

Gathered Around His Throne

Mike Bickle's International House of Prayer in Kansas City hosts 24-hour-a-day meetings that combine intense worship and prophetic prayer. If enough people copy this model, Bickle says, the results could change the spiritual landscape of the planet.

Few pastors would consider leaving their churches at the height of their success in order to become full-time prayer warriors. But in May 1999 that's exactly what Mike Bickle did.

In a daring step of faith, the Kansas City, Missouri, pastor resigned from Metro Christian Fellowship, the prominent 3,000-member charismatic congregation he founded in 1982, and started the International House of Prayer—an untried, unproven 24-hour-a-day prayer ministry that invites people to leave their jobs and raise missionary support to spend time praying.

Bold? Yes. Strange? Maybe. Even Bickle is staggered by the avalanche of interest he's received. But he believes the idea of changing the spiritual atmosphere of cities through worship and intercession has captured people's hearts.

"We hit a nerve," he says. "I've only presented this concept six times at conferences, and I have 2,000 people who want to do it full time."

Bickle says he expected maybe 100 to show interest the first time he explained the concept. "I tell people: 'You raise your support, change your occupation, do this night and day, add fasting to it. I'm talking hard, no money, no certainty, losing your job, relegated to a prayer room.' Every week people come and say, 'We're starting one of these in our city.'"

Full-timers at the International House of Prayer, or IHOP for short, numbered 70 back in March, and Bickle expects 175 by

the end of the year. Each participant prays and worships 50 hours a week, playing an instrument and leading intercessory worship for hours at a time. He believes the strong interest shows how little emphasis has been placed on prayer in American Protestant churches.

“Intercession has been left out of the Protestant view of missions, while preaching and mercy deeds have been emphasized,” Bickle says. “Jesus said that when you see the harvest, pray. People tend to see and send, rather than pray.”

But Bickle isn’t talking about your run-of-the-mill prayer meeting. Visitors who come to this place often say they feel as if they have stepped into heaven’s throne room—and that’s exactly what Bickle is trying to reproduce.

This concept of mixing prayer and worship—often by using prayers that are sung spontaneously—is based on a revelation Bickle drew from Revelation 5:8, which says that the elders who worshiped the Lamb of God in heaven each held “harps” and “bowls full of incense.” Harps refer to music, while the bowls of incense refer to the prayers of the saints.

“To do worship and intercession together, you’ve got to go to Revelation and the heavenly symphony before the throne,” Bickle says. “That’s where the harp and the bowl are together, the music and prayers mingled around the throne. It’s essential for us to do on earth like it is in heaven.”

So at IHOP on any given day or night, a group of musicians and prayer warriors can be found singing prayers from the book of Revelation, and aiming those prayers at the nations of the world. Bickle believes that this style of prayer, a style he says is modeled after the activity of heaven itself, needs to be duplicated in churches everywhere.

“Worship is agreement with who God is,” Bickle explains. “Intercession is agreement with what He’s going to do. In both, you are telling God what is true about Himself. Men have

separated them, but it doesn't work. Worship gives faith and longevity to intercession."

Though it may be a paradigm shift for today's church, the model Bickle borrows from is actually the Old Testament tabernacle of David, which he believes gives the best hint of the heavenly order.

His method seems to be working. IHOP was launched in May 1999 on a 13-hour schedule. But by the following September, intercessors were meeting around the clock. Live music, praise, worship and prayer have continued nonstop ever since. Charisma visited this 24-hour-a-day powerhouse of prayer in Kansas City to find out what the Holy Spirit is doing as believers abandon themselves in the presence of God. <P > Called to Intercede

It's 10 a.m. Thursday at the International House of Prayer. Mike Bickle walks into the 200-seat prayer room, observing the team leading worship on guitars, a keyboard, a violin and drums. It appears to be a typical church meeting. But as the moments pass, it becomes clear that worship is not the prelude to a sermon.

Worship is the sermon.

The atmosphere is part traditional prayer meeting, part jam session and part study hall. Bickle walks to a side pulpit next to a group of prophetic singers and joins the singing. "We will sing to the east and the west/ Jesus, the Savior to all," they sing.

