

More Ways to Pray

Prayer concerts

This is a phrase that has become very popular in the last 20 years, but is unfortunate in that it confuses people's minds with the image of a musical event, which it is not. In October 1744 a group of ministers in Scotland called for a "Concert of Prayer" to be held on the first Tuesday of February, May, August and November for a two year period, which was extended for another 7 years in 1746. Their desire was to release *concerted prayer* for a pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all the churches, for the revival of Christendom and the evangelisation of the world, and God's people were asked to commit themselves to either private praying societies or public meetings, or alone in secret. They were also asked to pray weekly for the preaching of the Word every Sunday. As a result Glasgow had 45 "praying societies" while Edinburgh had over 30 societies of young people alone! The idea caught on throughout Scotland, England and the American colonies; and it is this vision for united, believing, persistent prayer that motivates *Pray for Scotland* today.

Organising a prayer concert is not as easy as it sounds. Many traditional church prayer meetings have developed a bad image which does not encourage attendance, let alone participation - such as the prayer meeting where the experienced leader, having announced 6 things to be prayed for proceeds to cover them all in his opening prayer, leading to a long embarrassed silence where no-one can think of anything intelligent to add. Or the meeting dominated by 3 or 4 elderly Christians who pray for 10 minutes each, leaving others feeling too inadequate to participate. Or where there is no time left for prayer because the introductory Bible study has used up all the time, or the worship leader has kept the group singing for an hour! No wonder many prayer meetings need a new image.

While I have stated very clearly that a prayer concert is not a musical event, a disciplined use of music can enhance a prayer gathering and add variety to it. First, find a musician whose heart is really in serving the prayer leader and who will be submissive to the purpose of the meeting, rather than looking to duplicate a programme which better fits another occasion. In an inter-church event there needs to be a recognition of the backgrounds of those present. For example some from very traditional church backgrounds can fear that some styles of "charismatic" worship are irreverent. We want to take people along with us as much as possible. It is not necessary to have half an hour's opening worship, but people do need time to focus and leave behind the stresses of the day (or week). Maybe ask for just two opening songs, the first to proclaim the greatness and majesty of God, and the second to focus specifically on Jesus. If that sounds obvious, you will find that some of the most popular worship songs of today have no reference to the Name of Jesus and many are about our feelings and intentions ("I just want to praise"). A good test is to count the number of times "I" occurs compared with "You" or "He" ! If we want to enter the presence of God we start by forgetting about ourselves and focussing on who He is. Then a number of short prayers of thanksgiving will not only open up hearts but also create faith.

A carefully chosen song at the right time, interspersed between periods of prayer, can only enhance the meeting. If the sense of the presence of God is strong in the room, than it may be right to linger on in reverent worship, but music can be used in different ways. If one has stirred up the opposition of the enemy so that there's a sense of the presence of evil in the room a strong declaration of "He is Lord" may be called for. When praying for the unsaved, faith may be strengthened by any of the several songs containing the phrase "every knee shall bow". Some songs are direct prayers for revival (eg "Restore, O Lord" and "He is the Lord") and such songs have the advantage that it means that everybody is praying the same words at the same time. United reading of scripture eg Psalm 85 can have the same powerful effect.

Finally we need to realise that some songs are prophetic: we can actually sing them to people not there! eg “Make Way” or “Come, now is the time to worship”. There is no end to what the imaginative use of music can add to a prayer gathering, but if words are not carefully checked out and thought through, songs can detract from, and even abort the purpose of the meeting.

There are, too, different ways of praying. In a large gathering only the bold and confident will pray out in front of over 50 people. Experiment with splitting into small groups of 3 or 6. In some contexts it might be right to invite everyone to pray out loud for the same thing at the same time. (“Korean-style”) In another context one could ask everyone to pray silently for the same thing at the same time! If there’s a particularly difficult or “big” thing to pray about, why not brief one or two experienced intercessors to lead in a prayer on that topic so they can approach it with some preparation?

The variations are endless if we will prayerfully use our God-given imaginations. If the priests of the old covenant had to take time to prepare themselves to come into God’s presence and minister to the Lord, surely it can’t be wrong for us to spend time preparing ourselves for leading the priestly ministry of intercession?

However, let’s remember our aim is not a format, but to release concerted prayer.

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