

How Prayer Is Shaking Europe

When a church on the south coast of England devoted an entire month to prayer, the idea caught on across the globe. The '24-7 initiative' is now booming—and producing results.

A hip, 30-something Christian named Pete Greig stepped onto the stage of a nightclub in Southampton, England, normally reserved for topless dancers. It was a most unlikely platform from which to challenge the roomful of people to participate in round-the-clock prayer.

Greig kept it brief. Revelation Church, which he assists in leading on the south coast of England, was benefiting from its own trial run with continuous prayer, he said. Would anyone like to join in?

What Greig meant as a quick query turned into a clarion call. The attentive crowd, who were not there to leer at strippers but to participate in an edgy evangelism conference that billed itself as Cultural Shift, jumped on board. More than 20 churches wanted to take part. A professional designer later offered to produce a Web site.

That was November 1999, and it would prove to be a key turning point in the 24-7 Prayer initiative, which Greig today describes as “the biggest surprise” of his life. What started as a plea for prayer amid the club’s dry-ice mists and mirrored-ball ambience has become a cultural shift in prayer and evangelism that today is sparking Christian renewal in Europe and many points worldwide.

Open All Night

Just a few months after Greig's appearance at the conference, his 24-7 became a reality both in churches and cyberspace. Today, the official Web site, www.24-7.org, claims more than a million hits a month. There are "prayer rooms" in almost 40 countries—and in the strangest places: from Las Vegas to New Delhi, from a brewery in Missouri to a skate park in Switzerland, from a school in South Africa to a police station in England.

Participating groups pledge to pray 24 hours a day in a fixed location for time periods that range between a week and a month. The result is a continuous chain of prayer across the globe, linked by the World Wide Web. As the 24-7 Web site puts it: "We are a virtual community praying in real locations."

There is no big organization behind it all, according to Greig. He shrugs off the idea of being the chief, preferring "one of the leaders" as his label.

In effect, 24-7 is more like a network of friends who pray and chill together. They're united in their aim to "turn the tide in youth culture"—though in some places 24-7 has also united the generations.

Says one youth pastor: "For years I've been trying to get my young people to pray. Last night I found eight of them on their faces at 2 a.m. weeping for their non-Christian friends. What's happening?"

A Tennessee church has been "changed forever," according to a young woman who attends the congregation. "Dozens are coming back to Jesus or being saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. We're believing for an awakening."

One church leader says his 24-7 participation was one of the most productive weeks of prayer he'd ever known: "People were saved, the lukewarm ignited, and unity made huge steps forward. Through the prayer room a radical vision was imparted way beyond anything our puny little talks could have accomplished."

The phenomenon keeps on growing. Physical locations where people gather to pray—nicknamed "Boiler Rooms," "Millennium 3 Monasteries" and "Houses of Prayer"—that remain permanently open for prayer have emerged in Reading and Manchester, England. More are being planned.

"For some strange reason about 100 young people—very unchurched, mainly nu-metal, Goths and skaters—just come to hang out and chat," says Andy Freeman, a participant of the Reading Boiler Room.

As Greig puts it, the whole thing started as an accident. "It was never meant to happen," he says of 24-7. "And to be honest, if someone had come to me with it as an idea, I would've told them I thought it was stupid. But God's just done it."

On a Wild Goose Chase

It was in 1999, Greig says, that his congregation knew God was calling them to pray. "And we knew we were bad at it," he adds.

He was reminded of a personal vision God had given him during his student days—that an army of young people from continental Europe would be raised up and used by God. The time had

arrived, he believed, when God wanted to fulfill the vision.

For Greig, however, seeing it happen didn't mean implementing his own clever strategy. He sensed the need for something quite different.

"I felt God telling me to go on a wild goose chase," he says. "By that I mean 'wild goose' as in the way the Celts described the Holy Spirit—around Europe."

Greig, his wife, Samie, and their baby, Hudson, left their home in Chichester to embark on the unusual pilgrimage. They ended up in the German village of Herrnhut—site of what Christian historians have described as "one of the purest moves of God in church history."

A powerful move of the Holy Spirit there in 1727 gave rise to a 100-year prayer meeting among the Moravians. Under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf, 3,000 missionaries were sent out during a 200-year period. "Most modern missions movements trace their roots back to that," Greig notes.

"It's amazing that a nowhere village in a nowhere place had utterly transformed so much through prayer," Greig says. "And remembering that God was telling us to pray—and that we were bad at it—I thought if they can do 100 years nonstop, maybe we can try to do a month."

"It seemed like a really stupid idea. But we kind of felt there was something in it. And we figured that if we could pray nonstop in a room for a week, it would still be better than nothing."

At first, their track record wasn't good. Church prayer meetings, he says, were attended by "three old ladies and a goat." Participants' personal prayer lives weren't much better.

"As a church leader I had all these great plans, and I was using prayer more as a rubber-stamp exercise to get God's blessing on them than a place of waiting, listening and intimacy. Perhaps as a result—although I wouldn't have admitted it at the time—I was operating more as a servant than a friend," Greig says.