Twenty people in the center section lift their hands and sing. Flanking the room are tables where some participants read books, work on laptop computers or write on notepads. Others lean against large pillows that line the back walls.

Bickle calls it "sitting at the feet of Jesus," and he estimates that 20 percent of the people at any given time are

not participating in the main activity. In fact, they are encouraged to come and enjoy God's presence while engaging in other quiet activities.

Circling the room are flags from dozens of countries. On one wall are six dry-erase boards bearing a host of needs from world conflicts to personal health problems.

Participants come and go on their own schedules. Soon the crowd swells to 50. The worship shifts into spontaneous singing with tongues and heartfelt praise. People sway to the music. Bickle tells everyone to pick a Psalm and sing it spontaneously.

"Stay with this for a few more moments," he exhorts.

Seven minutes later he leads the group in reading a hymn from Revelation, then they sing it spontaneously. This is what he calls the "antiphonal style," where the prayer leader reads a sentence from the Scripture and then a prophetic singer sings it, improvising melodies.

They do this for six minutes, with different singers using each new passage as a jumping-off point for free worship. As they do, Bickle chimes in forcefully: "You are worthy! Only You are the worthy Man, Jesus!"

Forty-five minutes later, the worship still flows, then gains in power, then quietly subsides. Bickle moves from side to side, sometimes leading the flow, sometimes visiting with other IHOP leaders. Passages of Scripture bounce back and forth from one vocalist to another.

Ninety people are here now. Eyes are closed, arms are outstretched. A man kneels with his face in the carpet. A woman holds an infant while praising God.

At 11:01 a.m. the group begins interceding for India and particularly for a city called Nagpur. The music ramps up.

Bickle goes back to the mike.

"We ask for a historic visitation of the Holy Spirit!" he cries. "We ask you to break into the leaders in Nagpur. Break into India." His words are echoed by the singers. Another leader then reads an apostolic prayer from Acts 4, making it specific to India.

Two hours later, the meeting transitions seamlessly into the next session. The worship and intercession never stop, but the instrumentalists, singers, prayer leaders and prayer emphases change.

Aaron Walsh, 23, came from New Zealand in 1998 for a discipleship program, then became a founding intern at IHOP. He wants to spend five years at the Kansas City IHOP, then return to New Zealand with 25-50 full-time intercessory missionaries to start an IHOP there.

"You realize that this is the way God wants to be worshiped forever," he says. Full-timers like Walsh work 50 hours a week, spending 80 percent of their time in the prayer room and the rest helping with administrative tasks.

Dwayne and Jennifer Roberts were with Youth With a Mission for 10 years before coming to the training center at Metro Christian Fellowship. There they caught the vision of IHOP.

"Having fun praying was a new concept for me," Dwayne told Charisma. "I saw a lack of power and anointing in my life, and the idea of IHOP gripped me. I asked the Lord, 'Do I really want to spend my life praying?' As we went along, it started to become enjoyable.

"Now I believe without a doubt that what I'm doing in the prayer room is making a greater difference than when we were missionaries in Europe," he says. "If someone had told me two years ago that I'd be praying and worshiping God all day, it would have been a foreign concept to me. Now I love it. I'm

committed to it.”

Bickle says people can choose how long they want to participate, and there is no pressure to stay.

“[But] I will be [doing this 20 years from now],” he says. “Scores of others will, scores won’t. I tell people, ‘Do it today, and if in a month, a year, a decade from now you change your mind, then change it.’ Worst-case scenario is someone has a nine-month school of prayer.” <P> A Passion for Worldwide Prayer

Bickle’s own journey of prayer began in 1979 when he was a youth pastor in St. Louis. The Lord told him he was to be a lifelong intercessor, he says, and in one week he went from never interceding to five hours of intercession a day. “It was so real to me. I’ve never doubted or drawn back on that calling,” he says.

When Bickle moved to Kansas City in 1982 and started Metro Christian Fellowship, he often told people: “I’m not a pastor. This is a Sunday morning Bible study.”

