ministry at all. The intervening variables that could have impacted the outcomes include prior experience, age, gender, service setting, length of time at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC, and denominational background. The service setting, in particular, was worthy of noting because the altar is used far more commonly in the contemporary worship service than in the traditional services.

Generalizability

The genesis of this project grew out of my conviction to heed Jesus' call to make the Church a house of prayer. Because many do not know how to pray, they want assistance in coming before God. They are like the paralyzed man in Mark 2, who needed aid in getting to Jesus. Many people paralyzed in spirit in the Church today need similar help. A trained and prepared altar prayer team could help meet that need.

Prior to the inception of the project, a strong prayer ministry foundation was already in place at Martha Bowman UMC. Building on this strong foundation proved an invaluable asset.

Twenty-five participants were invited to be a part of the altar prayer training class in numbers proportionate to their primary worship service setting. Five were invited from the 8:30 a.m. traditional service (112 average attendance), ten from the 9:30 a.m. contemporary service (343 average attendance), and ten from the 11:00 a.m. traditional service (352 average attendance). In the end, three accepted from 8:30, six from 9:30, and six from 11:00.

Generalizability for similar outcomes to this study depends on whether it is replicated in a congregation of similar size, demographic makeup, spiritual vitality, worship styles, and prayer ministry grounding. Generalizability could be made less closely concerning smaller churches that approximate one particular worship service's size/style at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC.

The twelve-week class setting allowed time to process information, to engage in hands-on experience, and to take a personal transformational spiritual journey. No comparison was done for a weekend retreat setting or with use of another curriculum. I

assumed a positive response from the participants since they had strong dedication to God, warm hearts for prayer, good relationships with me, earnest desires to be available to God for ministry, and firm commitment to Scripture as the basis for the class.

Data Analysis

The data emerging from the one-page weekly reflections and semi-structured interviews was, by nature, more subjective. At the same time, it reflected feedback in two areas. First, it identified self-assessment of the participants concerning their insights, learning, personal growth, and transformation during the time the project was conducted. Second, it identified important areas in the altar prayer training class that were of greatest value in developing their competence and confidence. The goal was to create a feedback loop that would allow the training to be improved for the future.

A final component of the feedback, which really had its focus on the fruit of the research, included getting written responses from the congregation on their experience with the altar prayer ministry team and their opinions of the whole concept of altar prayer ministry (see Appendix F).

Chapter 4 presents the findings from these evaluative measures. It identifies responses both from both the primary population—the altar prayer ministry team—and the secondary population—the congregation.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This project grew out of two key motivations, one theological and one contextual. First, the theological conviction came from the universal witness of the power of prayer painted across the tapestry of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. In particular, I could not escape the centrality of prayer in Jesus' life and his dynamic declaration that his house was to be a house of prayer. Second, the contextual conviction arose from my pastor's heart. Pastors have the rare privilege of often being invited into the hidden recesses of people's trials, struggles, and needs. Pastors immediately are driven to their knees by recognizing two contrasting truths—first, they cannot meet these needs, and second, God can. The salient question arising from these twin observations is how people can gain access to the help that God alone can give. The consistent witness of Scripture and the unwavering example of Jesus give the answer. A primary place where people encounter God in life-changing power is through the avenue of prayer.

Few believers would dispute the validity of dependence on prayer to connect persons to God; however, additional issues arise. People wonder how to pray to connect to God. People wonder if there are right or wrong ways to pray that help or hinder. People speculate about when happens when someone feels unable to pray. People are unsure if a person can be unworthy to pray. People question whether God will listen to just anyone. People are unsure whether God hears if a person has committed a great sin. The net consideration of such questions asks whether a person can be assured of an avenue to God. Further, if one can be assured of coming to God, people wonder if a caring friend can travel that avenue with the person in need.

Knitting together the human need and the divine compassion called my heart to raise up a group of intercessors that could, indeed, come alongside those in need to travel together to the heart of God. Regardless of the person, the need, or the circumstance, these faithful intercessors could be conduits through which God's grace would flow. They would not themselves be the healers, but they would be the channels through which God's healing presence would come to people.

Consequently, the purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip lay people to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. The fruit of the project was ultimately to help people encounter the living God in Christ as trained intercessors came alongside them in prayer. The further goal was that the encounter would draw people into an ongoing, deepening relationship with the Lord.

Guiding Research Questions

Three guiding research questions gave direction to the project. These were neither esoteric in essence nor strictly cerebral in intent. Nothing about this project was designed on a purely theoretical model. On the contrary, it grew out of contextual need and sought to respond to practical concerns. If it lacked living reality, it would fail in the goal set forth.

Research Question # 1

What experience, confidence level, and knowledge about altar prayer ministry characterized the participants prior to the training?

Research Question # 2

What elements of the training contributed to changes in knowledge and

confidence level of the altar prayer ministry team?

Research Question # 3

How did the participants in the altar prayer ministry team describe their awareness of the presence of the living God during or after the altar prayer experience?

Profile of the Subjects

The selection team deliberately chose a cross-section of persons from the church as a whole. In particular, the team selected a group that reflected the makeup of each of the church's three services so that each arm of the team looked very similar to the particular segment of the congregation from which it was drawn. The selection team made an attempt to maintain balance in terms of gender and age while keeping spiritual maturity as the constant, uncompromising benchmark in the selection process.

The selection team invited twenty-five people to participate. From the 8:30 service (attendance 112), they invited five. From the 9:30 (attendance 343) and 11:00 (attendance 352) services, they invited ten each. The selection team believed that the final Altar Prayer Ministry Team should simply be comprised of those who agreed to participate. While the question of balance came up, the team believed God would draw those he wanted to this group and it would have his balance. Out of the twenty-five who were invited, ten declined. In the end, fifteen participated in the class. In addition, the fifteen had a solid balance that reflected our church population. Ultimately, three of the team members came from the 8:30 service and six apiece emerged from the 9:30 and 11:00 services (see Figure 4.1).

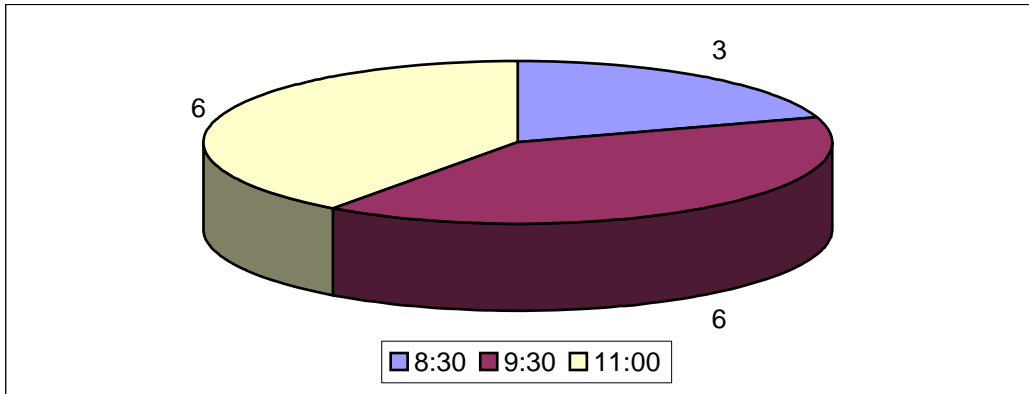


Figure 4.1. Distribution of team by service.

Interestingly, the ten who declined participation did so after serious consideration, not out of a casual lack of interest. Four cited a lack of calling to the ministry after they had prayed over the invitation. Since the schedule of all the classes had been sent out with the invitation, two declined because they could not make all the meetings. The final four indicated that prior commitments to service in other areas of the church obligated them to their capacity and led them to say no. Each sincerely prayed over the invitation and responded as much in God's spirit as those who accepted the invitation (see Figure 4.2).

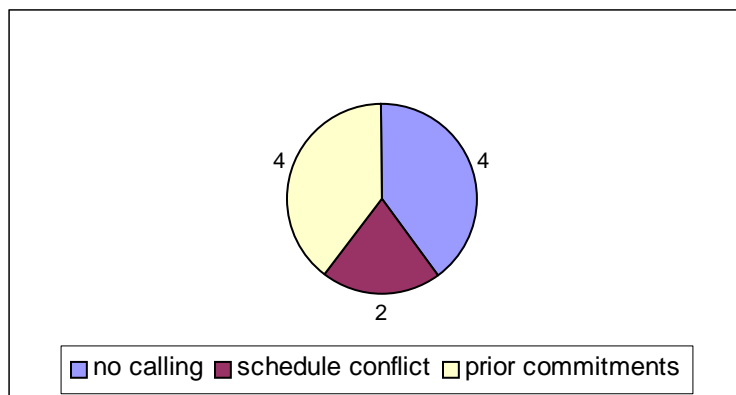


Figure 4.2. Reasons for declining to participate.

Of the fifteen participants, eight were women and seven were men (see Figure 4.3).

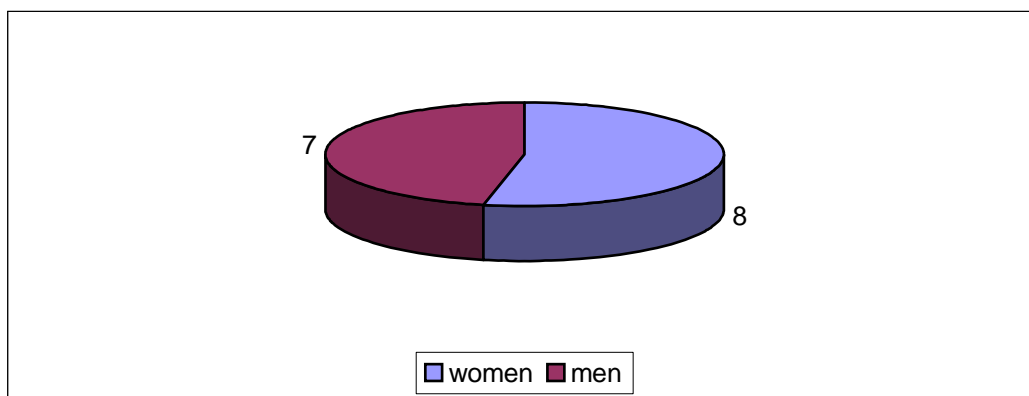


Figure 4.3. Gender balance of the altar prayer team.

On the team, one was a teen (selected because of demonstrating unusual spiritual maturity), two were in their early 30s, two were in their upper 30s, three were in their 40s, four were in their 50s, and three were 60 or older. While age and gender certainly

merited careful deliberation, spiritual maturity was the foremost criterion in the selection process (see Figure 4.4).

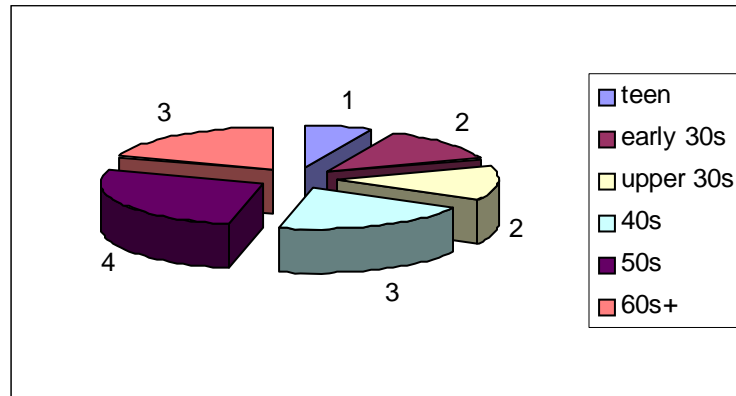


Figure 4.4. Age distribution of the altar prayer team.

Nature of the Qualitative Process

Before entering the analysis of the data collected, consideration of the qualitative process bears important reflection. In contrast to qualitative analysis, quantitative study lends itself far more easily to dispassionate, more straightforward investigation. It is far more replicable, and the variables are easier to control. Reliability, transferability, and validity are far easier to establish in quantitative analysis.

The very nature of qualitative analysis makes it far more subjective. For example, while the independent variable in this project was the training and the manual was a consistent element, the personality, style, experience, and character of the trainer could vary dramatically. In addition, the church setting, church history, personal experiences of the participants, personalities of those gathered, denominational background of the participants, mesh of those on the team, and receptivity of the congregation could also

impact the process. In sum, the coherence, or degree to which the conclusions are supported by the data, tend to be highly specific in such research (Eisner 53-56).

Generalizability is far more difficult to establish. In the end, certain principles can be highlighted, but they must be tested within the new context to determine their extrapolation or transferability (Patton 486-90).

Qualitative research by its nature is dynamic. The forces of the environment, participants, and researcher all shape both the design and the outcome. In fact, “the researcher must aim to become the research instrument” (Berg and Latin 219). In my case, I chose the role of observer participant. All those participating understood my role as researcher. Qualitative research is interpretive, typically involving the researcher in a sustained, intensive experience with the participants; therefore, researchers must explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interests concerning their project and its process (Creswell 184).

I gleaned most of my data from written documents and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Pretraining and post-training interviews involved participants filling out answers to the given questions so that they were prepared to address the issues during the interviews. Participants understood they would turn these in to me after the interviews. During the semi-structured interviews, I also took notes to confirm both what the participants had written and to gain any new information they shared verbally that may not have been on paper. This process also allowed me the freedom to probe farther on a particular issue of interest that may have been raised. Additional written response came from weekly feedback sheets that each participant returned. This feedback form allowed me to both keep abreast of their learning and to pray in a more focused manner

for each person.

I incorporated one other key ingredient in the process. At the conclusion of the training session, I distributed a half-page questionnaire to the congregation requesting feedback on the Altar Prayer Ministry Team and its efforts (see Appendix F). This response gleaned useful information both from those who had gone to the altar to receive prayer and from those who had not. Although the focus of this project was on the training, ultimately its value would be determined by the actual impact on the congregation.

Where the Process Began

What experience, confidence level, and knowledge about altar prayer ministry characterized the participants prior to the training?

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip laypeople to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. In order to assess whether this goal was completed to any notable extent during this process, I had to determine where the participants began. What experience did they bring? How much did they understand about altar prayer? How confident were they at the outset?

To help answer these questions, I conducted a pretraining interview with each person individually. The participants received the questions for the semi-structured interview (see Appendix E) ahead of time so they could think about the questions and be prepared to respond in a fuller fashion. The four questions were as follows: (1) What experience do you bring concerning prayer at the altar? (2) Have you received prayer at the altar? If so, describe your experience. (3) What fears or obstacles do you see

concerning your participation? (4) What qualifies you to participate in this ministry?

These questions helped me garner information about where the team began its journey.

Obviously, this information would vary dramatically depending on the people involved in training.

Experience concerning prayer at the altar. Four indicated that they had no experience at all in praying at the altar with another person. Three indicated some experience limited primarily to youth, mostly in retreat settings. One indicated some experience through participating in prayer for others by being present and laying on hands as her husband verbalized the prayer. One had been involved for a time in small group intercession at a healing service. Three had gone with me as leaders at a three-day, district-wide prayer conference and prayed with people at the altar there but had little experience beyond that. Three had prayed for others often and found themselves comfortable in that role (see Figure 4.5).

