

Foreword by Vonette Bright

The
CHURCH
That PRAYS
TOGETHER

INSIDE THE *Prayer Life* OF
10 *Dynamic* CHURCHES

Elmer L. Towns & Daniel Henderson

NAVPRESS®

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Behind the headlines of every notable praying church you always find a faithful handful of unsung heroes who passionately seek the face of God and intercede for the needs of His people. In writing this book, we recognize that many of those names, unknown to us, will receive a profound and eternal reward someday for their diligent warfare on their knees. Praying churches are built by humble, praying people. They are the story behind the story.

Two such heroes of the faith who inspired both of us were R. C. Worley and Bill Sheehan. We dedicate this book to the memory of their lives of prayer and to countless others like them whom we will meet someday in heaven.

Elmer L. Towns and Daniel Henderson

FOREWORD

I love this book.

I love this book because it places prayer in the proper priority—Number 1—for growing, healthy churches. Too often modern church-growth books emphasize visitation evangelism, preaching evangelism, or TV evangelism. All of these methods are important, but none is as imperative as prayer. Without prayer, evangelism isn't possible.

When my husband, Bill Bright, won the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion from the John Templeton Foundation in London, England, he was given approximately \$1 million. He didn't take it for himself but rather invested it in prayer ministry through Campus Crusade for Christ to reach the world. For seven years, conferences on fasting and prayer were held across the United States. I praise God that many Christians learned how to get answers from God by aggressive fasting and prayer.

It was at a conference that I met Elmer Towns, who was one of the counselors with Bill in planning these conferences. Of course,

Dr. Towns has written dozens of books on prayer and has been used of the Lord to call multiplied thousands to a fresh experience of prayer and fasting through his work.

Daniel Henderson served as pastor for one of my dearest friends in this life, Winifred Verbica. She often has commented on the impact Daniel has had as a prayer-focused, local-church pastor. For over twenty-five years, Daniel has modeled prayer ministry in the church and has worked with pastors to raise prayer to a new level.

I love the format of this book. It doesn't look at just big churches or little churches; rather it looks at *praying* churches. In some of these chapters I feel as if I'm tiptoeing into a prayer meeting and listening to the people pour out their hearts to God. In other places I feel as if I'm looking over the shoulders of saints as they intercede. These chapters thrill my heart because they not only talk about prayer, but they also show what happens when God's people pray.

Let the examples in this book inspire you to a greater time in prayer. If you are a pastor, I think this book can transform your ministry—and also your women's ministry, youth ministry, Sunday school ministry, and every ministry of the church. My prayer is that God will use this book to change the prayer life of all churches.

Sincerely in Christ,

Vonette Bright

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My personal thanks to Dr. Elmer L. Towns who, in past years, was my professor and mentor — and today is a colleague, friend, and coauthor. I am especially indebted to Pastor Jim Cymbala for the example of his enduring pastoral leadership and prayer passion. Thanks also to Dee Duke for his faithfulness and friendship. The women of Arcade Church are treasured intercessors and catalysts for renewal. I am grateful for my growing partnership with Paul Covert and Cal Jernigan at Central Christian Church in Mesa, Arizona. Finally, I praise God for the model of evangelistic passion I discovered in Pastor Khanh Quoc Huynh and his people at Vietnamese Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. Of course, I could not have done any of this work without the patient love and support of my wife, Rosemary, and the encouragement of Justin, Jordan, and Heather — my three Christ-loving children.

Daniel Henderson

Appreciation extended to Linda Elliott, Tricia Hicks, Kristin Wolfe, and Dan Marchant for their work on the manuscript. Also appreciation to my wife, Ruth, for fifty-five years of love and prayer support. Appreciation to the pastor and staff of Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas; Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia; Lakeview Wesleyan Church in Marion, Indiana; Christ Fellowship in Palm Gardens, Florida; and to the many churches contributing to chapter 10.

Elmer L. Towns

INTRODUCTION

We believe in prayer because Jesus said, “Men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1 NKJV). Jesus commands us to pray and describes the length of time to do it: “Could you not watch with Me one hour?” (Matt. 26:40 NKJV). We both want to be passionately obedient to the commands of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we pray.