This “Bible study” soon grew into a church of 3,000. Still, Bickle conducted prayer meetings six hours every day for seven years. And he has led groups in prayer from two to four hours almost every day during the last 20 years, except for travel and vacations.

The mandate for IHOP came in 1983 during a citywide fast. Bickle says God gave him Psalm 27:4 and spoke audibly to a prophet in the church that he would have a 24-hour-a-day prayer ministry in the spirit of the tabernacle of David. The Lord also told Bickle not to begin it until He gave the word.

That word came in January 1999 when the Lord began speaking through prophets and arranging circumstances to set the ministry in motion. IHOP was started in May 1999—20 years to the month from when God called Bickle to be an intercessor.

Metro Christian Fellowship was handed over to Floyd McClung, who had been the international operations director for Youth With a Mission.

“God spoke to me through a prophet that this church was always designed to be a prayer laboratory,” Bickle says. “The weight of human need demanded it become a church, and the Lord allowed it, but its purpose was to birth a worldwide prayer meeting. It succeeded in that purpose. Now it’s becoming a real church.”

IHOP is not directly affiliated with Metro but is a ministry related to a network of 50 churches in the region.

To those who have been at IHOP for months, the ministry is not about praying and worshiping for long periods of time—it’s about entering what they refer to as “the beauty realm of God,” a phrase coined by Bickle. This, they say, is the core of the ministry.

“IHOP is really about a new paradigm of God, which I call the beauty realm,” Bickle says. “It’s the lovesick God who fascinates us, and because we are fascinated we become abandoned. The outsider is gripped by the theology and the model, but the insiders are in a process of being lost in the beauty realm as they intercede for the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

“My premise is that intercession cannot primarily be about warring against negatives. Some people have the task of the Great Commission and getting rid of the devil. They have only one prayer meeting a week because you can’t do it for long.

“You have to be confident that God loves you, despite whatever areas you are struggling with. You cannot connect with God if you think He’s mad at you, or suspicious of you. You’re always guarding your heart and preoccupied with whether you’re in or out.

"The beauty realm is the hidden foundation of IHOP. Without it the night- and-day prayer won't work," he adds.

Bickle's vision of combining worship and intercession already has inspired leaders in other cities to start their own IHOPs. Peter Doakley, a musician and evangelist, pioneered the first IHOP in San Diego with his wife, Laurie, in August 1999 after helping Bickle start the Kansas City IHOP. They now have around 45 musicians and five churches involved, and hold prayer meetings 35 hours a week with the intention of going 24 hours a day.

"There is an anointing on the harp and bowl," Doakley says. "God has given us a blueprint. He's making His people joyful in the house of prayer. People who have never had a desire to pray are coming, some from hours away."

A number of churches in the Chicago area have also banded together to establish an International House of Prayer in their region. Called . Ministries, the Chicago-area effort, led by Todd Beery, was introduced during the last eight months in conferences conducted by leaders from Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City.

Norm Frederick, a pastor at Shady Grove Church in Dallas, helped his church start their All Nations House of Prayer after attending a conference with Bickle in October. They began at midnight on Dec. 31, 1999, and now have six churches involved. Prayer occurs in the evenings and mornings, but Frederick says they "won't rest" until they have a round-the-clock schedule.

"We're in the infancy stage, trying to envision pastors in the area," Frederick says. "We're getting away from issue-centered intercession and instead focusing on the worthiness of the Lamb. That's the core of the thing."

"Prayer meetings can become pretty dry and lifeless. In this model, you move back to fixing your gaze on who He is, and the

prayers seem to come that much easier.”

Frederick believes that IHOP is God’s chosen instrument to bring unity to churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. “We are poised for real breakthrough,” he says.

And that’s exactly what Mike Bickle is believing for—a worldwide breakthrough move of God that will change not only cities but nations.

“We want to see one of these in every city in the world, 24 hours a day,” he says. “I believe with all my heart that it will happen.”

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JOINING HEAVEN’S CHORUS

Revelation 5:8-14 (NKJV)

8 “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

9 “And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,

10 “‘And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.’

11 “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands,

12 "Saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!'

13 "And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: 'Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!'

14 "Then the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever."