

Racing the Clock for Chicago

At a unique ministry called The Prayer Furnace, intercessors are praying 24 hours a day for one of America's neediest cities.

Chicago is shrugging itself awake at 6 a.m. on this Monday in August. Cabbies are pulling into dingy coffee shops for a third cup before the morning rush hour fully kicks in. The first waves of commuters are trudging toward bus stops and elevated-train platforms to begin a new workweek.

At Chicago's Prayer Furnace—an intercessory ministry located in an unassuming storefront at 3541 N. Elston small group of primarily young adults has spent the entire night in worship-soaked prayer for this metropolitan region of 10 million people. In the prayer room, a CD of instrumental praise music is playing softly in the background, and those who have just finished their night in prayer are scattered around the room.

One young man is lying on the floor. Another young man is kneeling, Bible open, in front of a large city-and-world map fixed to the back wall. Two women in their early 20s are sitting in the small lobby outside the prayer room sharing conversation about the night's ministry to the Lord.

Just after dawn, a father-daughter team enters the room. The father begins to play the keyboard quietly as his daughter starts reading aloud from Isaiah 6. The father then begins to sing the verses while he plays, giving those who've come to pray at this hour an opportunity to spend extended time meditating on the passage of Scripture. A new day's ministry to the Lord and to the people of the city has begun.

Igniting a City

The Prayer Furnace is committed to round-the-clock prayer with a distinctly urban focus. Directors Marvin and Sally Adams

have had a vision for a ministry built on day-and-night prayer and worship since 1996, when they experienced a powerful visitation from God while serving an inner-city church in Chicago as youth pastors.

In 1998, they moved to Kansas City, Missouri, to train under pastor Mike Bickle at Kansas City Fellowship. They were there in 1999 when his International House of Prayer began 24/7 worship and intercession, and they modeled The Prayer Furnace after Bickle's prayer ministry.

The Adamses returned to Chicago in 2000 and started gathering with a small group of believers for prayer and worship a couple of nights a week. Word spread among Christians from local churches about the group's focus on intercessory prayer for the city and hunger for God.

By mid-2002, The Prayer Furnace had opened its doors. Seven newly trained intercessors hosted 25 two-hour prayer meetings a week. By August 2004, worship and prayer was being held around-the-clock, six days a week.

Marvin Adams sees The Prayer Furnace as a servant, not a competitor, of local churches.

"Having set-aside places devoted centrally to prayer and worship where at any time anyone who worships Jesus may come and pray and seek His face is a winning strategy for our city," he says. "A house of prayer allows the many intercessors to have a place to gather throughout the week as 'watchmen' for the city—yet does not take away from their commitment to their local church.

"From the beginning, we required that all participants be involved in a local church and giving of themselves there regularly," he adds. Adams points out that the ministry's advisory team is made up of pastors and other Christian leaders from the area. They all have committed to pray for the 10,000 churches of the Chicago metropolitan area every day.

"We love our city and we love the body of Christ in Chicago," Adams says of the team. Hearts on Fire for God By 9:30 a.m., the neighborhood outside The Prayer Furnace is pounding with the rhythm of a busy Monday morning. Two men are power-washing the brick of the sausage factory next door. Employees of the nail salon and deli that share the building with The Prayer Furnace are opening the doors of their businesses and readying for the day. In the prayer room, a woman is sitting at the keyboard, playing, singing and crying out for the city. "I long for the day when this city is ablaze with love for You, God," she sings. There is a tangible sense of God's presence when she prays for two women who will be heading out for an afternoon of ministry at a nearby drug-treatment center for teens. A small group of intercessors has gathered this morning, and she leads them in prayer over long lists of names of prodigals, the sick and others in need. The names are so plentiful that they fill a large white board covering a side wall. This lifestyle of prayer has no age limit—and it affects not only the lives of those being prayed for but also of those doing the praying. Jessica Engel, 21, a part-time intercessory missionary at The Prayer Furnace, has experienced a change in her spiritual life since she committed herself to praying and worshiping regularly. "I grew up in the church, and had Jesus in my heart. But before my internship at the Furnace, I was like a woman who said yes to a marriage proposal but afterwards never made any real effort to get to know the man who'd asked me," she says. "My internship here forced me out of my old ways of thinking about the way I lived my Christian life." Engel used to believe that God would touch her only at huge revival meetings every few years. Worship was something she did out of necessity just on Sunday mornings. All that has changed for her. "Now I know that it's enjoyable to worship God and just be with Him," she says. "My knowledge of Him is no longer cerebral but is at the core of my being." Intercessors often have the reputation of being inwardly focused, but the spiritual warfare waged in this house of prayer has an outward focus as well and has spilled onto the

