

Whatever Happened to Prayer Meetings?

Last weekend I was invited to join a prayer gathering at a local church in Hopelawn, New Jersey—a community so close to New York City that you can see the distinctive skyline in the distance. In recent weeks, Abe Rolon, the pastor of Life Mission Worship Center, has urged members of his church to gather on Friday nights at 9:30 p.m. to pray for the United States and the upcoming presidential election.

When I arrived I was so encouraged to see more than 50 people—mostly young adults in their 20s—gathered at the front of the church to pray. They were all passionately engaged in worship; when it was time to intercede, they were eager to take the microphone and cry out to God.

They asked God to have His way in the Nov. 5 elections. They prayed that Jesus would deliver America from the evil that has been entrenched in our media, in the entertainment industry, in politics and in our educational institutions. And before the night was over, we also prayed that God would stop the spread of communist dictatorship in Latin America.

When Pastor Rolon said the last amen, nobody left the building. The young people lingered at the altar as the worship team continued singing a worship chorus about the fire of God. Some of the people were lying prostrate on the floor while others were dancing or lifting their hands. I didn't leave the church until 1:30 a.m.—and I could have stayed longer if the musicians had kept playing.

I wish I could say that what happened at Life Mission Worship Center is typical. But the sad reality is that prayer meetings aren't a regular part of church life these days; for churches that still have scheduled prayer meetings, they are poorly

attended.

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Nobody can explain what happened to prayer meetings. There was a time in our history when churches had a designated time in the week for corporate prayer. Today, those meetings have been replaced by other events. Corporate prayer was once considered to be the furnace of the church. Today, the fire has died out, and the furnace is cold.

Pastor and author Jim Cymbala once said: "You can tell how popular a church is by who comes on Sunday morning. You can tell how popular the pastor or evangelist is by who comes on Sunday night. But you can tell how popular Jesus is by who comes to the prayer meeting."

If we believe the book of Acts should still be our template for Christianity, then corporate prayer should be at the center of church life. Acts 1:14a (NASB) says the early church was "continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer" as they waited for the miracle of Pentecost. After they were empowered, Acts 2:42 says the disciples "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The Greek word for "continually devoted," *proskartereo*, means "to persevere or to wait on continually."

British preacher Charles Spurgeon, whose church in London grew to 5,500 in 1881, measured a church's impact by its prayer meetings. He said: "We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians. ... The prayer meeting ... is the appointed place for the reception of power."

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In today's church, prayer is viewed only as a private discipline. We tend to make everything individualistic. The attitude of many Christians is: "It's just me and Jesus"—and this becomes a convenient way to ignore our need for each other.

The devil loves it when we stay apart. His strategy is to quench our corporate fire by separating the coals until they cool off. Satan trembles when believers pray in agreement.

We have 21 days left until the presidential election. What would happen if churches all over this country made prayer a priority again and sought God for His divine guidance and blessing on our nation? What would happen if we scheduled weekly or even daily prayer meetings from now until Nov. 5? And what would happen if we made corporate prayer a priority after the election? I have a strong sense we are going to need divine intervention like never before.

You don't have to copy Pastor Rolon's late-night format. You can host an early-morning prayer meeting, a lunchtime gathering, Sunday night prayer or even remote prayer meetings on Zoom. Prayer meetings don't require a full worship team, microphones, pulpits, digital timers or widescreen graphics.

Prayer meetings will be the most powerful when they are raw, unscripted, spontaneous and downright messy. Heaven will respond when we humbly cry out to Jesus with strong faith, authentic tears and broken hearts.

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