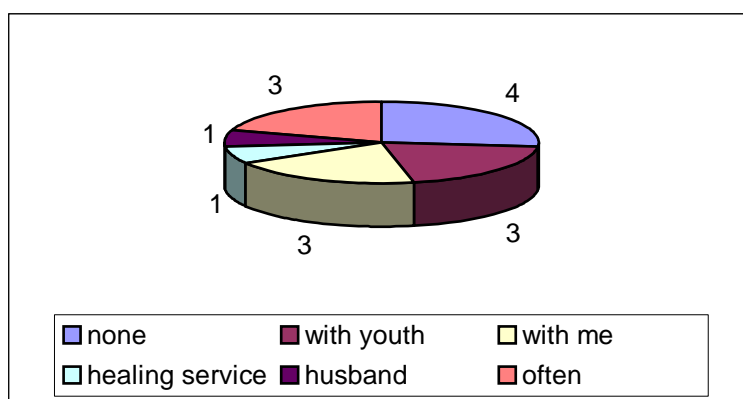


Figure 4.5. Prior team experience doing altar prayer.

Some of these had grown up using the altar at their church while others had not.

While one wrote, “Looking back to my early years, I realize how much the altar meant to me in my relationship with Christ,” another explained, “I grew up Presbyterian, so we didn’t have an altar rail—prayers and communion were done at the pew.” Many indicated they had prayed at the altar but only alone. Others had the experience of going to the altar during revival services. One specified experience in laying on of hands.

One of the three experienced participants has been actively praying in a group on a consistent basis for five years through Moms in Touch International. She writes, “This [Moms in Touch] is the longest commitment I have made to anything and it is because I *know* [original emphasis] God hears, answers, and loves our prayers!” Another person reported she has responded to God’s call to go to the altar and pray for people—even strangers—in the past.

Received prayer at the altar. Over half of the team members indicated meaningful times when they received prayer at the altar. One recalls his pastor praying for him in the midst of worship as he prepared to leave for the Marines just after finishing high school. That prayer left an indelible impression just as fresh forty years later. Another remarked on how she knelt with a deep burden for her troubled family. When the pastor prayed for her, she felt the path forward became clearer and she was assured of God’s unchanging love. Another reported sensing the power of God mightily as the youth director prayed over her as she prepared to go on a mission trip overseas.

The summer prior to the training, one of the team reported an attack on an elderly woman in her neighborhood. After she shared this need with the church, I invited her to come to the altar with her family during the worship service so that we could pray over them on behalf of the injured family. She reported such a deep feeling of empathy.

Interestingly, in the very hour we prayed, the authorities captured the perpetrator, who had been involved in a number of recent assaults.

Another team member reported wrestling with God at the altar during an Emmaus Walk. He sensed God directing him to take a stand for Christ in front of some non-Christian friends who were pulling him away from God. He told God he feared losing his friends. God simply asked him to trust and obey. God added that his friends would not abandon him if they were true friends; if they did abandon him, they were not real friends at all. He reports that with the perspective of time, he now finds that many of those friends that fell away are returning to his circle but with a new heart.

While not exclusively true, a common theme emerged that in most of their experience, clergy led in altar prayer. The greatest exception to this pattern was among those who had been on a Walk to Emmaus or Chrysalis weekend. Most had minimal experience with a layperson offering prayer at the altar. In other words, for almost all the participants, the concept of the laity embracing the ministry of altar prayer was appreciably new (see Figure 4.6).

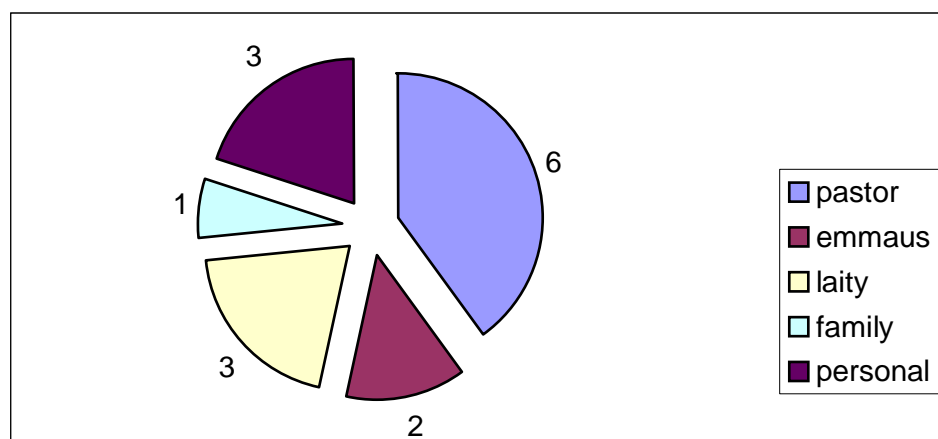


Figure 4.6. Prior team experience receiving prayer at the altar.

Fears or obstacles concerning participation. This question allowed me to move beyond simply understanding their prior experience and enabled me to grasp how they felt about their ability to engage in altar prayer ministry. Almost without exception, all felt some sense of apprehension (some felt a great deal) mixed with an eagerness to learn born of belief in the validity of such ministry and a sense of God's calling them to this ministry.

Generally, the concerns broke down into three primary categories, addressing the three facets of the training goals: personal issues (confidence), lack of adequacy (competence), and concern about people's perceptions (comfortableness) (see Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7. Primary areas of concern about participation.

1. Personal issues (confidence) clustered around the general sense of feeling unworthy to come alongside others in prayer. "Who am I to pray with another? Am I as good as the person for whom I am praying?" Inversely, one of the team wanted to be on

guard against pride, lest she think of herself more highly than she ought (Rom. 12:3).

Furthermore, she raised the concern that she felt a desperate need to be a pure vessel of use to God. One connected the tension of calling and fear saying, “I feel unworthy to the task. I also feel that God picks people just like me to use for his work. If he can use me to influence or help just one person, then all this fear will have been worth it.”

2. Lack of adequacy (competence) addressed a variety of issues. For example, a recurring concern was over whether they would know what to say in prayer at the moment. One wrote, “What if God doesn’t give direction for the prayer concern?” He rather explicitly expressed what most were feeling. One perceptively commented that she recognized God would give direction when it was needed, citing Jesus’ own words:

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt. 10:19-20, NRSV)

Another simply said that he did not feel he prayed eloquently or had mastered some kind of special protocol for prayer. On the other hand, one felt not a concern that she would not know what to say but simply feared that what she might say or do would be a hindrance to the work of God rather than an asset. “I don’t want it to be me but the Holy Spirit at work.”

3. The third concern was about other people’s perceptions (comfortableness). One participant stated that she was uncomfortable in front of people, being a more behind-the-scenes type of person. Some were intimidated by ministering before a large group. Some felt concern that others may wonder, “Who do they think they are to be up there?” One even said that in the past someone had expressed the opinion that prayer people were just phonies who gave a pretense of superior holiness. Another expressed the idea that he

wanted those who came for prayer to understand he did not have extraordinary gifts or powers but came with a willingness to care for them and be available to them.

One person addressed a theological concern in this matter. The subject was simply why God—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent—needed prayers and allowed the destiny of others potentially to hang on the intercessions of another person. The issue at hand here was fear of stepping into matters of eternal destiny. One could hear the echo of Paul asking, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16, NRSV).

Ultimately, their concerns addressed all three areas of the purpose statement. I wanted people to be able to serve confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context. In the pretraining interviews, I discovered at the outset that the team had fears and saw obstacles in each of these areas.

Qualifications for participation in this ministry. Asking an open-ended question regarding the subjects’ perceived qualifications was designed to get to the heart of their motives. Two primary responses surfaced. First, most indicated that their primary qualification was their status as children of God who had received Jesus as Savior. Second, most also identified a willingness to serve people and to be used by God. While a few alluded to past experiences, no one approached this ministry with a spirit of arrogance or a sense of being superior or better qualified than anyone else (see Figure 4.8).

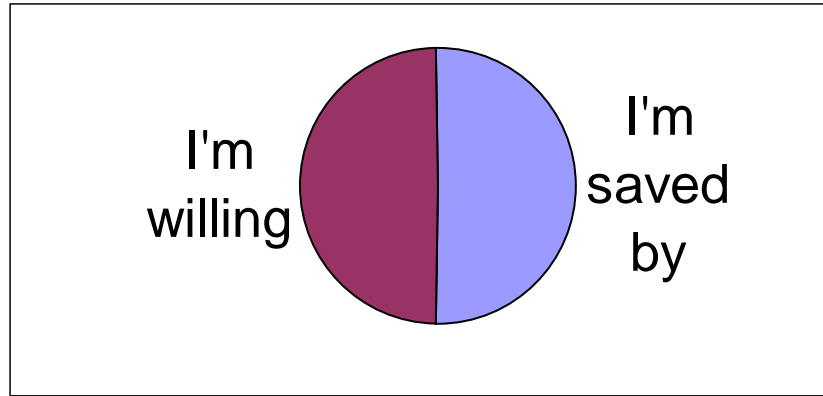


Figure 4.8. Self-expressed primary qualifications for participation.

The entire team showed humility matched wonderfully with a quiet confidence in the power of God. One expressed a “belief in prayer as the *most* [original emphasis] and *best* [original emphasis] we can do for someone in need.” Another person identified a desire simply to be a vessel for God to use. He quoted the statement, “God does not call the equipped; he equips the called.” In fact, one stated he felt unqualified if compared to others. Nevertheless, he knew that others had prayed for him, and he wanted the privilege of doing the same for others.

As observed earlier, this assessment is highly personal to the group selected for participation. Obviously, just as another researcher would bring differing skills and insights to this process, another group would bring differing individual experiences, skills, and expectations as well as a differing synthesis as a team. So much hangs on these varying dynamics. As the researcher, I freely admit the grace of God in putting together this outstanding team. I am profoundly grateful to the Lord for gathering spiritually mature people who responded out of a deep sense of calling. He developed the group into a genuine emergent team with powerful synergy.

What Catalysts Initiated Change

What elements of the training contributed to changes in knowledge and confidence level of the altar prayer ministry team?

The heart of the project lies in discerning what catalysts initiated change. If no change occurred, the project would be deemed a failure. Consequently, I conducted a post-training interview with each participant to attempt to assess if any changes had occurred and if so, what served to initiate those changes.

To get to this issue, I gave to each team member a copy of the post-training interview for them to complete and turn in to me. As before, when conducting the interview, I also took notes for the dual purposes of assuring I had heard them correctly and for garnering additional information beyond what was written on their page.

The post-training interview sheet included six questions (see Appendix E): (1) After receiving some initial training, describe your first experience praying with someone at the altar; (2) What in the training experience helped you become more confident? (3) What aspects of the training did you find most valuable? (4) What suggestions would you have for improving the training/ministry? (5) What evidence have you seen of the Holy Spirit at work at the altar? and (6) Describe your personal spiritual journey during the training. The first three items are addressed in this section. The final two items relate to Research Question # 3. The fourth item is addressed under evaluation from the team.

Description of first altar prayer experience. The response to the first question helped gain some initial feedback to discern not only how the training was going but also how the participants felt part way into the process. As might be imagined, the results were mixed. Most said they felt trepidation as they anticipated going to pray at the altar.

On the other hand, most indicated that once they began to pray with people, the experience was positive. A number indicated that as they prayed, the focus shifted from worrying about themselves to concern for the person needing prayer. When the focus changed, the whole experience took on a different dimension.

The first opportunity the team had to pray with others was at Communion. In the Martha Bowman Church context, customarily people receive communion by intinction. As they are served while standing in front of the altar, many are accustomed to going to the altar to pray after they have been served. Upon discussing the issue with the team, I gave instructions to the congregation on how to ask for altar prayer. People were welcome to come and pray privately at the altar if they chose; however, if they would like an altar prayer ministry team member to pray with them, they could quietly turn their palms upward. A team member would be glad to join them in prayer.

Some of the team described the initial experience as awkward. One said he felt embarrassed because as he stood there, no one came to him for prayer at the first opportunity. However, at the second opportunity, he prayed with two people and felt deep affirmation. Most indicated that once they began to pray with people, they experienced a calm and a sense of God's presence. A tentative confidence began to emerge out of at least surviving this first contact.

Wonderfully, these intercessors found themselves depending on God—and God used them. One remarked, "I could feel the Spirit of God working through me and giving me the words to say. I don't recall everything that was spoken but feel that God used me in an effective way." Another described herself as being more in tune with God. One of those who had prayed with others before said she felt peace, confidence, and the

assurance that the Lord would work through her. She felt confident that it was not her merely her effort but was God at work.

One of the keys that emerged was the sense of people getting outside of their own fears. While coming to the altar with self-consciousness and fear, those tended to disappear as they actually prayed with people. One said he had a clear sense that God was in control. Another said when a person opened hands asking for prayer, “I know this sounds cheesy, but my heart filled with compassion for this person.” I found the comment instructive that someone would think of a very natural gift of God as sounding “cheesy.” I suspect this idea grows out of the innate sense that people believe God would not give genuine gifts like godly compassion to ordinary people like them. Actually, believers should not only expect that God would use them but also that he would give them his heart. A man wrote, “I feel very close to the person I prayed for even though I do not know him.” I was encouraged to see that while competence was still young, God was maturing confidence and comfortableness as the intercessors leaned on him. In fact, utter dependence on God may be the greatest competence needed.

Some experienced surprises. The teen team member indicated she did not think she would be very useful except perhaps to other youth. She was startled when an older woman asked her for prayer. The woman expressed gratitude and left with a blessing. Another team member was grateful that God sent him a person who simply wanted him to join in giving praise to God. Since his anxiety level was high, he believed God sent him someone for whom he could easily pray. One of the most startling serendipities occurred when one of the men simply placed a hand on a person at the altar without praying aloud. When that person stood up, he told the intercessor that he had been

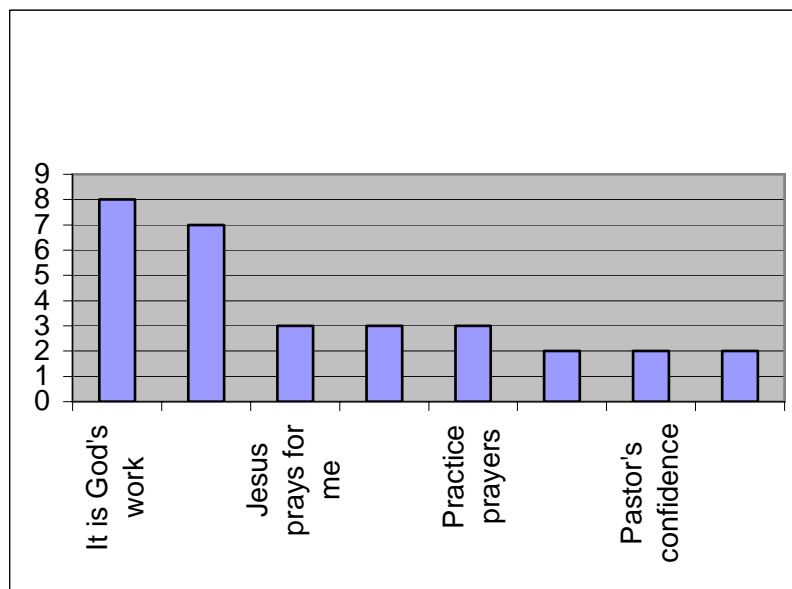
praying for that very team member, who had just discovered he was losing his job. He reported how blessed he felt to find the very person for whom he was praying kneeling in prayer for him.