streets of the city. "Each week we send a prayer and worship team to the subways in downtown Chicago, where they do what we do in the prayer room but do it right in the middle of the subway," Adams explains. "People are astounded and have never heard worship quite like it. We have trained evangelists who engage people, standing around listening, and point them to the love of Jesus. "We have drum circle teams that go into the parks," he continues. "We've got outreaches into the poor sections of the city to reach drug addicts and prostitutes. Our school of ministry offers an evangelism class every term, and we have all kinds of training that is ongoing." Such ministry now comes naturally to Engel, she says. "I see people differently after spending so much time singing love songs to Jesus," she explains. "'The secret of loving the souls of men is loving the Savior of men' is a quote posted on the back wall of the prayer room. I think that describes fairly well what's happening in my heart. "My heart is being mushed for them, so I can't stay quiet!" she exclaims.

Unceasing Prayer A young woman who has been poring over her Bible since noon in the small lobby of The Prayer Furnace enters the prayer room at 2 p.m. and seats herself at the keyboard. As she leads in worship, she also prays through some of the passages of Scripture that she's just been studying. Her midafternoon devotional invites those in attendance to focus on the beauty of Christ. Indeed, inviting others to partake of what The Prayer Furnace has to offer is at the heart of the Adamses' objective to equip believers for ministry. The menu of instruction that's available to those hungry for it includes internships that allow hands-on training, intensive Bible study and a small Bible school that offers the Christian community a variety of courses. One-day seminars equip those with an interest in worship, dance and prophetic ministry. Traveling teams from The Prayer Furnace have been sent to churches and conferences in the area to teach others how to conduct 24-hour prayer and worship ministry. As late afternoon fades into evening, the neighborhood outside The Prayer Furnace switches from its

workday rhythm to a nighttime beat. Bicyclists jostle for street space with mufflerless cars, and sirens from a nearby fire station pierce the air. Back inside, a complete worship team gathers to pray for Haiti. The Adamses adopted their oldest son, James, from the Caribbean country eight years ago. The couple has been instrumental in sending short-term missionary teams there several times a year. They recently finalized the adoption of James' younger brother, Djecky. He will join Joey and Jenny—the Adamses' two other adopted children besides James—as soon as the Adamses are approved for a travel date to the island nation. In addition to prayer for Haiti, there are a number of other focused prayer emphases each week, including prayer and worship in Spanish, prayer for and by young adults as well as children, healing prayer, and scheduled times of contemplation and silence. As the prayer meeting for Haiti winds down at 10 p.m., a CD of worship music takes over inside the prayer room. A handful of people lingers, Bibles open, seeking the Lord together in this sanctuary set amid the hum and shadow of the night. The first of the overnight intercessors trickles in, readying for another night of loving God and loving this city in prayer. *

Michelle Van Loon is a Chicago-area freelance writer. Her published works include plays, articles, children's stories and book reviews. For more information about the Chicago Prayer Furnace, visit the ministry's Web site at www.chicagoprayerfurnace.org.

RACING THE CLOCK FOR CHICAGO Looks can deceive: The Prayer Furnace is a modest storefront with a big purpose. Worship teams help support the continuous prayer vigil at the "Furnace." 24/7

LEFT: Building relationships BELOW: Furnace directors Marvin and Sally Adams with children Jenny, Joey and James continued "Having places where anyone who worships Jesus may come and pray is a winning strategy for our city." —Co-director Marvin Adams (See Racing the Clock on page 88) 24/7 RACING THE CLOCK FOR CHICAGO Racing the Clock continued from page 67