Neither of us claims to be a great hero of prayer, nor do we claim to get greater answers to prayer than anyone else. Probably the greatest prayer warriors in the United States are unknown believers who, by spending much time on their knees, accomplish much for the Lord. One reason for their success is the fact that they are unknown. They are humble, saying nothing about their prayer ministry and giving God all the glory.

While we may not be the greatest men of prayer living, we want to do everything we can to motivate the church to prayer. We write books on prayer, we hold seminars to teach people how to pray, and now we are writing this book, which we hope will accomplish the passion of our hearts. If, after you read it, you pray more, we’ve accomplished half of our passion. If you get your church to pray more, we’ve accomplished all of our passion.

This book presents what several praying churches across the country are doing and the prayer principle each one exemplifies. What's more, you'll see that you can apply these principles to your own church. We could have written about literally dozens and dozens of churches that are doing remarkable things in prayer, but we could pick only a handful. How did we ever select which ones to feature? First, we wanted to look at several different denominations, because people from different theological persuasions can pray and get answers to their prayers. Second, we wanted to look at different sizes of churches. We believe small-, medium-, and mega-size churches are all uniquely privileged by God to do His work through prayer.

Because we believe God can use old-fashioned churches that worship the same way they did when they were founded, we looked at them. But we also wanted to include some of the up-to-date modern-worship or organizational styles such as multi-site churches, attractional churches, and intentionally multicultural churches.

We wanted to include churches from across the country. Whereas we believe there is no such thing as a true "Southern" or "Western" church, we do believe sections of the country have specific characteristics. Why did we do this? So no one in any part of America could say, "They may pray like that in the South (or North or East or West), but prayer doesn't work like that where I live."

Also, notice we believe anyone can pray and touch the heart of God: children, youth, adults, rich, poor, and any ethnic group. Anyone and everyone can pray. Too often people think of a prayer warrior as an old widow who spends most of her life on her knees in intercession for the work of her church. While we praise God for every elderly woman who prays, we know there are terrific young intercessors who put aside the pursuit of rock music, the vanities of video games, and the addictiveness of physical sports to give

themselves to prayer. And don't forget high schoolers; the greatest prayer meeting in the United States is held each October by high schoolers who "Meet You at the Pole." Since 1991, See You at the Pole has grown to God-sized proportions.

As you read, watch for the many different ways to pray. If you see a prayer term you're unfamiliar with, check the appendix starting on page 133 for its definition. Also, you'll read about many answers to prayer. Some answers are small; that's fine. We believe in praying for minutia. But some answers are astounding miracles where God clearly intervened to bring about a great revival in the church, a great harvest of souls, or a great amount of money supplied to His work. Don't let these large events overwhelm you. Instead ask, "What could I learn from this work of God?" and "How can I take my next step of faith to trust God for more?"

I (Daniel) was a student of Elmer Towns, and as a result of his teaching, I was on a twenty-one-day fast while a student at Liberty University. It was because of that fast that I met my wife, Rosemary. It's reassuring to know that your choice of a lifemate came out of a concentrated prayer and fasting before God!

I (Elmer) was on a forty-day fast when a publisher asked me, "What great answer did you get by fasting?" I frankly told him, "I'm not fasting to get anything from God; I'm fasting to know God." The publisher was so impressed that he said, "Write me a book on knowing God." That evening I went to my room and began the book that I called *God Encounters*, the story of thirteen people in Scripture who experienced the atmospheric presence of God. That experience changed their lives; it also changed mine.

Now we want to challenge you to a deeper life of prayer. Therefore, before you begin reading, we ask that you would first bow your head and dedicate yourself to read the entire book. Second, ask the Holy

Spirit to guide you to understand more about prayer, more than you've ever understood before. Third, ask God what you must do as a result of reading this book. When you come to the end, make a fourth commitment—to pray as He has taught you from this book.

May God use this book to make you and your church greater intercessors for God.

