

A Church That Prayed

By Ron Clouzet

At a congregation I pastored some years ago, I saw, as never before, a church that took prayer seriously. The church was made up of educated Caucasians living in bedroom communities. Their recent new sanctuary sat 400 people, but barely 100 showed up on Sabbath mornings. When we first arrived there, I found that Adventists, in that metro area are full of churches, liked this church, but for some reason, didn't care to be members there.

Even though I was a young pastor, I had no doubt about the three Christian non-negotiables: Bible study, prayer, and witnessing. I also believed that it is "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6) that God can change the situation. So I took Bible preaching more seriously than ever. I spent hours reading, comparing, exegeting, and poring over the text of Scripture, until God's message became clear. So much time was spent on this study that not enough time was spent on actual sermon-crafting. So very early on Sabbath mornings, I'd go and pray earnestly for God's Spirit to move in our midst and make up for my deficiencies. People started to come out of the woodwork: inactive members, transfers from other churches, friends of Adventists thirsting for something more in life, and lots of young adults. By the end of the first year, Sabbath attendance had tripled, and the church was changing.

Fifteen months into this adventure, I set out to do a series on prayer. My friend Dwight Nelson says we preachers preach what we need to hear. And he is absolutely right, of course. I needed to know more and grow more regarding prayer -- so thus the series. A whole new world opened up for me. Prayer and communion with God became much more real and concrete. My relationship with Jesus grew much closer than ever before. I finally realized how most of us seem to live our lives three inches below the water-line: we know we're drowning but assume this is our lot in life, ignorant of the fact that just above us is a whole new world.

The Spirit of God moved on the church. People began to pray. We continued the mid-week prayer meetings, but now every Sabbath afternoon during daylight saving time, we'd gather for an hour to do nothing but pray. We prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit, prayed for our burdens, for our church, and for our community. During standard time, we met on Friday evenings. Then, after realizing that several of our church families were under severe satanic attack, I invited my elders to join me for prayer at five in the morning for special intercession. Yes, you read right - five in the morning, before people left for work. Seven of the ten elders came, and our prayer time was so blessed we decided to do it every week. Then, we added Fridays. And then Sabbath and Sunday mornings. By this time, deacons asked if they could join us. Then, other members did. And we expanded that time of morning prayer to every day of the week.

The church board began to pray. I was amazed at how God would take potentially conflicting issues and simply convict members of what to do, without much fuss. Leaders who'd never prayed like this before saw the power of prayer.

No one would come late to the board, because the first thirty minutes was nothing but pleading and surrendering before God. And that had become real to us now. Evangelism also became more of a way of life for the church. We'd go door to door on Sabbath afternoons, and we transformed the fellowship hall into The Better Living Center, where a dozen health-, finance-, and family-oriented seminars began to be offered to the community every year. We used Easter for evangelism, and every fall conducted a full-length evangelistic series. Each year, we baptized an average of forty people, all from the community, for we did not have a church school. And the church grew by leaps and bounds.

The Holy Spirit Takes Over

After the prayer revival of the second year, I decided it was time to do a sermon series on the Holy Spirit. Oh, what a blessing that was to me! And God used the series to bring more and more conviction upon hearts. By now, we had two worship services each Sabbath, the second often lasting past one o'clock. And as the church grew spiritually, giving increased. Offerings increased so that our church budget went up tenfold. Tithes increased so we could support up to ten full-time pastors, even though we only had one.

Church leaders decided it was time to plant another church just north of where we were, and after some intense praying, a few miracles, and knocking on over 3,500 doors to get acquainted and take a survey of needs, the new church was born. Twenty-five leaders trained for nine months to become church planting core members. But even though they represented only 7 percent of the membership, they provided 32 percent of the church income. Again, we prayed and turned it over to God, fully knowing that if we gave of our best, He would give of His best. And He came through: Our finances and leadership vacuum were easily and quickly replenished, and the beautiful new church plant is still thriving today after so many years.

God became concretely real in the lives of so many that a testimony time became part of our Sabbath service. Some attendees would drive two hours to get there, just to hear what God was doing in our midst. I seldom began preaching for the second service before noon. Small groups began to form, but these were missionary small groups - groups that would target people to pray for and to invite to the group and to the church. Some groups became Sabbath School ministry teams.

The leaders of these groups were remarkable men and women, most in their thirties and forties. On Tuesday evening, I'd meet with them for our small group. What I experienced time and again during those gatherings, I will never forget: the intensity of Bible Study, the powerful and real time for intercessory prayer, the synergistic insights going back and forth on the love and work of God, the singing, and the sheer joy of

being in the presence of God! I had never experienced anything like that in group dynamics before. It seemed to all of us that heaven was very near.

But not everything was perfect, as you can imagine. Especially because, whenever you choose to grow in Christ, the devil will set out to harass and annoy. Some families began to struggle: divorce, teenage drug use, illnesses. So it came time for corporate fasting and prayer. We encouraged participants to fast according to their experience and health, and we gave them materials to read and prepare. We'd do this from Friday afternoon through Sunday morning and divide that time into fifteen to seventeen sessions of ninety minutes each: singing, prayer, before a fifteen-minute break. Imagine hundreds scattered across the sanctuary, hallways, and Sabbath School rooms praying together twenty of every ninety minutes for the Holy Spirit, during an entire weekend! People would register - up to 800 hundred for one of them - and stay for as many sessions as they wished. The people most affected were young adults and professionals. They had not experienced anything like this. Never had they spent so much time in the presence of God, and an intense weekend like this would be enough to produce radical changes in their lives. Some sold their sports cars and nice boats to downsize and live simpler lives. Others changed jobs, driven by personal outreach and ministry opportunities. In short, they put God first. God changed so many of them. The Spirit of God was really at work.

His work was evident in real results. Tithe quadrupled, and giving for evangelism rose a whopping 5,000 percent! The church membership tripled in size, and that's not counting the church plant. Three-fourths of the members were involved in some form of service or ministry. And we baptized almost 200 people in five years. This may not be unusual for some places in the world, but for us, in our circumstances, this was clearly the Spirit at work.

During those years, it was my privilege to witness the powerful moving of the Spirit in the lives of regular, cultural, Laodicean Adventists. We woke up as if from a dream. God became real. Faith became strong. Personal surrender and commitment became tangible. Never again have I been in a place where such intensity of devotion and search for God was so earnestly sought or concretely given.

People in that church still remember when God was at work in such powerful ways. But was this supposed to be an exception? Why doesn't this happen more often in churches all around North America? Could it happen in your church? Would you be part of it?

United Prayer

One reason this happened is because a critical mass of people were willing to embark on it together. They prayed together, they worked and planned together, they fasted together. Writing to brother and sister Farnsworth one day, Ellen White gave the following counsel:

"We are encouraged to pray for success, with the divine assurance that our prayers will be heard and answered. 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in

My name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matthew 18:19,20) The promise is made on condition that the united prayers of the church are offered, and in answer to these prayers there may be expected a power greater than that which comes in answer to private prayer. The power given will be proportionate to the unity of the members and their love for God and for one another."