

Prayer Movement Gains Momentum In Finland

Church leaders are crossing denominational lines to unite in prayer for the secularized country

A new zeal for intercession is sweeping across portions of Europe. In secularized Finland, world famous for its lakes, cell phones, ice hockey players, long winters, loneliness and vodka—but not yet for its fear of God—church leaders meet monthly for interdenominational intercession in 24 cities.

Charismatic, Baptist and Pentecostal pastors; Lutheran vicars; and Orthodox priests are joining hearts and hands to plead the case of their country before the Lord in prayer. Also, Helsinki ministry leaders who represent a variety of churches meet in the Helsinki Parliament twice a month to intercede in unity for “those in authority.”

Antero Laukkanen, a young Helsinki businessman with no particular church involvement, conceived this new and growing prayer movement in 1992. Laukkanen said the Holy Spirit woke him up at 4 a.m., telling him that he had been a believer for 20 years but did not yet know how to pray.

Laukkanen today works as a personal assistant for a Christian Democrat member of parliament. He also pastors the Helsinki Charismatic-Baptist Lighthouse Church that he planted three years ago. While walking Charisma through parliament, Laukkanen recounted the nightly visitation that changed the direction of his life.

"I could not go back to sleep, so I kneeled down to pray," he recalled. "But after some 30 minutes it became overwhelmingly clear to me that I did not know how—and I started crying. The Lord spoke to me in business terms and asked if I wanted an account without a limit, called 'the account of prayer.' He also asked me if I wanted to make a career—in the invisible world."

These illustrations made it even clearer to Laukkanen that he did not know the first thing about prayer. For two and a half years the businessman—then in his mid-30s—did not get much sleep. He never slept past 4 a.m.

"I was not active in a church. I prayed only," Laukkanen said, emphasizing that these early morning prayer sessions had no special direction. "It was like two lovers conversing. The Lord was teaching me about Himself and enlarging the capacity of my inner man."

Then in 1994 Laukkanen was asked to join the leadership of the Finnish March for Jesus initiative. After the march, Helsinki pastors and Laukkanen kept meeting for prayer, and about six months later the others asked the businessman to take the lead.

"The pastors laid hands on me and something happened," Laukkanen said. "I got a vision of pastors praying together in every city in Finland, and seemingly I also got the anointing to do something about it."

Laukkanen had a growing burden to pray for the authorities, and in 1995 the praying pastors contacted the president's

office, committing to pray for the president daily. The president responded positively, and for a year and a half the pastors received regular prayer requests from the president's office.

"Then the media found out about it, and the president backed off," Laukkanen said.

In 1996 Laukkanen and others had a vision of praying not only for the parliament, but also in it. Laukkanen contacted a member of the Christian Democrats, and the miracle happened—the intercessors were allowed in.

"Some 70 pastors showed up for the first prayer meeting in the parliament," Laukkanen said. "When we gathered at 7:30 a.m. in front of the building, we were shocked. Media was all over the place—the main dailies, national television. It was a complete surprise."

In modern Scandinavia, church leaders, in particular charismatics and evangelicals, generally are not part of the political scene. The Helsinki initiative hit the prime-time news.

Christianity has a stronger hold in Finland than in the other Scandinavian countries. Some 39 percent say they believe in the Christian God, and 20 percent believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible. In neighboring Sweden, 18 percent of the population understand "God" in Christian terms, and 3 percent view the Bible as God's Word.

Still, secularization is widespread in Finland. Only about 10 percent of Finland's 5 million people attend a religious

service at least once a month. Less than 1.5 percent of the Finns are Pentecostal, charismatic or evangelical believers.

Laukkanen is not discouraged. He prays that 1 million Finns will be born again in this generation and believes the new prayer movement has done much to unite Christian leaders in Finland. "It is hard to slander people you're praying with," he noted.

Laukkanen also has seen several positive social and political changes in recent years, including the number of pornography bars in Helsinki dropping from 13 to 2, and the minister of education, who is a believer, permitting Christian schools.