On September 5, 1999, the intercessors lit a candle, divided one month into hourlong slots, and started to pray through the day and night. The whole thing took off.

"God turned up, prayers got answered, creativity exploded all over the walls," he explains. "Non-Christians were coming in, saying they could really feel God in the place. One girl heard an angel praying. Just amazing things happened."

What started as an interesting experiment within the safe confines of Revelation Church was followed by Greig's "historic" rallying call from the nightclub podium a couple of months later, and then the official launch of 24-7 in February 2000.

Postmodern Praise

Greig and his friends at Revelation have tapped into an ancient vein of prayer in the British Isles that dates back even further than the Moravians. As long ago as the fifth century, Welsh and English monks divided themselves into 24

groups, each responsible for one hour's worship, so that prayer and praise ascended continually to God.

Tradition says there were only three centers in early Britain that pioneered this unceasing praise, or *laus perennis* ("eternal praise"), and now the practice is being revived under 24-7.

"The Boiler Rooms are like modern-day Celtic monasteries," Greig says. "They're modeled on these ancient communities that were house of prayer, mission station, art studio, pilgrimage hostel and ministry to the poor—all rolled into one. And they're remarkably fruitful.

"They're both the closest thing I've seen to the early church but also very postmodern. People can turn up at 3 in the morning and find the people of God—they know where to find the people of God when they come out of a nightclub on a bad trip," he adds.

One of the Boiler Rooms even became a sort of safe house for some local youths who were being chased by soccer hooligans.

"Big, dark Goth guys—Marilyn Manson fans in their long black coats—were standing on the door as guards to keep these soccer hooligans out, while we had people who weren't Christians praying inside and police on horseback outside," Greig explains.

One of the biggest surprises has been the evangelistic impact these houses of prayer have had. The young people who visit them are not always Christians. A Swedish girl visited one of the Boiler Rooms and within two hours of arriving had talked

to five unchurched kids about Christ.

“She was just bewildered,” Greig tells Charisma. “She said, ‘I came to a House of Prayer, and I’ve done more evangelism in the last two hours than I have done in the last year.’ The presence of God is magnetic.”

Answering the Mail

Greig downplays any emphasis on a strategy for 24-7’s future. He notes instead that “exciting and surprising” things already are happening.

“The Salvation Army is really involved,” he points out. “They’re about to pray nonstop for a year on the east coast of Australia—on beaches and up around Pacific Islands.

“We’ve got major developments in the States at the moment. To date there have been 100 prayer rooms in America—not loads—but very exciting beginnings.

“We’ve got some books coming out. We’re quite excited about the potential those have for connecting new people in with what’s happening. It’s just snowballing and growing all the time.”

The network also is partnering with DJs and exploring how dance music can be used in prayer and worship. The number of prayer rooms emerging in restricted countries is rising, but Greig declined to mention the locations because the countries are closed to the gospel.

Short-term missions teams are being sent to pray in “extreme” locations. One such place is the Spanish island of Ibiza, the nightclub capital of Europe.

“It’s a place of unparalleled immorality in terms of drugs and sex and hedonism,” Greig says. “The Daily Mail, one of our tabloid newspapers, called it Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Since reading that, I felt a burden—wouldn’t it be lovely to take the gospel to Sodom and Gomorrah? When 24-7 started we were invited by the churches on the island to go. We went last summer, tentatively, to pray nonstop in the middle of all the sex, drugs and hedonism and see what happened.

“God turned up in the most incredible power. We asked the churches how we could bless them, and they said, ‘The best thing would be, please pray for it to rain—we’re in a drought.’ So we prayed, and it rained. And we were so excited, especially when they told us that it hadn’t rained in July on Ibiza for 27 years.”

Ibiza’s police chief went on record as saying that the island’s crime rate dropped while the 24-7 team was there—because of their prayers. According to Greig, the team “saw miracles in the street” after circulating among the clubgoers and offering to pray for them.

Another missions trip took place on the Mediterranean island during the party season this summer. Says Greig: “[The team] had a really tough time, but they’ve also had incredible favor”— which included being filmed for a TV documentary.

Red Moon Rising

For Greig, taking prayer to the streets is an essential element in the 24-7 dream.

“As charismatics we’ve been meeting for 30 years to say, ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’ And He’s come because Jesus promised that He would. But I don’t know if you’ve noticed—we don’t see the power of God in our meetings the way we used to.

“So all sorts of people are trying to find new ways of getting the power back that they once tasted. Whether it was the Jesus movement that they get dewy-eyed about, whether it was the early days of Vineyard, whether it was the Toronto Blessing—whatever the reference point is—they’re trying to recreate that power encounter in their meetings.

“Here’s the deal. I think the tables have turned. I think the Holy Spirit is now saying, ‘You come to My meetings.’ We’ve been meeting to say, ‘Come, Holy Spirit,’ but now He’s saying, ‘Come, holy people.’”