Two other experiences bear mention. In the first, one of the most anxious but willing members really caught the vision of what he had been called to do. A woman he knew came asking prayer for her husband, who has Alzheimer's disease. The intercessor not only prayed for her husband, as requested, but prayed for this wife, as well. He sensed a need beyond her verbal request and followed God's leading in offering intercession there. In the second instance, a woman knelt in front of one of the intercessors and with tears running down her face asked, "Will you pray for me?" God unlocked a spring of compassion in the intercessor, who put her arms around this woman. She assured this weeping woman God was pleased that she had come to him and that he would blanket her in his love. The woman rose to her feet thanking the intercessor for praying.

The training experience that enabled confidence. The team identified fourteen things from the training that helped them become more confident. Since individuals named multiple reasons, the numbers add up well beyond the number of participants. The top eight factors are listed by frequency with which they were mentioned (see Table 4.1 and Figure 4.9).

Table 4.1. Eight Factors in Training that Built Confidence

1. Confidence that this is God's work, not mine (8)
2. Teaching from the manual (7)
3. Grasping that Jesus prays for me (3)
4. Team/weekly meetings (3)
5. Practice prayers (3)
6. I have authority through Christ (2)
7. Pastor's confidence in me (2)
8. Actually praying with people (2)

**Figure 4.9. Top eight factors that built confidence.**

In addition to these eight primary responses, individuals mentioned six other factors of benefit. These included (1) training helped discipline my prayer life, (2)

trusting the answers to prayer to God, (3) asking God's help, (4) response of the church, (5) encouragement, and (6) sense that this is God's timing for building altar prayer ministry.

Clearly, two things stand above all the others. First is the team's unshakable confidence that this ministry is God's work, not theirs. Second is the teaching from the manual. Add to that the next item in terms of frequency, namely grasping that Jesus prays for me, and the sixth item—I have authority through Christ—and something else becomes clear. In terms of confidence (the focus of this question), knowledge that moves from head to heart makes the most dramatic difference. Confidence did not grow out of a gimmick or slick method that intercessors discovered they could use. Confidence grew out of knowing and believing the truth. To paraphrase Jesus, "You will know the truth and the truth will give you confidence." When the intercessors truly grasped that altar prayer was God's work—not theirs, when they understood truths from God's Word presented in the manual, and when they understood that Jesus is praying for them every moment, God released Spirit-empowered confidence into their souls. Their confidence grew out of a deep knowing that the work was not theirs but God's. They heard the echo of the prophet proclaiming, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6, NRSV). When truth connects with the believer's heart, God-confidence, not self-confidence, is released.

Two further factors bear note. First, a number mentioned team meetings as important. Two persons indicated the value of knowing they were not the only ones who felt inadequate. A third person highlighted the value of intimate sharing within small groups during the training sessions. These lifted up the value that though this ministry

most often would involve individuals praying with others, truly a team was leading out in this ministry. Second, actual practice of prayers during training helped. Here would be a clear instance where growing competence helped build confidence.

A final insight came from a single individual but may reflect wider feeling. This one indicated that confidence grew through the knowledge that the pastor had confidence in the team. That confidence validated the individual personally and also validated the entire concept of lay ministry. This invitation to participate moved lay ministry from lip service to concrete action.

Most valuable aspects of the training. While the prior question is related to this question on valuable aspects of the training, its focus was primarily on what built confidence and comfortableness. In this question, I hoped to find what helped build competence, as well. One could expect that what built confidence would reflect growing competence. One could also expect that building competence would build confidence and comfortableness.

The team identified fifteen different aspects of the training that helped prepare them for serving at the altar. They are listed in order of frequency mentioned (see the top six valuable aspects in Figure 4.10).

1. The manual (8),
2. Practicing prayer scenarios aloud (7),
3. Class discussion/small group time (4),
4. Teachings in class (4),
5. Team bonding (3),
6. Rick Bonfim's teaching (19, 54-55) on roots (3),

7. Asking commitment up front (2),
8. Foot washing/commissioning service at the end (2),
9. Raising awareness that people come for many different needs (2),
10. Quotes from the classics in the manual (2),
11. Weekly feedback forms (1),
12. Centering prayer used in class (1),
13. Actually praying for people in worship (1),
14. Ed Silvoso's teaching (106-28) on spiritual authority/warfare (1), and
15. Atmosphere/Holy Spirit's presence in classes (1).

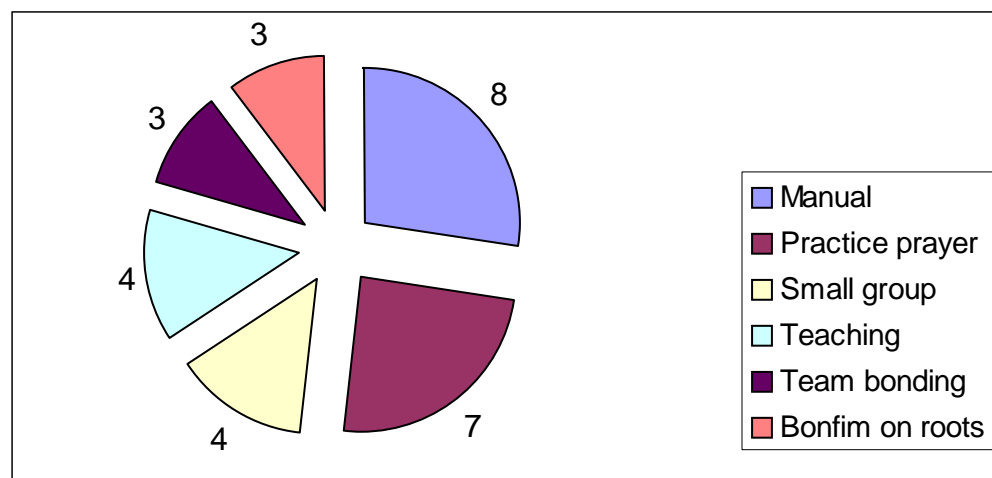


Figure 4.10. Top six valuable aspects of the training.

In gathering the data for this question, once again two primary responses emerged as clearly predominant. The manual and actual out-loud practicing of prayer over various scenarios proved to be the two most important items in the training. Apparently, the group embraced a good balance between theory and praxis, learning and doing. The

manual undergirded the reason to pray and the power of prayer; the out-loud prayers over different situations connected the theory to life.

1. Proverbs 23:7 states, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (KJV). Clearly, what happens in people’s minds and what happens in their lives are intimately linked. Here is where the teaching in the manual clearly impacted the team. Specifically mentioned were a few keys. The division of the manual into daily readings and assignments kept people on task. The sequence of the subjects seemed to keep building on one another and developed the big picture. The inclusion of Scripture readings in the text helped make them easily accessible to those who might not have looked them up otherwise.

The manual, Building an Altar Prayer Ministry in the Local Church, began with the four foundations on which the entire project was built: centrality of prayer, reclamation of the altar, ministry of the laity, and power of the team. From there it moved into practical discussion of truths about prayer and how people could engage in intercession on-site with insight. Repeatedly, I lifted the emphasis that intercession could not be built on gimmicks or techniques but only upon a vital, ongoing, growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Extending across twelve weeks gave time for concepts to sink in and time for a relationship to be encouraged.

In no way do I imply that the manual is perfect, comprehensive, or the final word on the subject. That is far from the truth. Any wisdom in it is the gleaned wisdom of the ages from both living intercessors and saints who have gone before. Nevertheless, the composition of the truths has been designed to equip willing, godly laity to embrace their calling to intercede alongside people in need and to join Jesus in his ministry of

intercession.

2. The second key ingredient the team identified was the use of a variety of scenarios in which team members prayed aloud as though actually praying for a person in need. This practice made a number of people uncomfortable, but most participants identified it as one of the best parts of the training. Whether a participant was praying or listening while someone else was praying, both occasions provided for realistic learning. Each setting invited people to consider how they might pray in that context.

Two concepts proved central in this process of practice prayers. First, I always affirmed those offering prayer, encouraging them in their intercession. Suggestions were only made in the spirit of “if someone wanted to, here are some other ways of approaching the prayer.” I believed it crucial to affirm that every person has a different style of praying. No one way is right or another wrong. Each prays according to the personality, insight, and heart that God has given. That idea affirms the variety of gifts in the body of Christ.

The second concept in practice prayers was identifying various things done well in a prayer that someone offered. While affirmation helped put people at ease, pointing out specific positives helped people learn. For example, I could affirm that someone prayed with compassion, used Scripture, addressed a deeper need than merely what was expressed, got straight to the point, prayed with great faith, claimed a promise from God, exalted the name of the Lord, prayed to the root of an issue, prayed with authority, interceded with courage, and so on. While these practice prayers made some people feel awkward, at the same time the team recognized they might actually be faced with such a request. How much better to have given thought and learned in this setting than to face

that reality less prepared.

3. A third critical thought surfaces—power of the team—that is really equal to the first two if one combines two kindred findings—class discussion/small group time (4) and team bonding (3). A score of 7 would make it of parallel value to the components of the manual and out-loud practice prayer. Frankly, this team spirit surprised me. While I knew that God had gathered an outstanding group of people and I had incorporated team ministry as one of the core values of the project, I was still amazed at how the group melded into a team. Since our church is larger than many (800+ attendance), no one knows everyone. Since we worship in three different services and two different spaces, many people never even see each other though they are all at church on the same Sunday. This group garnered people from each service and included people of disparate ages and experience, yet the genuine love and kinship that drew the group into unity clearly evidenced the work of God's Holy Spirit among us.

The development of the team raised up several values. First, the fearful realized they were not alone. Second, each realized the group had no experts and that all were fellow learners on the journey. Third, the team strengthened each other with insights and gifts that built up the others on the team. Fourth, the team instantly took up the role of encouragers to one another. Fifth, discussions in groups of differing composition kept people from growing stagnant. Sixth, small group discussions engaged everyone in the learning process where some might otherwise have sat silently in the larger assembly. Seventh, fresh appreciation grew within the group for people from other worship services. Contemporary worshipers discovered traditional worshipers had as much fire and passion as anyone. Traditional worshipers discovered contemporary worshipers had

as much humility and grace as anyone. Although only one specified the environment, I witnessed that the atmosphere of Holy Spirit presence was real. One cannot orchestrate the Holy Spirit. I believe the group's openness simply paved the way for the Spirit's entry into the training process.

4. I identified one last noteworthy finding by combining three different components. If one combines class teachings (4), Rick Bonfim's teaching on roots (3) and Ed Silvos's teaching on spiritual authority/warfare (1), an aggregate score of 8 emerges, putting teaching on a par with the manual, practice praying, and team. The nice part is the balance put on the teaching within the manual and from the leader (see Figure 4.11).

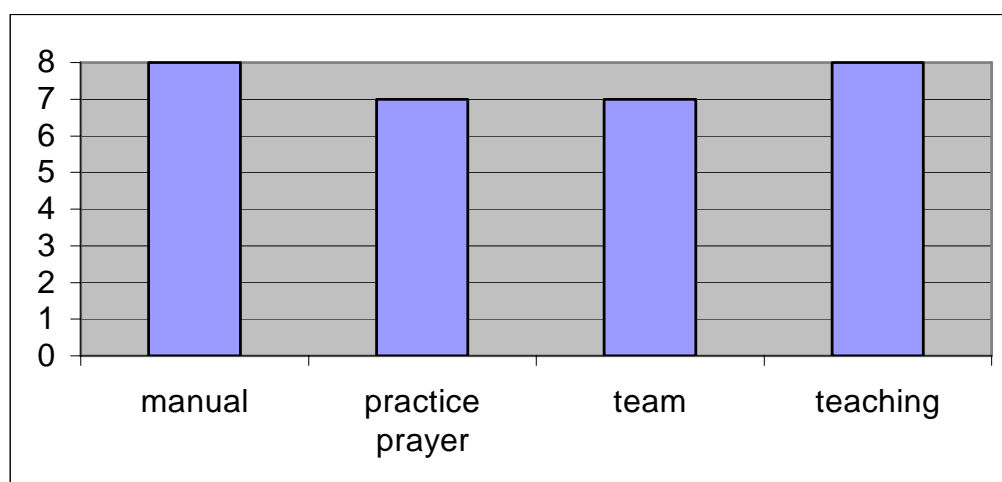


Figure 4.11. Modified results on valuable aspects of training.

While many of the insights from people like Rick Bonfim and Ed Silvos were fresh and challenging, the receptivity of the participants proved critical. Their underlying humility and genuine desire to be used by God made them eager to learn. Knowing that they would soon be engaged in prayer for others in a variety of unknown settings made

them fervent to prepare themselves. Great insight met by a great desire to learn creates great progress.

Evidence of God at Work

How did the participants in the altar prayer ministry team describe their awareness of the presence of the living God during or after the altar prayer experience?

Responses to this question fell into four basic categories. People saw God at work in terms of personal experience, team relationship, praying with people at the altar, or engaging in prayer beyond the altar (see Figure 4.12).

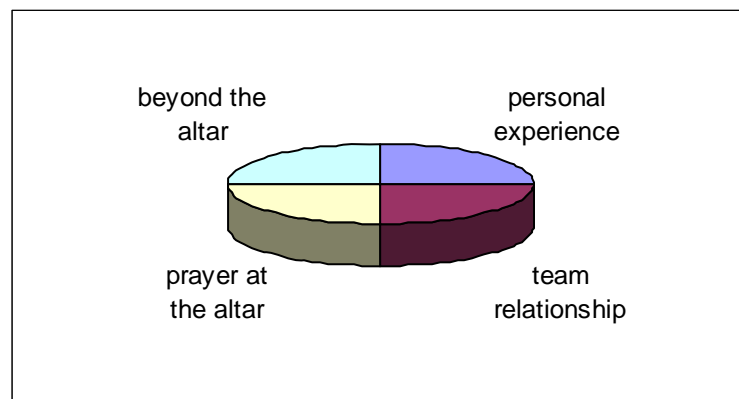


Figure 4.12. Four areas where God was seen at work.