Written from our homes at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains,
Elmer L. Towns and Daniel Henderson

SHARE YOUR STORY

As you read this book, you will be inspired by the stories of congregations that have forged a significant prayer culture. You also may be inspired to share how your church has experienced a movement of prayer. To share your story, go to www.strategicrenewal.com, click on “Share Your Prayer Story,” and tell us about it.

A PASTOR OF PRAYER

*Jefferson Baptist Church
Jefferson, Oregon*

In the fall of 1988, Pastor Dee Duke received a letter from Dr. Joe Aldrich, president of Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland, Oregon. It invited Salem-area pastors to a four-day get-together at the coast for a first-ever Prayer Summit. This unusual event would encompass prayer with no agenda, no programs, and no speakers.

At the time, Pastor Duke wasn't excited about the prospect of praying for four days. It sounded boring. Reluctantly, however, he decided to attend, but his plan was to skip the prayertimes. He would walk on the beach, think about his life, write a letter of resignation to his church, and try to figure out what to do next.

His decision to respond to that invitation led to a radical renewal in his life that forever changed the essence and trajectory of his pastoral ministry. Today, he is recognized as a humble, insightful, and very effective pastor whose model of prayer inspires church leaders around the world.

GOD'S CALL

Jefferson Baptist Church began as a church plant in 1973 in Jefferson, Oregon, a small farming community in the Willamette Valley. Pastor Duke and his wife assisted the founding pastor while attending Western Bible College. After graduation in 1975, they returned to the dairy farm owned by Pastor Duke's father in Washington State in hope of fulfilling the young man's high school dream to be the world's greatest dairy farmer. Even though he had finished Bible college, Pastor Duke's real love was the farm.

In 1976 his dreams were interrupted by a call from the leaders at Jefferson Baptist: "We don't know if you've heard, but things haven't gone well here. The pastor left, and we're down to just a few people. We're planning to close the church, but we thought that before we did, we would call you. If you and your wife will come back to Jefferson, we'll keep the church open and try to make a go of it."

Although plans were in place for Pastor Duke to take over the farm, he had a longing to use his ministry training. His father advised, "If you don't give this a try, you'll always regret it." So the pastor and his family packed up and moved to Jefferson. Reflecting on that decision, he says, "I was an extreme introvert. I struggled with relationships, and the whole thought of being a pastor scared me to death. But I couldn't shake the strong sense that God was calling me back to be the pastor."

About twenty-five people attended the church when Pastor Duke arrived. In spite of his lack of experience, God blessed the congregation with more people, and the church steadily grew. They met in the local grade school gym until the fall of 1979 when they moved into their own building on five acres of land. By 1980, Jefferson Baptist had almost two-hundred people.

But the setbacks during those eight years took a toll. The church was full of disunity and financial problems. Many people left, and the ones who stayed weren't happy. Pastor Duke says, "I tried as hard as I knew how to be a good pastor and to do the things that would cause our church to grow. My father used to say that there wasn't anything I couldn't accomplish if I was willing to work hard enough. So every time someone left the church, I would work a little harder, put in more time, start another program. But nothing seemed to work. I seemed to upset and offend people no matter what I did and no matter how hard I tried."

READY TO QUIT, RELUCTANT TO PRAY

By the end of 1988, Pastor Duke felt bitter and angry at God—and at most of the people in the church. After obediently giving up his dream of farming to serve the church, he felt God's blessing had eluded him. He became disillusioned, weary, and depressed, concluding that God had not really called him to ministry after all. By then the dairy was sold, and he had no idea what he was going to do with his life. He just knew that he was going to resign from Jefferson Baptist Church and start his life over.

That is when he reluctantly decided to attend the Prayer Summit.

Pastor Duke went to the first session just to be polite. After just twenty minutes into prayer, it occurred to him that he had tried everything over the years *except* prayer. His prayer life was shallow, and church prayertimes were sparsely attended. But God arrested his attention and gripped his heart early in that Prayer Summit and changed him in those four days.

"For the next four days God turned me inside out," he recalls.