Greig points to Jesus, who spent little time in religious environments, but met with people at parties, in the streets and in marketplaces.

“When we take the prayer to those places where the Holy Spirit is keen to be active, we find the power of God in the way that we used to only find it in our meetings,” he says. “I’ve got a hunch that we will never again encounter the power of God in our meetings the way that we once did. But those who are addicted to the presence of God and crave the presence of God will find that the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire, has moved into some very surprising places.”

There's another evocative image among the 24-7 crew. While driving to the official launch of 24-7 U.K. in February 2000, Greig noticed a red moon on the horizon. He says he felt God reminding him of Joel 2:31-32: "The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (NIV).

That text became his sermon for the launch. He's heard similar messages at other events since.

"I believe this is a prayer movement at this time in world history that is to do with the red moon rising over a generation—that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved."

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Boiler Room Prayer

Young people from varied backgrounds in England are now involved in round-the-clock prayer efforts.

Young people and prayer haven't always been a successful mix. But when a small group met to pray at an Anglican church in Reading, southern England, it proved to be a popular blend.

"First it became infectious," leader Andy Freeman recalls, "and the second thing was that it drew people in. Suddenly,

loads of churches became involved.

“We went on doing lots of 24-7 seasons—sometimes up to 200 young people were taking part. God was answering prayers, and something was obviously going on. One young guy, Dan, came into the prayer room on crutches [with a sports injury]—and left without them, completely healed.”

When Pete Greig shared the idea of “Boiler Rooms”—centers for continuous prayer—they snapped it up.

“The churches liked it, and the young people liked it,” Freeman says. “Money came in. A pub building became available, and in October 2001 we launched. From first to last, the Boiler Room has been about God’s faithfulness, His provision for us.”

Today, 200 people come each week to pray—covering a wide spectrum of Christianity, from Quakers to Roman Catholics to charismatics to Pentecostals. “There’s been an explosion of artwork, poetry, songs, and expressions of prayer and worship,” Freeman says.

Oria Dale left behind her studies in Canada and flew to Manchester in England’s traditionally industrial northwest because, as she puts it, “I didn’t know what God wanted me to do.” A friend had suggested that the move might open a few doors for her.

A local church leader asked her if she’d heard of the Boiler Room prayer model. “He said, ‘I have a building, and we would like to do something like this,’” Dale explains.

“I went and prayed in the building—and knew that it was

right.”

She spent her whole summer networking with churches, prayer groups and other organizations in a bid to find support for the idea. Then she moved into the building and started refurbishing it.

The Boiler Room opened in the spring—and already half the prayer slots have been filled. “We’re just getting the momentum going,” Dale says, “but people are blown away by God.”

As in Reading, they have witnessed a boom in creativity as intercessors literally have painted their prayers on the walls. The Manchester team has had to repaint some of the interior because so many people have illustrated their visions and dreams on the walls.

“Every now and again we whitewash it. So there are layers and layers of prayer in that room,” she says.

The 24-7 networkers dream of establishing 50 new Boiler Rooms during the next five years. It looks like there could be many more layers of prayer to come.

When Prayers Go Unanswered

Pete Greig, founder of the 24-7 prayer movement, talks candidly about his biggest faith battle.

A recent family crisis brought home to Pete Greig just how

supportive a network can be. One year into helping to spearhead the 24-7 prayer initiative, his wife, Samie, woke in the night paralyzed down one side.

“We rushed into the hospital and found out she had a brain tumor,” Greig recalls. “That mobilized incredible prayer support that moved us profoundly. The prayer from people who didn’t know us probably meant the most—because you can only really explain that in terms of the love of Christ. By God’s kindness, Samie’s surgery was successful, and we’re now on the long journey to recovery.”

He describes the last couple of years as “schizophrenic.”

Says Greig: “I’ve seen the most remarkable answers to prayer in all of my life—our Web site is constantly jammed with amazing testimonies to the way that prayer works—but at the same time I’ve been wrestling with some of the most painful unanswered prayers of my life.”

Greig observes that Christians are quick to trumpet stories of answered prayer but can be very slow to admit the reality of unanswered prayer.

“I think God has probably taught me as much about unanswered prayer on this journey that we’re on as He has about answered prayer,” he points out.

“Real faith isn’t frightened of unanswered prayer. If you have a formula that somehow will guarantee you answered prayer in any given situation, you don’t have faith. Ultimately we have to learn to celebrate weakness.”

He believes that victorious Christianity understands that we live on “a great big time-delay switch”—some prayers won’t be answered until after death, and somehow in weakness there is strength.

“So I don’t feel very successful in my prayer life. I don’t even feel very good at prayer. But I can’t help but talk to God about all that I’m going through and walk with Him in it.

“If you asked me how to define prayer, I would say this: Prayer is weakness talking with God. If someone is talking with God out of strength, it’s not prayer—it’s showing off. Prayer is weakness talking with God.”