1. Many indicated personal experience in terms of seeing God at work. If they were unsure of the Holy Spirit's work in others, they were certain of his work in their own lives. Some indicated a deeper sense of his presence. One who had been studying the Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren said he felt like he was living prayer all day long, not confining it to a devotional period. Another indicated disappointment that the training ended because it had given her prayer life definition and direction. She valued the

accountability of the study and the group. Many indicated a strengthening of their personal prayer lives. Moving people beyond their comfort zone tends to throw them into dependence on God. One said it stretched him as an introverted person and a man of few words, yet he felt prayer is his gift and was eager to be a part of the team. Another team member said that he discovered during the session on forgiveness that he had not forgiven a person who had hurt him. God enabled him speak to the person and to forgive and release the offender by grace. One participant wrote, “I am not the same person that I was at the beginning of the training. God has revealed to me that in spite of my doubts and fear, I will be a good member of the Altar Prayer Team.”

2. Some unexpected moves of the Spirit came out of the interaction of the team itself. Three of the team members experienced crises during the course of the training. The class became not merely a training ground but an actual ministry setting for the team as they surrounded these dear ones with prayer. One person experienced a miscarriage; another had neck surgery that kept him away for a few weeks; and, a third found he would be losing his job. It was a blessing to see God move through the group as they surrounded these facing crises with grace-filled prayer and compassionate love. Each of these friends bore witness to the grace of God that came to them through contacts made by the team and from the connection that came from simply being a part of this prayer force. The woman who had the miscarriage wrote, “I went through a difficult experience during these twelve weeks. This study prepared me for a steadiness in him [God]. A relationship has deepened and a confirmation that he loves me.”

3. A third place where the team sensed God’s Spirit at work was in the actual ministry at the altar. One witnessed that he had “seen people leave the altar with an

assurance that God heard their concerns.” When a mother and daughter came asking for prayer over the daughter’s recent engagement, the intercessor said she felt an emotional connection as she prayed with them. One person humorously asserted he saw God at work because he did not go running out the side door when the time came to pray for others. One intercessor said that he saw God working as he prayed silently for people coming for communion. He observed that things looked different from the front than from the pew. He was able to observe the demeanor, the tears, the struggles with serious issues, and the love of God that people brought to the Lord’s table and to the altar. Another person observed with keen insight that when God speaks to intercessors concerning the needs of people for whom they are praying, the message and the blessing comes to the intercessor as well. People cannot pass perfume to another without residual fragrance clinging to them. Someone wrote, “I realized God had been preparing me for this for a good while. And my confidence has grown—knowing he is able in my weakness.”

4. Three people specifically identified experiences of praying for people beyond the walls of the church. One felt God’s power flowing as he prayed for youth during a senior high retreat. That experience was still in a church-related setting. The other two experienced God’s leading them to pray in settings radically different from church. One said she was praying more with her children, husband, and friends. She said she is becoming bolder in offering to pray for others, including praying for people at work. She is discovering that God’s altar is portable. He is a God not bound by buildings or constricted by time and space. The third person related a moving account of praying with a friend at work. His wife had died in a freak automobile accident a month before. The

intercessor said that prior to this class he would not have thought of praying with this friend right there at work; however, he asked for the privilege of praying for him there in the office. He said he was startled at the depth of emotion that washed over him as he prayed. He experienced the prayer of empathy that Larry Jackson talks about in Numbered with the Transgressors. This intercessor further demonstrated his integrity by working an hour extra to make up for the time he had spent in prayer with this friend. What a powerful witness he related of God at work.

I expected to see God at work at the altar. Extra blessing came as I saw God at work so dynamically in individual lives, in the team connection, and even beyond the church walls. The step of moving beyond the church walls resonates with the heart of God who loves his unchurched children as fervently as those within the church walls.

Response from the Congregation

I distributed a half-page questionnaire to the congregation on a single Sunday asking for feedback. I had published the questions in the newsletter that had arrived in homes just prior to that Sunday so people could have a chance to reflect. The questions asked for the following information: (1) Did you come to the altar during the period of September-December 2003? (2) Did you receive prayer at the altar by an altar prayer team member? (3) Do you feel that MBC would benefit by having a trained altar prayer ministry team of laypersons available at the altar? Why or why not? (4) What difference could it make if MBC had a trained altar prayer ministry team? And, one unfinished statement (5) About the Altar Prayer Ministry Team, I would like to say _____. On a Sunday where attendance was 886, 173 people returned surveys (see Figure 4.13).

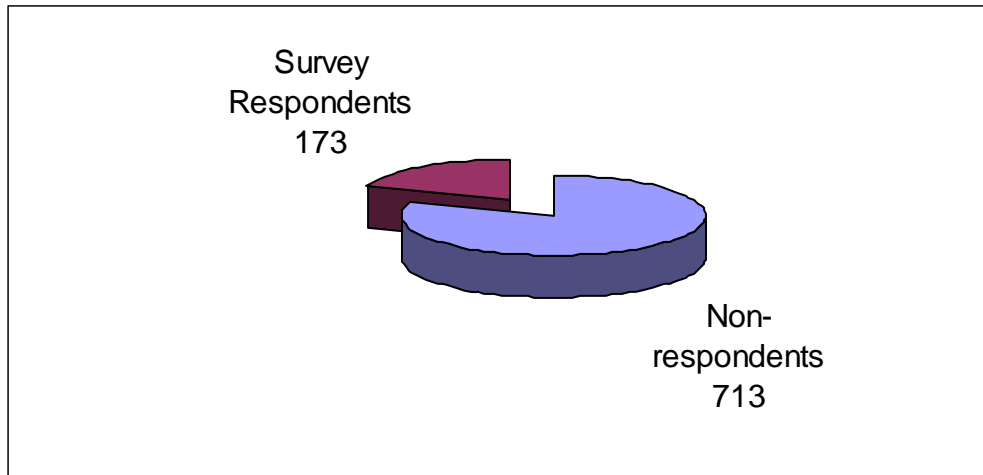


Figure 4.13. Survey respondents compared to nonrespondents.

1. In answering question 1 (Did you come to the altar during the period of September-December 2003?), 144 indicated that they had come to the altar while twenty-nine of the respondents indicated they had not. Two things were instantly clear. First, I was amazed at how many people had come to the altar across that period of time. Second, I realized that most of my feedback would be filtered through the lenses of people who had openness to the altar. One could surmise that most of those who did not go to the altar had little interest in responding to such a questionnaire since it was about a ministry that they believed would likely not impact them at all. One might also surmise that they were/felt largely neutral about the ministry or perhaps toward the negative end of the spectrum (see Figure 4.14).

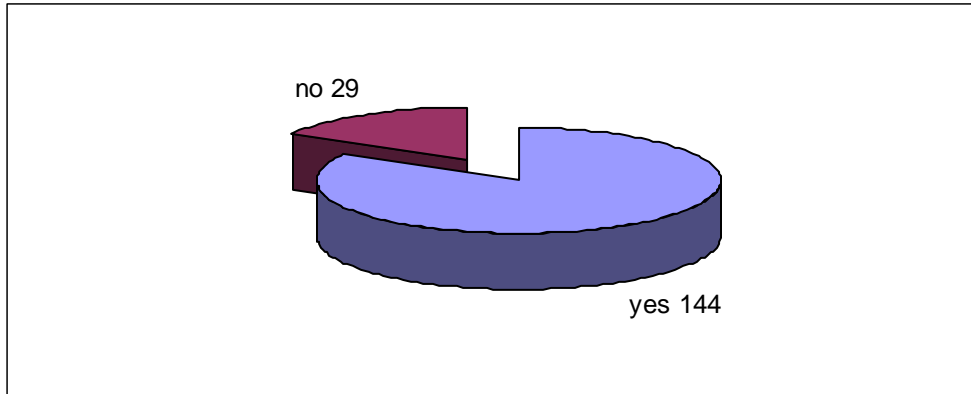


Figure 4.14. Did respondents come to the altar September-December 2003?

2. In response to question 2 (Did you receive prayer at the altar by an altar prayer team member?), fifty-three said, “Yes” and 120 said, “No.” The number of respondents who said, “No,” yet still completed the survey pleased me. I asked for feedback and received it from both perspectives (see Figure 4.15).

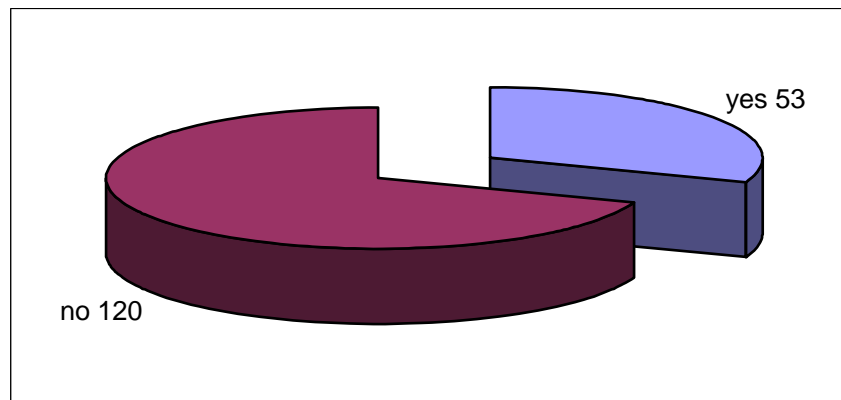


Figure 4.15. Did respondents receive prayer at the altar?

When asked for a comment, the universal feedback of the respondents who said, “Yes,” was affirmative. Whether the means was gentle laying on of hands or quiet prayer,

people felt grace flow to them. One wrote, “Oftentimes (such as depression, esp.) I am unable to pray at all, and I cannot sense the presence of the Holy Spirit. The prayer team member prayed and helped me feel closer to the Holy Spirit.” Another commented that the intercessor helped lift a fear regarding a daughter in college. Many indicated they felt as if God heard. Others said they felt “there was someone who cared.” Several observed that the intercessor prayed just what the person needed without knowing specifics of the situation. Someone expressed appreciation because an intercessor had written a follow up letter after their prayer together.

In the comment section, most of those who responded “no” to receiving altar prayer indicated one of four sentiments. First, some did not feel comfortable sharing their needs. Second, some wanted to pray privately at the altar. Third, some did not like receiving prayer in a public setting. Fourth, most simply stated they did not feel a need to ask for prayer at the time. One opinion read, “I do not favor public prayer for my own worship. I believe worship is direct by the individual, not through another.” Even so, this same person said, “I am in favor [of altar prayer ministry] if there are those it helps and who have that need. I believe they could best serve outside a formal service to those in need” (see Figure 4.16).

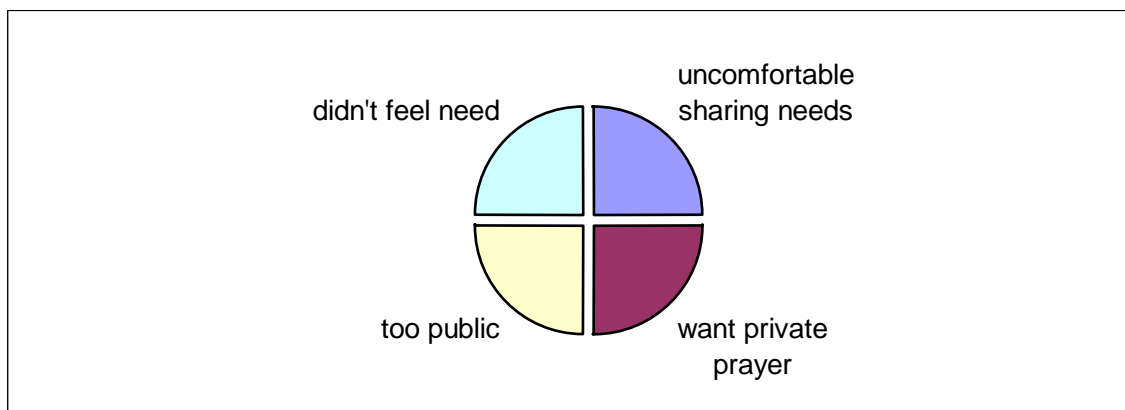


Figure 4.16. Why people did not receive altar prayer.

3. In response to question 3 (Do you feel that MBC would benefit by having a trained altar prayer ministry team of lay persons available at the altar? Why or Why not?), 145 agreed altar prayer ministry would be a benefit, fourteen believed it would not, and fourteen were unsure (see Figure 4.17).

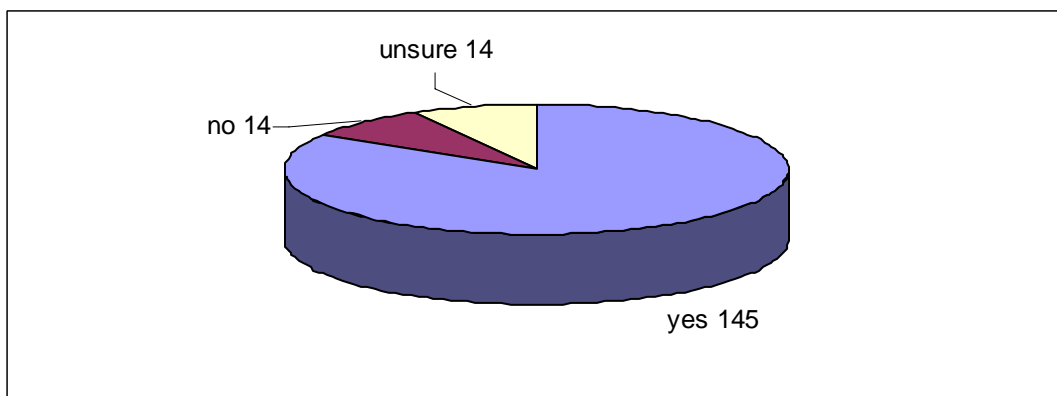


Figure 4.17 Would an altar prayer team be a benefit?

One might reasonably anticipate that those who came for prayer from an altar prayer ministry team member and had a positive experience would affirm the ministry.

Notably, though, approximately ninety people who came to the altar but did not receive prayer still affirmed the benefit of having such a ministry. Most commented that they did not ask for prayer because they experienced no pressing need at the moment; however, when such a need arose, they would be grateful for the availability of the team. This positive response speaks well to the congregation's openness to altar prayer ministry and speaks affirmation to the team's ministry to date.

When asked to comment on the usefulness of an altar prayer ministry team, a number of ideas consistently surfaced (see Figure 4.18). First, people appreciated the availability of a prayer partner if needed. Second, praying with someone adds power. Third, trained prayer ministers are able to minister more effectively (although one expressed the idea that sincerity was adequate qualification). Fourth, having an intercessor can give those in need assurance they are not alone in facing their crises. Fifth, the pastors cannot handle all the needs. Sixth, people experience power in laying on of hands. Seventh, coming to the altar encourages others to pray by elevating the importance of prayer. Eighth, altar prayer allows people to come and lay their burdens down. Ninth, intercession helps those who do not know how to pray. Tenth, intercessory prayer helps when a person feels too distressed to be able to pray. Eleventh, altar prayer encourages people to pray with others beyond the walls of our church. This last comment really captures the wider vision for the inception of this prayer ministry. As with all the work of the church, it just begins within the walls but is ultimately designed for ministry in the world.