“He convicted me of my prayerlessness, my independent spirit, and my belief that I could accomplish this ‘pastor thing’ with enough work. I had never realized how arrogant I was. I knew things had to change.”

Pastor Duke didn’t miss a single session at the summit and hasn’t missed a step since then in his desire to be a praying pastor who leads a praying church.

A CHANGED PASTOR, CHURCH, AND COMMUNITY

Following the summit, Pastor Duke became convinced that his church needed to make prayer the central focus of its ministry. He started by confessing his prayerlessness to his congregation and publicly pledging to be a man dedicated to prayer. He also set seven specific goals for his life and ministry:

1. Spend one uninterrupted hour per day praying by himself.
2. Spend one hour per day praying with at least one other person.
3. Pray for everyone in the church by name weekly.
4. Pray at least once per month with other pastors.
5. Preach on prayer for three months.
6. Plan four major church prayer events each year (always to precede a major evangelistic thrust).
7. Identify the church’s “farm” (twenty miles in every direction from the church), claim it, and target prayer for it.

He opened the church from 9-10 p.m. for prayer and continues to do so to this day. Pastor Duke also began to devote a major part of his mornings to intercessory prayer for individuals and families in the church. Besides praying for their needs, he asked God to motivate

his people to pray. He took his charge from John 17:9, in which Jesus prays to the Father: “I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.” Pastor Duke’s example of prayer, intercession for his people, and relentless obedience to the call to pray has brought great blessing to his life, church, and community.

In Jefferson, with a population of 2,200, the church has grown to an average attendance of 1,400 people in four weekend services. Pastor Duke says, “The more we prayed, the more God put His heart in us to reach the lost. We experienced a growing sense of urgency to reach our neighbors and the world. We grew in boldness and in creative ways to reach out to the lost. Almost everybody in the church began praying for lost friends, work associates, family members, mission efforts, and countries around the world.”

Jefferson Baptist has planted three daughter congregations in Albany, Turner, and Corvallis. The pastors of these new congregations were trained at Jefferson Baptist and continue to carry the DNA of prayer and outreach with Christ-honoring results. The mother church has raised funds to help support each pastor and assist the new churches in buying property.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

Pastor Duke admits that he hasn’t “arrived,” nor has he implemented his passion perfectly. He advises other pastors not to become too pushy in their enthusiasm for prayer. “In our eagerness we want to pressure everyone to participate. But many in our churches are immature and reluctant,” he explains.

He has learned the wisdom of giving people progressive opportunities to grow in prayer as the Spirit stirs their hearts. He encourages

everyone to come to at least one prayertime a month. Some might become interested in prayer through periodic prayerwalks in the community or even in another country. He also tries to offer periodic prayer events that motivate everyone.

Eventually, people commit to attending prayertimes weekly or to praying regularly for those who do not know Christ. A visit to Jefferson Baptist's very unassuming Web site (www.jeffersonbaptistchurch.org) will tell you that the congregation has really caught the vision as they have some forty prayertimes a week. Many prayer ministries have developed, including targeted prayer teams and an official "church intercessors" group (committed to one-hundred hours of prayer for the year, fifty at home and fifty at church). Pastor Duke assures pastors that, in time, the vision will take root and the commitment will follow.

A second major mistake he cautions against is to allow prayer experiences to grow beyond the necessary effort to train skilled leaders. Pastor Duke regrets the prayer meetings people in his church have attended that weren't led by someone who modeled prayer and understood the key principles of effective prayer. To overcome that mistake, he regularly conducts a leadership class that includes a variety of important topics, one of the most essential being prayer.

WISDOM FOR WILLING PASTORS

For those pastors willing to turn from a prayerless ministry to embrace a vision for heartfelt change, Pastor Duke willingly offers advice from his own journey. In fact, every January Jefferson Baptist hosts a conference for pastors that attract leaders from many states and several countries. He speaks of his pathway to a praying life, the principles he's learned about the incalculable blessings of prayer

in the church, and the practical principles for implementing prayer. Some of his salient points are:

Believe that prayer is essential.

