

Prayer for Peace Surrounds Belfast City Hall

Flag violence was met with peaceful **prayer** in Northern Ireland on Saturday, when hundreds of Christians stepped across denominational boundaries to surround Belfast City Hall in a human chain.

It started in the imagination of charismatic church leader Alain Emerson, who also spearheads 24-7 Prayer Ireland. "It was a bunch of friends who got together and thought we could do something," he said. "It just snowballed."

Those taking part in this 'Prayer For Peace' initiative included Belfast's Lord Mayor Gavin Robinson. They were all making a quiet response to recent riots over new restrictions on flying the British flag at Belfast City Hall.

Councilors had voted to fly the flag only on designated days, whereas the flag used to be flown every day to show solidarity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Loyalists felt the move was an attack on that union.

But this latest event focused on **prayer**—not protest—bringing together Protestants and Catholics. They prayed for peace, for leaders in the land and for the city of Belfast.

In complete contrast with angry scenes over the past two weeks, 'Prayer For Peace' was non-threatening and low-key. Some said it was moving to see people join hands, completely encircling City Hall—which had previously seen demonstrators smashing windows and shouting protests.

A whistle was blown at 8:30 a.m. to start the intercession, and again five minutes later to finish. Participants were encouraged to buy their breakfast at local cafés to support traders who'd been hit hard by the recent unrest.

"We felt the unbroken chain was quite symbolic about unity," said Emerson, 33. "There was also that sense of surrounding the City Hall. We focused out towards the city. We were very much directing our **prayers** into the streets."

The **prayer** leaders adopted the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's marketing slogan—"NI 2012 our time our place"—as "a prophetic statement and wake-up call." Said Emerson, "It was our time and our place to do something."

It started the Saturday before, when Emerson drove home with his wife and daughter. Watching police prepare for unrest, he thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a group of people surrounding City Hall and praying."

On Monday, he e-mailed a few friends at various Christian agencies. "Tuesday morning we phoned the police and had real favor with them," said Emerson, who is Missions Coordinator at Emmanuel Church, Lurgan.

"Wednesday morning we went 'live' with it on social media," he added. "It seemed to be one of those viral things that harnessed a lot of goodwill. It was the best thing we could really do in response to all the tension."

A message that went out to Anglican churches had said, "No agendas, no flags, no badges, it's just the whole church together to pray." The men's movement CVM Northern Ireland said, "It's time to draw a line in the sand."

Delighted with the outcome, Emerson said, "It harnessed that passion and desire in a lot of people who want to see a new future for Northern Ireland ... We believe God above all else can change the history of this nation."

Local Presbyterian pastor Steve Stockman was among those praying. "It was charismatic, it was ecumenical, it was evangelical, it was liberal," he said of the breadth of the event, which he felt embraced all the Christian communities.

“I don’t think I’ve seen that happen before.”

Local media picked up the story. The “Belfast Telegraph” saw such events as “timely and symbolic,” which demonstrated the wishes of most people for peace. “That is the only way forward for everyone here.”