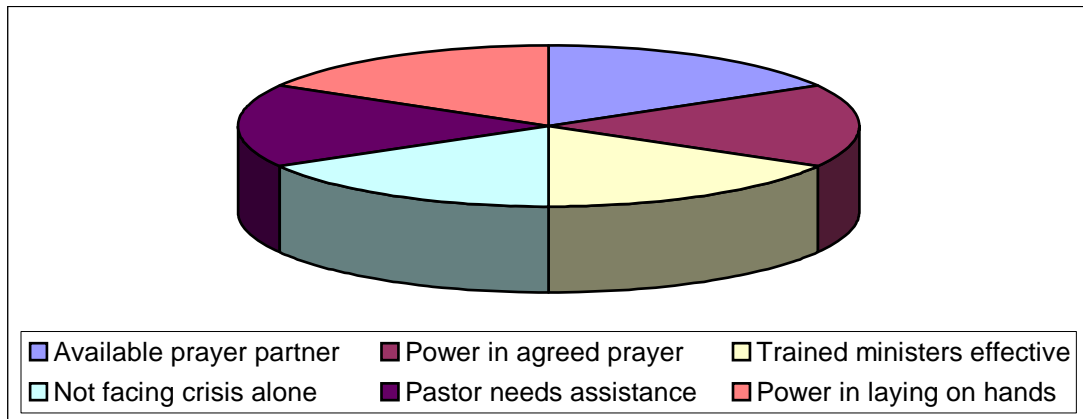


Figure 4.18. Primary reasons for favoring prayer ministry.

Of the fourteen respondents who believed an altar prayer ministry would not be of benefit, seven simply indicated their feeling without any comment. The other seven pointed to two basic reasons. First, they objected to the public venue. One wrote, “Prayer should be private.” Second, they did not feel comfortable sharing with a stranger. One simply stated, “I don’t really like the idea.” This person’s sense was that altar prayer made people feel uncomfortable and had actually reduced the number of people going to the altar (see Figure 4.19).

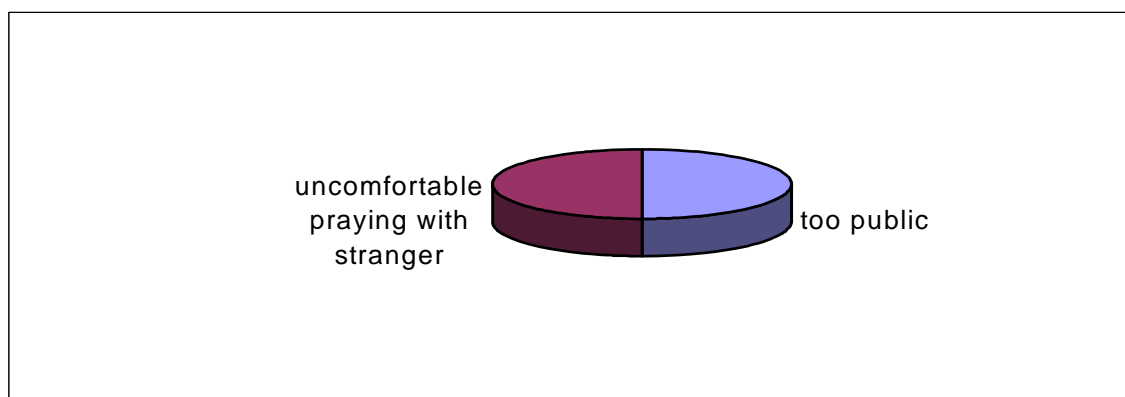


Figure 4.19. Primary reasons for not favoring altar prayer ministry.

Comments from the unsure group tended to fall into three categories (see Figure 4.20). Five simply indicated “unsure” without comment. First, some felt altar prayer ministry was too public. Second, people preferred private time to pray instead of praying with another person. Third, they were unsure of the team’s function. One stated, “I can’t answer that because I don’t really know what they do.” On the other hand, another wrote, “It’s my inhibitions that keep me from participating, not the perceived abilities of the APM team—keep up the good work for the benefit of those who do participate.” Six of those who gave comments agreed that altar prayer ministry could still be of value to those who wanted to receive it.

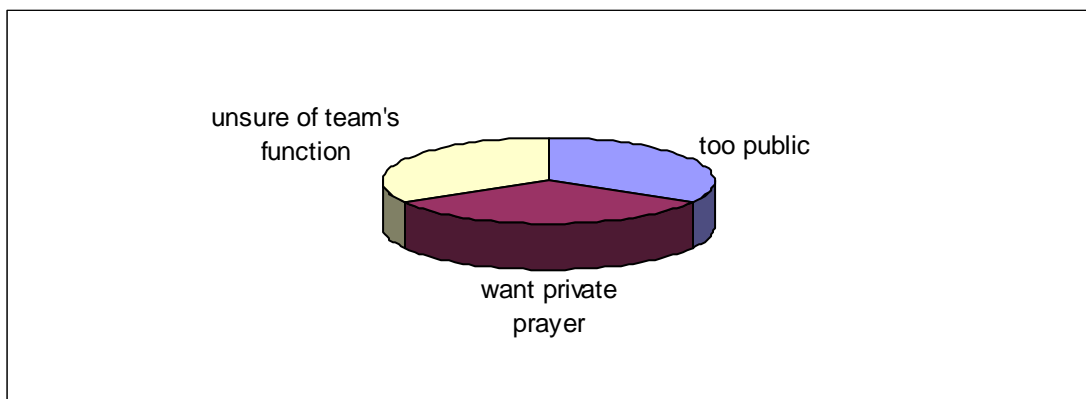


Figure 4.20. Reasons people felt unsure about altar prayer ministry.

Evaluation from the Team

The most helpful feedback on how to improve the training came from the Altar Prayer Ministry Team itself in the post-training interviews. Thirteen ideas surfaced to which I added two in my own reflection. Four of them clearly surpassed all the others, indicating key areas in which improvements and modifications need to be made. The fact that they kept resurfacing consistently showed that the ideas were on target. Table 4.2

shows the thirteen ideas for improving the training in order of frequency.

Table 4.2. Ideas for Improving the Training

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Longer class sessions (75-90 minutes) (12) 2. More practice prayer; pray over real concerns instead of just role play (11) 3. More training of the congregation to understand and receive prayer (5) 4. More opportunities for hands-on prayer during the training (4) 5. Testimonies to the congregation from the team (2) 6. Field trips to actual altar sites during the training (2) 7. Additional sample prayers in the manual over challenging issues (2) 8. Write newsletter articles to validate the Altar Prayer Ministry (2) 9. More connection of team groups by worship service attended (1) 10. Clarify a 20-30 minute daily study expectation (1) 11. Have alumni help teach the next class/share experiences (1) 12. More durable cover for the manual (1) 13. Share more of the leader's altar prayer experience (1) 14. Keep use of weekly feedback forms in the training (mine) 15. Add an introductory session (thus 13 sessions total) (mine) |
|--|

1. Almost everyone thought longer classes were needed. The classes were so rich, the team interaction so deep, and the material so broad that an hour simply did not allow enough time to process everything adequately. I recognized this difficulty early on but did not feel comfortable changing the commitment once we had entered into the process.

In particular, debriefing experiences, more in-depth teaching, time for practice prayers, time to transition to the actual worship spaces, and concluding prayer time in small groups were compressed or omitted.

2. While offering practice prayers over certain scenarios was uncomfortable for some and stretched all, everyone recognized this approach was where theory and practice intersected. Great learning took place whether the learner was offering the prayer or observing another who was praying aloud. Admittedly, the setting was awkward, but actually praying aloud over the situations accelerated the learning. Some felt unease over role-playing the prayers. A couple of the team members gave the excellent suggestion that they offer out-loud prayers as before but pray them over real concerns brought by themselves or others that they knew. Almost every situation that the group could mention would bring to mind a real person with a similar need.

3. I underestimated the critical importance of training the congregation to understand and receive prayer from the Altar Prayer Ministry Team. Congregational training required more clarification and repetition than I anticipated. Anything new requires repeated explanation so that fear and confusion are minimized. Unfortunately, more confusion arose than I realized. Some people wondered if they could go to the altar and pray alone; others were concerned that they might be singled out or embarrassed; and, others questioned whether the prayer time would be confidential. In fact, I had addressed all of these issues. People could come and pray privately; but if they wanted an altar prayer minister, they could simply open the palms of their hands to indicate the need. Prayer would be quiet and private and no one would ever attention drawn to any individual. I conveyed to the congregation that confidentiality was one of the hallmarks

of our team covenant. Nevertheless, confusion abounded. My failure was in not repeating the information enough. I began well as the team came to the altar in each service at the outset of the training to receive the congregation's blessing. In retrospect, I discover I did not stay the course. The lack of clearly understood information resulted in confusion on the part of the congregation and hesitancy among some to come to the altar. In the end, I realized training the congregation is as important as training the team during this process.

4. The last area where notable improvement needs to be made is in providing more opportunities actually to pray for people. For better or worse, a capital campaign for a Martha Bowman Church building program intruded into this time, limiting the kinds of messages that would lend themselves to altar invitations. In undertaking this project, more intentional opportunities for people actually to pray with others needed to be made available.

In summary, the manual, practice prayer, team spirit, and teaching proved the greatest strengths. Brevity of the classes, limited opportunities for practice prayer, and inadequate training of the congregation stood out as the greatest weaknesses. Chapter 5 summarizes the evaluation of both team and congregation in an attempt to assess what could make the training more effective in equipping lay altar prayer ministers.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This project may have begun when I was only three years old. To this day I remember as a little boy barging into my Dad's study only to discover him on his knees in prayer. Something indelibly marked my consciousness that day about the absolute centrality of prayer in the Christian life. I knew that on his knees, my Dad touched the heart of God. I further understood as time went on that his prayers were not for himself alone, but they were poured out in intercession for others.

When I arrived at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC, I found myself blessed to arrive in a congregation where prayer was paid more than lip service. Many grasped the truth that prayer was more than just one ministry among many at the church. Prayer was the foundation that provided the bedrock for every ministry in the church. Already a broad spectrum of intercessory groups of various kinds existed. A dedicated prayer room functioned. Intercessors prayed during the worship services. A Prayer Warrior ministry connected one or two people who especially undertook intercession for a staff person or ministry area leader. Both a phone and Internet prayer chain existed for ongoing concerns. A small weekday healing service lifted up needs given through prayer request cards. People came to the altar during worship services to pray.

As I watched these other prayer ministries, God began to stir in my heart a deep desire to equip a team of lay intercessors to come alongside those who had concerns to be lifted before God. Embracing Jesus' promise that he would be where two or three are gathered in his name, I could see how the power of God could be given free reign as trained altar prayer ministers came alongside those who prayed. Furthermore, this

ministry opportunity resonated with my deeply held conviction that the greatest force for ministry is among the laity. I could imagine this ministry being multiplied. Out of this vision, I felt God's call to initiate this project. This calling grew in intensity as I looked and found few resources available other than occasional local church leaflets on praying with people. No real training manual was available for pastors or other leaders to use in equipping their people to pray with others. I felt God's call to this equipping ministry. Not until the end did I discover another factor that had been at play long before I even arrived at the church.

Major Findings through Evaluation and Interpretation of Data

The purpose of this project was to evaluate training that would equip laypeople to minister at the altar confidently, competently, and comfortably in the Martha Bowman Church context.

Although the Altar Prayer Ministry Team brought varying degrees of altar experience, only three had prayed with people at the altar often. All felt stretched out of their comfort zone in approaching this new ministry. Most found themselves bound by either self-consciousness or an inadequate understanding of the dynamics of altar prayer. On the whole, most had primarily experienced prayer offered by the pastor or a staff person. Engaging the power of lay prayer ministry at the altar was foreign to most.

Obstacles

The greatest obstacles to surmount in moving the group forward involved overcoming three fear-based issues. First, I had to deal with people's fears of personal inadequacy. Second, I had to deal with the fearfulness that arose from people's uncertainty of how to pray for others and the fear of saying the wrong thing. Third, I had

to deal with fears about others' perceptions. Interestingly, these fears addressed three key factors in my purpose statement—confidence, competence, and comfortableness (see Figure 5.1).

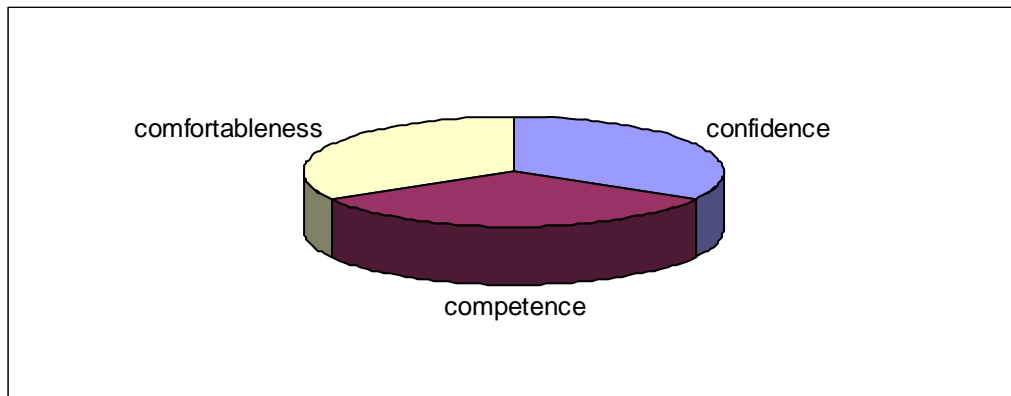


Figure 5.1. Three primary obstacles.

Confidence. The team was in good company when they asked, “Who am I?” Moses offered that excuse to God (“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’”—Exod. 3:11, NRSV), as did Jeremiah (“I am only a child”—Jer. 1:6, NIV) and others. What the team needed to discover is what Moses and Jeremiah needed to discover. “Who am I?” is the wrong question. The real question is, “Who is God?” When eyes begin to move from self to God, new horizons open up. Instead of filtering life through the small lens of human ability, incredible possibilities emerge as people see life through the awesome lens of God’s unlimited ability. Confidence ultimately grows not out of self-confidence but God-confidence. As this truth began to capture not only the minds but also the hearts of the team, one could observe breakthroughs to a whole new level of ministry.

Competence. Once again, “How do I know?” is the wrong question. “Is God in control?” is the right question. Teaching focused to some extent on discerning people’s needs and trying to understand their root needs through the eyes of God. Teaching also dealt with recognizing the vast panoply of needs that people bring to the altar; however, the most critical aspect of the training aimed at helping people understand that the work is God’s, not theirs. They are not responsible for healing these friends; they are only responsible for bringing them to the Healer. When they understood that they are only temporary assistants to the Holy Spirit, they entered into the prayer relationship with love. With Paul they could affirm, “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” (2 Cor. 3:5, NIV). Freed from doing, they were freed for being. They could simply love these friends in prayer in the presence of God and let God minister to them. God’s work did not hang on their speaking the perfect words. They just had to care and let God cure.

Comfortableness. They discovered once again that “What will people think?” is the wrong question. They cannot control what people think. No matter what anyone does in any situation, inevitably some will think one thing about it and some will think another. Being enslaved to others’ opinions is a terrible tyranny, indeed. The right question is, “What does God think?” When people seek his affirmation, then the opinions of others matter little. Once more learners turn to Paul: “Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10, NRSV). People make a mistake to look out and see the congregation as the audience. When people look out and see God as the audience, everything is revealed in its true light. The fear of God cures fear of people.

Happily, these altar prayer ministry participants approached the training with humility and a teachable spirit. They identified their qualifications not in terms of their knowledge or abilities but by two factors: (1) Jesus Christ had saved them and (2) They were willing to serve him as he called.

Catalysts for Change in Knowledge and Confidence at the Altar

When I asked the altar prayer team what catalysts had most notably helped develop their knowledge and confidence in praying at the altar, the responses broke into two fundamental divisions—conceptual and practical. Both are equally important. The conceptual provides the groundwork on which the practical builds. The practical lives out the reality the conceptual envisions. Without the conceptual change, no vision emerges to create a new reality. Without practical application, the vision remains an ephemeral mist.

Conceptual catalysts. Three primary ideas seemed to electrify and energize the team to take up its calling (see Figure 5.2).

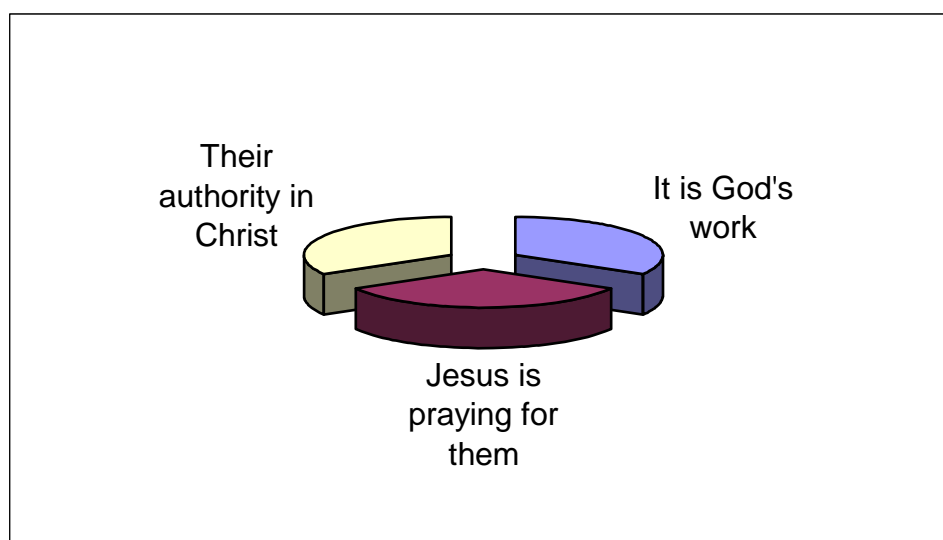


Figure 5.2. Three conceptual catalysts.

1. First, a growing confidence arose that the work is God's, not theirs. They are not initiating this work, but instead, they are joining God where he is already at work (Blackaby and King 24). Altar prayer is God's work, passionate and strong. One can feel the beat of God's heart in intercession. Recognizing God's work kindled assurance and enthusiasm. One can proceed with assurance when joining God in his work. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5:19, NRSV).

2. Another conceptual turning point for many grew out of the teaching that Jesus is praying for them at this very instant. "Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25, NRSV). When intercessors grasp the startling reality that as they pray for others, Jesus is praying for them, two things happen. First, personal blessing comes from knowing the intercessor is held in the palm of God's hand. Second, the awareness that the intercessor is not so much praying for the person as Jesus is praying for the person through the intercessor. The locus of the power is there—not in the human intercessor but in the divine Intercessor. As though this reality were not enough, what confidence flows from the marvelous truth that the Holy Spirit prays for believers:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26-27, NRSV)

3. A third, fear-conquering concept that transformed the team is the authority that is in Christ. The intercessor does not pray for someone with a pallid hope that one day victory will come; rather, the intercessor in prayer appropriates the victory already

secured by Christ at the cross. The Gospels repeatedly quote the people as noting that Jesus taught with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees (e.g., Mark 1:22). This same authority is delegated to all believers as Christ's appointed emissaries. "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20, NRSV). Therefore, intercessors meet every need with authority, not cringing fearfulness.

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-19, NRSV). The connection is transparent. Believers are given the authority of Jesus so that they can go. Believers can take up that authority with confidence even when Satan opposes. Martin Luther was right when he penned the following words in the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God":

The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
for, lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him. (110)

That one word is the name of Jesus. Intercessors do not speak from the platform of their own authority but from the assurance of the matchless authority of Jesus, won by his shed blood at the cross of Calvary.

Practical catalysts. Three keys emerged as practical catalysts, as well (see Figure 5.3).

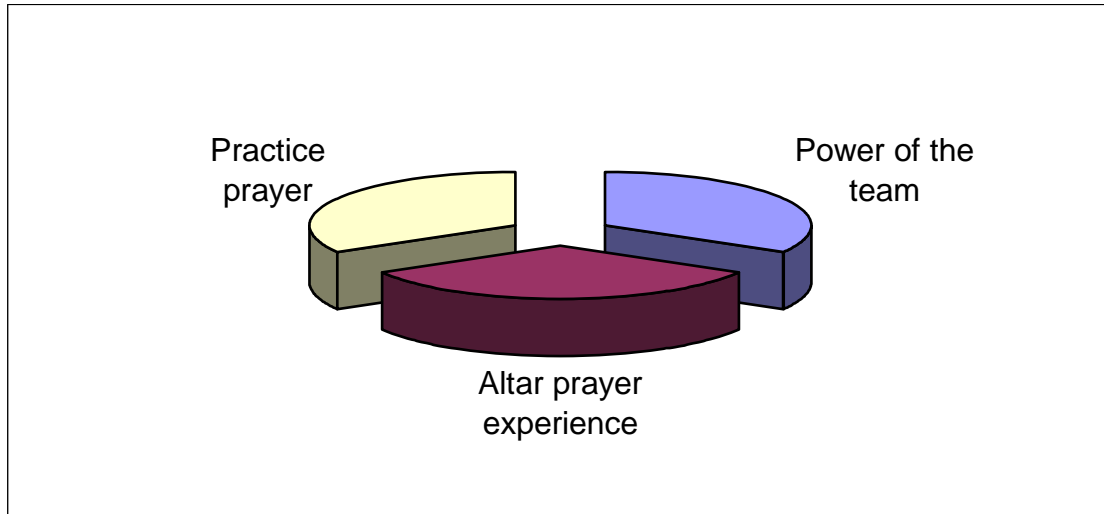


Figure 5.3. Three practical catalysts.

1. First, the group experienced the power of the team. When I first wrote the manual, I subtitled the chapter on the team, “Theology of Accountability.” After further consideration, I recognized my error. Accountability was certainly present, but it was only one aspect of the whole and by no means the central aspect. In the end, I changed it to “Theology of Partnership.” Partnership is truly what developed for this team. Some groups never become teams; they are merely conglomerations of people. Others mesh with a sweet synchronicity that makes the whole far greater than the sum of its parts. The latter proved to be the case here. The group took its commitment seriously, recognizing responsibility to God and to one another. A real Barnabas spirit permeated the meetings. Even in the worship services, the intercessors sensed they were not alone but were there as a team. A dynamic emerged in the team interaction that accelerated learning, inspired individuals, and encouraged people in this altar prayer ministry. The small group interaction during the classes validated once again the genius of people like John Wesley, who birthed a whole movement in small groups.

2. Second, actually praying with people gave field experience to the intercessors. It gave a place not merely for them to try out what they learned but a place to put to test the promises of God. Nothing builds faith in God like facing the moment of testing and finding him faithful. As the team prayed for people, the grace of God that flowed through them not only blessed the recipients of the prayers, but it left the residue of grace's fragrance on the intercessors. The affirmation of appreciation encouraged the team that they were responding to God's call and being used in his service.

3. Third, practice prayers over a variety of scenarios proved helpful and instructive to the team. In a safe and encouraging environment, they were able to offer up prayers and learn from one another. One might use the analogy of learning football plays at practice before having to run them during the game. This role-playing allowed those who were watching and listening to learn as much as the one offering the prayer. I gave encouraging and supportive comments after each prayer, identifying strengths in the prayer and affirming the person's gift. I constantly reaffirmed to the class that no one had developed a single right way to pray. Each person would pray in the personality and gifts that God had given that person. Authenticity, not imitation, was ever to be the watchword.

Where God Was Present

In some ways anticipated and in some ways surprising, the hand of God was truly visible throughout this process. People saw God at work in their own personal experience, in the team relationship, in praying with people at the altar, and in engaging in prayer beyond the altar (see Figure 5.4).

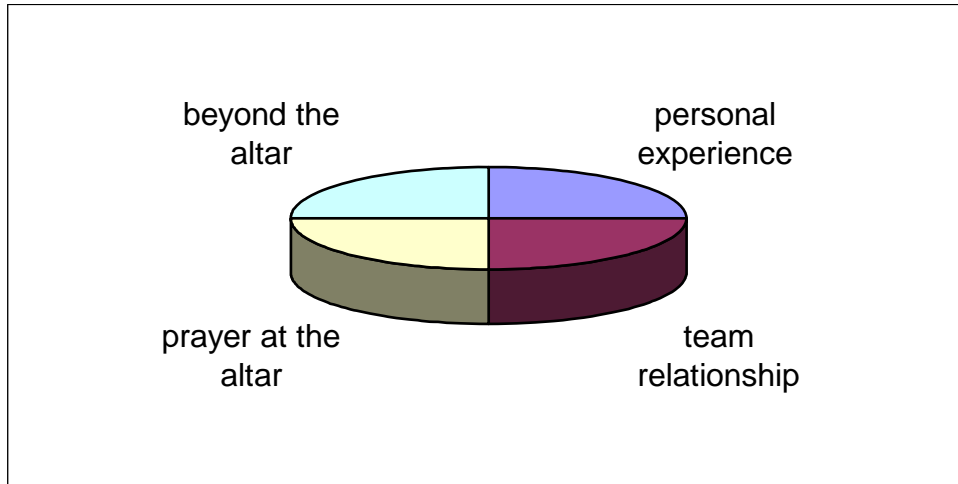


Figure 5.4. Four areas where God was present.

Personal experience. With embarrassment, I acknowledge that the depth of spiritual vitality the participants experienced surprised me. What I suspected would be more cerebral ended up being deeply relational. As the training unfolded, the team began to seek after God, not just after knowledge about God. Even as the team entered the journey to learn how to pray for others, God surprised them by joining them on the journey. It became not a journey to God but a journey with God. God met them at every bend in the road. They discovered with great joy that intercession was not something they did for God but something they did with God. Better still, it was something God did through them. For these travelers along the road of faith, these weeks brought joy in the journey. The weekly feedback sheets did not indicate an unbroken upward path but certainly an upward trend. Even the low points and struggles were ones of ascending the heights of God's grace. The training grew in the team an awareness of the presence of God and an expectation that he would meet them in the commonplace paths of each day.

Team relationship. Perhaps I was caught off guard by this team connection most

of all. In fact, in my initial draft of the training manual, I did not even include a chapter on team. At the encouragement of both my dissertation team and my research reflection team, I incorporated a chapter on “Power of the Covenant Ministry Team—Theology of Sacred Partnership.” It became so pivotal to the whole that I made it the second chapter of the manual, preceding the other three foundational pillars of the project—prayer, altar, and lay ministry.

The experience of team ministry energized and built up the entire group. The presence of the Holy Spirit soon became clear in the spirit of the classes. People came on time. They held fast to their commitments. They came expectantly and participated enthusiastically. They kept regularly (though not perfectly) to their daily tasks in their workbook. They encouraged one another and learned from one another. Apart from brief teaching segments, the small group interaction was pivotal. Whether discussing the teaching, sharing experiences with one another, or praying with one another, God was truly at work.

Prayer at the altar. One might reasonably have expected actually praying at the altar to be crucial in the learning process, and so it was. This practical intercession took the theoretical to the practical. It field tested what had been theorized in the classroom. If praying with people did not prove effective, what happened in the classroom was moot. On the other hand, when intercessors saw God at work and witnessed people leaving from altar prayer with renewed hope and confidence that God was with them, it kindled in them a desire to continue pursuing this ministry. When difficult situations arose, these drove them back to the classes to share the need and learn together. What provided the greatest affirmation was the fact that they witnessed God using laypersons just like them

as conduits of God's grace.

Beyond the altar. Perhaps the most exciting and God-sized signs of the Lord at work have been the first reports of face-to-face intercessory prayer taking place beyond the bounds of the church. God is entering conversations more frequently as intercessors are increasingly aware of his presence. They are making themselves available to God, and he is opening doors other than just church doors. Two reported praying with friends in the workplace. One of them engaged in prayer with tears—what the early Church called *penthos* (Hausherr 1)—much to his own surprise. He reported that normally he would have told the friend he would pray for him, and, indeed, he would have done so later. He also said that generally he would never have thought of praying right at work with a person, but because of his participation in the class and my persistent teaching on praying at the time of the request, he asked if he could pray with the friend right there at work. As he told me about the experience, the tears of compassion were still brimming in his eyes. My fervent prayer ascends that this intercessory ministry beyond the church walls that has begun as a trickle will break into a raging flood of Holy Spirit-empowered grace.

Other Noteworthy Findings

In reflecting on the project, three other noteworthy themes emerged—the indispensability of pastoral leadership, congregational education, and discipleship development (see Figure 5.5).

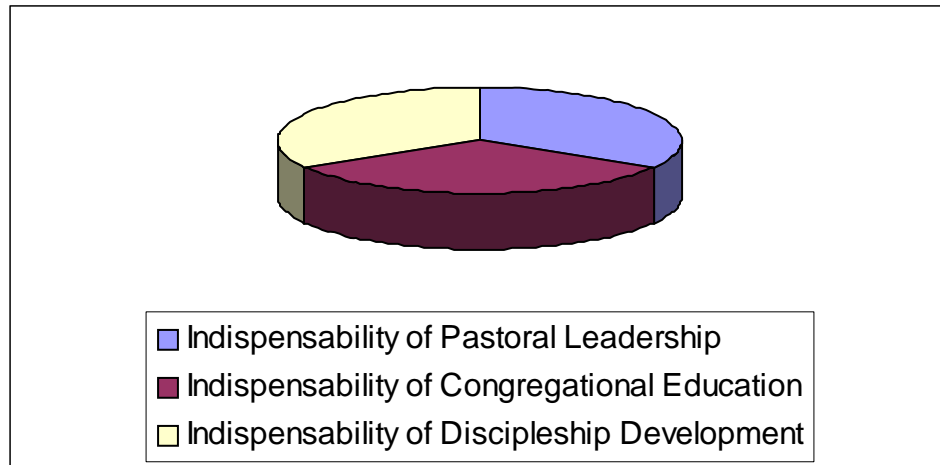


Figure 5.5. Three more essential elements.

Indispensability of Pastoral Leadership

This ministry cannot move forward apart from not only the permission but also the participation of the pastor. At the very least, it must have the pastor's blessing. Apart from pastoral leadership affirming the value of this ministry, neither the team that is gathered nor the congregation at large will be convinced of its value and efficacy.

First of all, this concept is true because the pastor is the spiritual head of the congregation. If the shepherd does not value this kind of ministry, neither will the sheep.

Secondly, the pastor has the voice, trust, and delegated leadership to initiate a new arm of ministry. If the primary leader is not a strong advocate, no one will follow. The congregation will have the sense that this train is bound for nowhere, and they will not get on board.

Third, no one can replace the pastor in training the congregation in the significance of altar prayer ministry, validating the members of the team, and encouraging the congregation to receive this prayer as a means of grace.

Fourth, when the pastor personally asks laypersons to be part of the team, that request from the spiritual head of the church validates the individual and empowers those persons for ministry. When the congregation sees the pastor equipping laity for ministry, a growing sense of expectation emerges that this ministry will be vital and alive.

Indispensability of Congregational Education

As mentioned above, implementing this program involves far more than just working with a small group of people. It involves educating the whole church.

First, the church needs to be taught the foundational principles of prayer, altar, and lay ministry that undergird the team and the ministry. Not only must the team understand these ideas, but the congregation must comprehend them, as well. For instance, if the team believes in the power of lay ministry but the congregation remains suspicious of it, the congregation is less likely to embrace these lay intercessors.

Second, the church needs to be invited to pray over the team so that the whole church recognizes altar prayer as a valid ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

Third, the pastor holds the key to helping the church realize the altar is available for every kind of need. For example, many have only known the altar call as one for salvation. That is surely valid, but God is doing a new work. As in biblical times, people came to the altar for all kinds of reasons, so people can bring God all kinds of needs today.

Fourth, the church needs to recognize that those who come to the altar are not a parade of the pitiful. They are simply bringing their concerns or the concerns of those they love to Jesus.

Fifth, altar prayer is not a show. It is a quiet and humble time where two or three

can pray together and Jesus joins them in power.

At this point of congregational education, I made my greatest mistake. In my eagerness to prepare those who would be praying, I underestimated the critical aspect of preparing the congregation to be open to receive prayer. I learned that one has to educate the whole church simultaneously; it is one body. One only distorts the body and keeps it from functioning properly when one part grows without developing the rest, as well. Leaders cannot be developed in a vacuum. I would add a whole preaching dimension throughout the process to help educate the congregation at the same time I was growing the altar prayer team.

Indispensability of Discipleship Development

In debriefing with my dissertation mentor, I commented on how positive the team feedback was. While they gave a number of excellent suggestions for improving the training, they were enthusiastic both about the training and the emerging ministry of which they were a part. In other words, the question I asked was whether the project was skewed by the fact that those on the team were so intimately linked with me in the process. My mentor, Steve Martyn, gave me a word that became a key for me to understanding much of what had happened. The word is a distinctly biblical one—disciple. He reminded me that the nature of this project cast me as an observer participant. I was not a neutral, dispassionate observer standing on the sidelines. I was not even just a teacher giving information. I was a disciple maker developing disciples. With humility and godly fear, I was saying what every Christian leader should say along with Paul, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1, NRSV). In other words, one would expect that disciples would eagerly seize truths from their leader. What happened

in the course of this training was not simply equipping some people to do another task in the church. What happened was that God developed disciples who have matured and grown in their relationship with God and in value to his Church.

In developing an altar prayer ministry, several issues cannot be overlooked. First, while the pastor need not do all the training, clearly the pastor needs to be active and supporting from the outset. Second, the goal must explicitly be the development of disciples, not merely teaching of students. The end is to grow hearts, not simply fill minds. Third, in the final analysis, this is the very work to which Christ called his Church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19, NRSV). Insofar as this tool can be of any value in fulfilling that commission, may glory be to God.

Unexpected Findings

1. I am embarrassed that I did not anticipate the personal growth in the spiritual lives of the team members. Thankfully, God did far more than I expected. He was building disciples. Humbled, I come back to Paul’s benediction with gratitude:

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.
Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21, KJV)

2. A smaller matter turned out to be more valuable than I realized, namely the weekly feedback sheets. What I gave to the participants as an instrument to help with this project ended up becoming a valuable tool on two counts: (1) to keep pace with where people were on the journey and to guide me in praying for these friends, and (2) to keep the team members accountable and on task. I would recommend that some similar type of feedback sheet be used in any other altar prayer ministry team training.

3. On a personal note, I did not expect to find my own prayer life struggling so

much during this time. Where I might have expected a personal mountaintop, I experienced struggles instead. I do not know how to account for this experience but simply note that the road of faith is not even or smoothly paved.

4. On a final note of unexpected findings, a blessing about the Holy Spirit's work came to me during one of the post-training interviews. I had clearly felt God urging me to build this altar prayer ministry. What I did not realize is that God had been at work long before I ever got the idea. After the training, the prayer ministry coordinator told me she believed God called me to Martha Bowman specifically to open this ministry together. She and a few others had been praying for some time concerning this very ministry. They knew God wanted to elevate the ministry of reclaiming the altar and building a team of lay intercessors. Other avenues of prayer ministry were growing, but this one had never begun. She told me it was a locked door. This prayer group, however, believed the pastor had the key to unlock it. This small group prayed before I ever came to Martha Bowman that God would bring a pastor to take the church deeper and wider in prayer ministry. I was humbled to witness the birthing of a ministry conceived in prayer long before my arrival. The intricate workings of God are truly awesome.

Weaknesses and Limitations

An inherent elasticity exists in any qualitative analysis. Controls are far more difficult to maintain. When variables are so many, results are harder to assess. Furthermore, in a study such as this, the researcher is engaged as an observer participant. I deliberately selected participants who had a strong love for God and a positive connection to me; therefore, one might reasonably expect that their evaluations would tend to be more positive in nature. This turned out to be true. Consequently, finding a

dispassionate evaluation of the quality of the training is difficult. Nonetheless, since the process deliberately includes disciple making as part of its scope, that may be less a bias than an integral part of the instrument. At least in this setting, the initial results of the altar prayer ministry have been encouraging.

Limitations abound because so many intervening variables can impact the process. For example, great variation may occur due to the prior congregational prayer foundation, spiritual maturity of the participants, receptivity of the congregation, size of the congregation, age range of the congregation, age of the church itself, support of the pastor, experience of the trainer, dynamics of the group, connection of the leader to the class, and the commitment of the trainees to this ministry. For example, if the church did not have strong confidence in the pastor, the whole project might be viewed with suspicion. In another case, if the church had no prayer emphasis prior to this training, less foundation would exist on which to build and people might be more skeptical.

Recommendations for Further Exploration

In no way has this project pretended to be the last word on the subject of altar prayer ministry. In fact, in light of the paucity of material on training for altar prayer ministry, it is one of the first words on the subject. I recognize that many local churches provide altar prayer training and do it well; however, I have found no comprehensive manual that helps train people in a practical fashion on how to undertake altar prayer ministry. Therefore, this is just an introductory word that needs much follow-up. Since this qualitative study has been by its nature subjective, one might explore what consistencies or inconsistencies might appear if this research were done in another setting. Much useful research could be done on how to teach and prepare the

congregation to receive this ministry at the same time that the team is being trained to enter this ministry. Another valuable project could explore how to give warm, compelling, invitational altar calls that would help people feel at ease in coming to the altar and would bring many to the altar. Further exploration could be done on how to do follow-up with teams to keep them growing, focused, vital, and engaged.

Summary

God has begun another arm of prayer ministry at Martha Bowman Memorial UMC through the addition of an altar prayer ministry team. Altar prayer builds on strong prayer foundations already long in place. This is a church that numbers prayer as one of its six core values. It recognizes prayer as foundational to all ministries. It understands people can do more than pray, but they cannot do more until they pray.

Now that the initial training is complete, the question is what direction God will take it. The ultimate goal is not for the church to fill altar rails but for prayer to fill the people of the church. When that happens, intercession on-site with insight will not be confined to a building called the church. Instead, the church's prayer is that intercession will spread across the community as people from Martha Bowman Church pray with people in schools, work places, neighborhoods, and restaurants. The vision is that mutual prayer will become as natural as breathing all across the community. Then the community will experience the real presence of Jesus who has promised, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20, NRSV).

APPENDIX A

Letter Inviting People to Participate in the Training

August 8, 2003

Name

Street

City

Dear _____:

Grace and peace to you in the wonderful name of our risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus said, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer.*" We have always taken him seriously at Martha Bowman. We are continuing to do so more and more. In my experience, I have seen the church altar used as an effective place for many people to encounter Jesus Christ in ways that have transformed their lives. You have seen many times in our own church when the altar has been filled with people praying.

God has laid on my heart a burden to help equip people to pray with people at the altar. What a privilege it is to come alongside a person and help bear their burden to the Lord who is able to meet every need! I will be training a team this fall to serve as an **Altar Prayer Ministry Team** at MBC. I want to ask you to pray about being part of it.

We have prayerfully selected a group of people from each worship service so that we can have people available at any time. You would serve in your particular service since you would be more familiar with both the setting and the people.

I will call you in about a week to see if you are willing and able to be a part of this emerging ministry. Here are the commitments:

- Attend twelve training sessions of an hour each (dates listed on the back). *If you can't make the times, please decline.* There will be training another time.
- Meet once a month for an hour in a small group from the Altar Prayer Team.
- Be available in worship services on a consistent basis to pray with people.
- Be willing to commit 30-60 minutes a week in study for the class.
- Keep a brief daily prayer journal of insights and growth during the class (for you).
- Turn in weekly (anonymously) a one-page summary of what God is showing you.

Thank you for praying about this and taking it seriously. I will be contacting you in about a week. "God will deliver us *as you help us by your prayers.*" (2 Cor. 1:10-11)

Your friend in Christ,

Bob

APPENDIX B**Worship Attendance across Thirty-three Years at Martha Bowman UMC**

1970	86
1975	103
1980	151
1985	284
1990	515
1995	608
2000	648
2003	807

APPENDIX C**Sunday School Attendance across Thirty-three Years at Martha Bowman UMC**

1970	86
1975	84
1980	104
1985	184
1990	382
1995	408
2000	389
2003	510

APPENDIX D

Sample Prayers from Rick Bonfim over Seekers at the Altar

Rejection

Father, in the name of Jesus, Lord, my brother has a broken heart because he feels rejected by his mother. This is his identity. Lord, he has lost his perspective of prayer. He has lost his perspective of what he can do to change the situation. He is becoming a victim instead of a winner in that relationship. Lord, I pray that this friend will now take the sword of the Spirit and assume a position of warfare against the attacks from Satan through this hurt from his mother. He will not fall by the wayside but be a victorious Christian. So I break rejection within him and speak to freedom in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Rebellion

Father, in the name of Jesus, my sister comes complaining about feeling that she is rejected at home. She is angry with her husband and is minimizing him. He is already insecure because she is so strong. I come against years of rejection that have caused her to feel second-class, insufficient, and unable. Father, in the name of Jesus, I command that the spirit of rejection come out of her. Take the wounds of her soul, the wounds of her mind, and help her to forgive. I set her free from hatred and every attitude of rebellion.

Bitterness

Father, in the name of Jesus, I come against bitterness in my brother's life. In your Word you say that anyone who curses another brings reproach. I ask you to bring healing to his bitterness. Root out all acidity, wormwood, acid, gall, and poison. By the blood of Jesus, repeat after me, "Father, I ask you to forgive me for my bitterness toward my family...." In the name of Jesus, I break the curse and set my brother free. You give him a new attitude of grace and hope and love and mercy.

Unforgiveness

Father, in the name of Jesus I come against the root of unforgiveness in this person's life. I come against the thoughts that never go away, that keep on remembering the past as though it were the present. Father, I ask you to remove all resentment, anxiety, unforgiveness, and thoughts of hate. I ask in the name of Jesus that you remove this strong will from my friend and soften it. Let her come to a place of repentance. Let mercy flow into her that the love of God would so fill her that no room would remain for things that have bound and hurt her in the past.

APPENDIX E

Grand Tour Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Pretraining Interview

1. What experience do you bring concerning prayer at the altar?
2. Have you received prayer at the altar? If so, describe your experience.
3. What fears or obstacles do you see concerning your participation?
4. What qualifies you to participate in this ministry?

Post-training Interview

1. After receiving some initial training, describe your first experience praying with someone at the altar.
2. What in the training experience helped you become more confident?
3. What aspects of the training did you find most valuable?
4. What suggestions would you have for improving the training/ministry?
5. What evidence have you seen of the Holy Spirit at work at the altar?
6. Describe your personal spiritual journey during the training.

Weekly Feedback Form

1. Describe your spiritual life/journey this week.
2. What is God teaching you regarding altar prayer/intercession?
3. Describe a high or low in your prayer life this week.
4. Where have you seen God at work this week?

APPENDIX F

Survey of the Congregation to Assess Altar Prayer Ministry

ALTAR PRAYER MINISTRY SURVEY

1. Did you come to the altar during the period of September - December 2003?
_____ Yes
_____ No
COMMENTS:

2. Did you receive prayer at the altar by an altar prayer team member?
_____ Yes (If yes, please comment on your experience)
_____ No (If no, please share why)
COMMENTS:

3. Do you feel that MBC would benefit by having a trained altar prayer ministry team of lay persons available at the altar? Why or why not?
COMMENTS:

4. What difference could it make if MBC had a trained altar prayer ministry team?

5. About the Altar Prayer Ministry Team, I would like to say:

APPENDIX G

Altar Prayer Ministry Covenant

ALTAR PRAYER MINISTRY TEAM COVENANT

As a Christian disciple, I daily commit myself to respond in obedience to God's call, to daily center my whole life in Christ, and to daily open myself to the power of the Holy Spirit. Together with the other members of the Altar Prayer Ministry Team, I covenant to seek the heart and will of God through:

1. Commitment to the LORD.

I will daily practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer (both speaking to and listening to God), Scripture reading, confession, generosity, and service. I will seek to grow in other spiritual disciplines as well, understanding that all are a means of God's grace and an invitation to grow in faith and service.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

2. Commitment to the MINISTRY.

Having taken the vows of membership at MBC, I will gladly share the spiritual gifts God has given through me, recognizing that God is extending the ministry of Christ. I will always maintain confidentiality.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor 12:7)

3. Commitment to the TEAM.

I gladly make a two-year commitment to serve on the team. I will pursue constant learning, embrace mutual partnership, guard my personal integrity, pray for others on the team, and meet with a team monthly after training. I will make attendance a top priority.

"I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." (Philemon 7)

Signed _____ Date _____

Pastor _____ Date _____

APPENDIX H

Sample Weekly Letters Sent to Participants

Dear APMT—

What a blessing you are!

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel.” (Phil. 1:3-4)

Thanks for being such a blessing!

Your friend in Christ,

Bob

Precious APMT—

As I’ve been praying for you, this mix of verses 3 and 4 of “Onward Christian Soldiers” came to me:

“Like a mighty army moves the church of God;
brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
Gates of hell can never ‘gainst that church prevail;
We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.”

So in Christ’s strength, ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS!

Your friend in Christ,

Bob

Dear APMT—

I’m praying this for you this week!

Bob

I’ll Pray for You

“One part of life is joy, another part is grief;
And when I see you hurting, I long to bring relief.
But while there is so little I feel that I can do,
God is ever loving and is there to help you through.
So to the One who knows your pain, the Source of peace and care,
I pledge to kneel beside you, before the Lord in prayer.”

Dear Intercessory Warriors—

This time has flown by. What a HUGE blessing you have been to me. This Sunday is our last meeting. We will have sign-ups for post-class interviews.

With Paul, I say, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil 1:3-5)

I love you!

Your friend in Christ,

Bob

APPENDIX I

Altar Prayer Ministry Training Manual

**BUILDING
AN ALTAR
PRAYER
MINISTRY TEAM**

Martha Bowman Memorial

United Methodist Church

Bob Moon

[NOTE: This includes only a brief summary of each session. For information on the entire manual (including teacher's guide), contact the author or Doctor of Ministry Office at Asbury Theological Seminary.]

SESSION 1

**Vision for Altar Prayer Ministry—
Catching a God’s-Eye View**

The opening chapter focuses on three primary factors. First, it casts the vision for the ministry of intercessory prayer. Second, it introduces the key verse on which the altar prayer ministry builds. Third, it gives an overview of the four legs on which the entire project stands.

The vision for the study comes into sharp focus when people catch a God’s-eye view. Just as one sees a situation from a wider perspective from an airplane, when one sees the circumstances of life from the higher perspective of God’s viewpoint, everything changes. Problems do not disappear, but they take on a whole new outlook. Prayer allows people the privilege of entering the heart of God and seeing from the standpoint of God.

The key verse for the altar prayer ministry is 2 Corinthians 1:10-11 (NIV): “*On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.*” Central insights include: *God* is our hope. He has already been at work and will *continue to deliver*. However, God brings hope *as people help by their prayers*. What a vision for prayer ministry! It is nothing short of partnering with God in his work.

The four legs of altar prayer ministry are these:

1. Power of intercessory prayer—theology of sacred encounter,
2. Power of the altar—theology of sacred place,
3. Power of lay ministry—theology of sacred calling,
4. Power of covenant team ministry—theology of sacred partnership.

SESSION 2

Power of the Covenant Ministry Team— Theology of Sacred Partnership

Here the manual explores the power of team ministry. It casts the vision for this to move beyond the realm of individual effort to that of the work of a covenant community.

It explores the value of (1) the team, (2) the ministry, and (3) the covenant.

The manual sets two bases for the ministry of partnership. First, it explores the biblical record for mentors and developing team ministry. It studies examples from the Old Testament, Jesus, and Paul. Each sets a pattern for ministry that is done not in isolation from others but in concert with others. Second, it learns from the ministry of John Wesley. His genius in developing small group ministries to equip, empower, train, and deploy believers has left an enduring legacy for other Christian leaders to follow.

The third major goal of the chapter is to clarify the commitments that participants are asked to make. Before committing to the covenant, persons need to understand clearly what is expected. Commitments are made in three areas:

1. Commitment to the Lord,
2. Commitment to the ministry, and
3. Commitment to the team.

The session concludes with the group joining in the prayer from John Wesley's Covenant Service.

SESSION 3**Power of Intercessory Prayer—
Theology of Sacred Encounter**

This chapter examines the fundamentals of prayer and its power. The point is not to manipulate God nor is it to simply appropriate his power. Rather, the focus lies in building the relationship with God. The power lies in the connection with God, not in any gimmick or technique or secret that exists apart from the relationship.

The chapter begins with a review of the four legs of this ministry:

1. Prayer connects people intimately with God,
2. The altar is a crucial place where people can meet God in transforming ways,
3. Laity can exercise the ministry of intercession with power and authority, and
4. Incredible synergy results when team ministry happens.

Going to the Bible, the manual shows the transformational power of four great intercessors: Moses, Daniel, Paul, and Jesus. The intercession of each was marked by immediate identification with those for whom they interceded. They interceded putting their own lives on the line on behalf of those for whom they prayed.

Of course, nothing can compare to Jesus, who was “numbered with the transgressors.” The sinless Christ identified himself with a sinful humanity, taking on people’s sin that they might take on his righteousness. Jesus did not run from the cross. He came into the world precisely to bear it to Calvary. The climactic surrender of Jesus’ life for the sins of the world became the supreme act of intercession.

Thus, the ministry of intercession is a ministry of identification with those in need. The intercessor takes hold of the person in need with one hand and takes hold of Almighty God with the other, allowing God’s power to flow.

SESSION 4**Power of the Altar—
Theology of Sacred Place**

Understanding the altar provides an awareness of people's need, God's perspective, and God's plan for reconciling people to himself. The altar speaks of the means of connecting with God. The merciful God has not closed his heart to people but has opened a door for reconciliation. He gives the altar as a place where he not only agrees to meet people but where he longs to meet people to restore them to a right relationship with himself.

1. Noah's altar was one of gratitude.
2. Abraham's altar was one of total surrender.
3. Moses' altar was one of trust.
4. Elijah's altar was one of God's blazing power.
5. Jesus taught the altar was a place where one meets the living God.
6. Hebrews teaches that every altar points to the spiritual altar where Jesus makes sacrifice for sins.
7. Heaven's altar stands before the throne of God. Yet, in the new heavens and new earth, no altar is needed for God himself will be in their midst.

The chapter concludes with an overview of the modern kneeling altar, not as a place of animal sacrifice but as a place to encounter God, nonetheless. The Church ought not canonize the kneeling altar, for God may raise up a new methodology. Neither should the Church lose the kneeling altar's true heart, which is the invitation to make a present response and meet the Lord in prayer.

SESSION 5

Power of Lay Ministry— Theology of Sacred Calling

The critical truth here reveals that ministry is the property of the entire Church, especially the laity. Clergy equip the laity so the laity can do the great work of the Church. Unfortunately, this paradigm has often been inverted through the ages. Recapturing the biblical image of *kleros* as leaders chosen within the *laos* returns the Church to God's original intent. Interestingly, Jesus modeled this truth in that he was a layman himself.

Reclaiming the biblical model for the Church results in

1. Giving the ministry back to Jesus,
2. Giving the ministry back to the Church,
3. Creating a culture of mutual servanthood,
4. Restoring a biblical understanding of the gifts of the Spirit,
5. Recognizing the laity are called to ministry in every sector of life,

Reclaiming the Church's call to kingdom ministry and mission,

6. Restructuring delegation of clergy time, energy, and commitment, and
7. Reclaiming ministry out of weakness, not strength.

The result of recapturing this biblical balance between clergy and laity results in the kind of synergy that bring conductor and orchestra together in concert to provide beautiful music that feeds the soul. Conflict and struggle between the two—or even casual *détente*—results in discord.

SESSION 6

**Personal Prayer Life of the Intercessor—
Learning to Know God in Prayer**

The goal of prayer is not to get things from God but to connect with God. When people pray to get things from God, the prayer is merely transactional. Those who stop here never get to the relational aspect of prayer—the greatest aspect by far. Those who get God get all that they ever imagined and more. Prayer is not so much about getting things *from* God as it is *getting God himself*.

A second facet to prayer reveals God's astonishing self-limiting interaction with the world. The omnipotent God has chosen not to work in our world until his people pray. Thus, prayer is far more than a nice idea. Prayer allows people nothing less than participating with almighty God in the fulfillment of his purposes.

This chapter invites people to explore the fact that people pray for a wide variety of reasons. Since that is true, God wants intercessors to pray for people both in their area of need and in God's area of provision.

The essence of the intercessor's calling is not to get things from God but to be in relationship with God. The one in relationship with God holds the key to God's heart. Equally, the one in intimate relationship with God trusts God's answer no matter the outcome. Before believers can ever be with people before God, they must be alone with God.

SESSION 7**Embracing the Ministry of Intercession—
Learning to Partner with God in Prayer**

Altar prayer ministers are only temporary assistants to the Holy Spirit. Such ministry includes both a sense of our inability before God and a confidence in God's ability through people. The fact is that God has chosen to act through people in striking and world-changing ways.

Two key images guide this chapter:

1. S. D. Gordon compares the prayers of the intercessor to a switchboard. The power is not in the switchboard but in the supply. The switchboard, however, with a small toggle can span a connection that makes the power accessible to those who need it. The intercessor is the one at the switchboard.

2. Andrew Murray offers the picture of intercessors as a pipeline. The intercessors do not actually give the Living Water, but they are conduits that enable the Living Water to flow to thirsty souls. As pipelines, they do not create the water but they channel the flow to reach those in need.

Absolutely central is the principle that all intercession is based on the victory of Jesus Christ won at the cross and confirmed at the empty tomb. Intercessors do not attempt to do a work; they simply appropriate victory from Christ's finished work and apply it in the particular situation at hand.

SESSION 8**Understanding Spiritual Warfare—
Learning to Battle in Prayer**

One cannot read the Bible with integrity without coming to a clear knowledge that people are engaged in spiritual warfare. Even as people live their lives in the earthly dimension, a battle is engaged in the heavenly dimension. Jesus established a clear connection between what happens in the earthly and heavenly realms (Matt. 18:18-19). Believers have been given authority on earth to engage the forces of darkness with weapons of light and gain the victory.

Battling in spiritual warfare requires twin actions that are polar opposites. First, resist the devil. Second, draw near to God (James 4:7-8). Left with the lone injunction to resist the devil, people might despair, for they are unequal to the battle on their own; however, when they draw near to God, they discover the power that makes them more than conquerors.

In warfare prayer, believers must learn to use their position in Christ. They never actually battle and defeat the devil—he *is already* defeated. God gave Adam authority over the earth, but Adam gave up that authority to Satan when he sinned. God sent a perfect Man to win back that authority. Jesus did so at the cross and at the empty tomb. Intercessors now have the responsibility to apply the victory already won to the battle with the devil.

This chapter ends with an explanation of Ed Silvoso's understanding of spiritual warfare drawn from Ephesians. Believers should grasp the deep truth that those nearest to Jesus in the battle are the least subject to defeat.

SESSION 9

**Developing the Church as a
House of Prayer—
Learning to Grow in Prayer**

One of the key struggles in every church is whether it will follow the model of Mary or Martha. Mary churches focus on *being* while Martha churches focus on *doing*. In a society obsessed with action, results, and measurable success, Jesus brings a clear corrective. “My house shall be called a house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13). When Jesus drove the moneychangers from the Temple, his objection was not simply that they were making it a house of thieves. The ultimate violence done to the Temple and the people of God is that the commerce *shut out prayer*. Profit preempted relationship. Barter replaced intimacy.

Churches can be identified as one of three basic types:

1. Churches that think prayer is good but do not give it priority,
2. Churches that give prayer a position as one of the key ministries of the church,
3. Churches that see prayer as foundational to *every* ministry of the church. They could no more see proceeding in any area apart from prayer than they could imagine flying in a plane without wings.

More than anything people need a vital, growing relationship with God. This relationship can begin, grow, or mature through a dynamic encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ. The altar is one biblical and primary place where this encounter can take place. Equipped intercessors empowered by the Holy Spirit can effectively help connect the seeker and God.

SESSION 10**Discernment and Authority in Prayer—
Learning to Listen in Prayer**

In seeking to understand discernment, this chapter turns to concepts articulated by Rick Bonfim, a North Georgia United Methodist evangelist from Brazil. Rick has keen gifts of discernment born out of long relationship with God and experience in dealing with people. Fundamentally, Bonfim discerns four roots of need:

1. Rejection,
2. Rebellion,
3. Bitterness, and
4. Unforgiveness.

Furthermore, Bonfim notes that these roots can bind in three areas—will, mind, and emotions.

The last part of the chapter deals with authority. The Bible indicates that believers have authority in prayer toward people, toward the devil, and toward God. The intercessor, therefore, does not pray out of presumption but out of confidence in God. Intercession is not about our own power but about Christ's authority. When the intercessor prays out of the appropriated authority of Christ, God's power flows into the circumstance. Knowledge of God's infinite wisdom and boundless mercy, however, keep intercessors from demanding from God. D. L. Moody rightly observes, "Every true child of God in the end would far rather pray 'Thy will be done' than 'my will be done.'"

SESSION 11**Prayer and Healing—
Learning the Language of Intercession**

Jesus sent his disciples out (Matt. 10:7-8) with three assignments—preach, heal, and cast out demons (confront the forces of darkness). Healing and dealing with those who have been demonized must be recaptured as part of the ministry of the Church. Ignorance and fear have often been obstacles in the believers' path. In addition, frauds and caricatures of true healing have made many believers hesitant. The Church must go beyond these barriers to reclaim what Jesus sent it forth to do.

Intercessors must find a balance in this enterprise. Prayer should be made with confidence and assurance that the prayer is heard and answered. On the other hand, prayer must be offered within the context of absolute trust, knowing that God's understanding of the circumstances and the need extends far beyond any person's grasp. Therefore, people honor God when they bring great requests in great faith. At the same time, people honor God most when they trust his goodness and love, confidently putting themselves and those they love in the hands of God. The model for this kind of trusting faith is Joseph. In Genesis 50:20, he affirmed God's infinite wisdom and goodness even in the face of evil. He told his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

The issue is not ultimately what happens. The issue ultimately is the confidence that flows out of the intimate relationship between the believer and God. Every time someone prays, grace is released.

SESSION 12

**Joining in the Ministry of Jesus—
Learning to Love in Prayer**

Intercession is love on its knees. Prayer is not the *least* believers can do but the *most* they can do. They can do *more* than pray, but they cannot do more *until* they pray. In prayer, intercessors join those who are dear to them and enter into the presence of Jesus together to ask him to help them. No privilege could be greater.

The model for this ministry of intercession is found in the story of the four men who brought the paralytic to Jesus. The four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus loved him and were persuaded Jesus could help the man. They persevered, undeterred by the crowds. They found a way to bring the man to Jesus. They could not help their friend, but they knew Jesus could. This story paints a powerful picture of intercessory prayer. Love on its knees led to love on its feet. It also led to their friend's being put on his feet. Such can be the result when believers intercede at the altar for those who come with needs.

Intercessors can find fresh strength, courage, and confidence when they recognize that not only is Christ praying *in* them and *through* them, but he is also praying *for* them. In preparing to intercede for their friends, believers can do four things:

1. Seek God from a cleansed heart,
2. Ask God for deliverance from fear,
3. Ask God to give them strong faith, and
4. Ask God to clothe them in his righteousness.

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