Almost everyone believes that prayer is important. But there is a difference between believing that prayer is important and believing it is essential. “Essential” means there are things that will not happen without prayer. He says, “There are many contributing factors to successful ministry, especially in the area of winning the lost. Prayer alone may not get results. But without prayer, even the best program, discipline, or plan will be frustrated and fail. Those who believe that prayer is essential—not just important—will have a passion and fervency that will persuade others to join them.” He shares that the stronger his belief that prayer is absolutely essential, the stronger his zeal and passion have become. He believes zeal and passion are the keys to good leadership when motivating a congregation to pray for the lost.

Model your belief.

Pastor Duke knows the first step in motivating a congregation to make prayer essential is to model this belief. He believes that a prayer commitment is much like budgeting money: You write down your goals, and then consistently allocate your time according to those goals. Not only does he do this through preaching, participating in prayer gatherings, and interceding for his flock—but also through praying with other pastors.

Every week, he and the pastors around the Jefferson area gather for four hours of prayer and sharing. They bear burdens, engage in honest accountability, and pray for each other and the surrounding community. This sacrificial, unselfish prayer commitment speaks volumes to the congregation.

Target the men.

Pastor Duke has learned that getting the hearts of the men, who are often the hardest to reach, you get the hearts of the wives and families. He regularly calls the men to a high and holy commitment of accountability and believes this has been a vital part of the church's health. He asks the men to join a regular accountability group. Within that group each man commits to:

- A regular Bible-reading plan
- Praying for the needs of the church, using a regular update letter that Pastor Duke sends
- Praying with his wife two times a week
- Reading twenty pages in a book every week
- Responding openly and consistently to the needs of other men in his group
- Being consistently involved in corporate prayer at least two times a month

As these groups have gathered, the spiritual life of each man has deepened. Marriages have improved and the spiritual level of the church has risen to new levels.

Provide many opportunities to pray.

Bite-sized opportunities to pray are very important. Often Pastor Duke begins by asking people to engage in a one-time commitment to pray for fifteen minutes for five days. He believes anyone can do this. As they begin, he asks the Holy Spirit to capture their hearts with a growing love for Jesus and His presence.

Pastor Duke believes it's best if those opportunities are designed so the congregation can see answers. It's certainly important to pray

for unsaved relatives who live halfway across the country. But something happens to a congregation when people see a person they've been praying for accept Christ as Savior, become a growing believer, and get involved in a church.

At Jefferson Baptist, he encourages people to pray for neighbors, local friends, and coworkers. The church plans four major prayer events a year, each followed by an evangelistic event. For example, every year before Easter, regular attendees put the names of ten local people who don't go to church on a prayer card. They commit to pray for them every day and invite them to church on Easter Sunday. They turn in the cards and put them in a big bowl. Starting ten days before Easter, the congregation engages in around-the-clock prayer for the people on the cards. The day before Easter, they commit to twenty-four hours of fasting. Each time a person is prayed for, the pray-er marks the card and puts it back in the bowl. By Easter morning, each person has been prayed for numerous times.

The pastor says, "The first year we did this we had over five hundred in attendance on Easter morning—over fifty responded to an invitation to accept Christ as their Savior!"

Another prayer initiative he started was to involve intercessors in a community prayer effort. They record the name of every person who lives within a twenty-minute drive of the church. Four times a year the intercessors send a card to them, asking for prayer-requests. "We want our community to know we are a praying church. When they have needs, they'll know where to go," he says.

Jefferson Baptist high school students prayerwalk for the unsaved. Each morning a group of young people prayerwalks around the school's track. Besides getting exercise, they pray for teachers and students by name. This has been extremely effective and been the impetus for the launching of a Saturday-night service geared toward

youth. Many of prayerwalkers come to the service to meet the young people they've been praying for.

Don't give up!

Pastor Duke offers this encouragement: "If you want to see your church develop a passion for prayer and for the lost, don't give up! It may take awhile to get your congregation motivated and on board. Start slow and keep trying. Make them aware that the leaders of the church are praying, and put in front of them opportunities to pray."

Expect blessings.

Pastor Duke and the people of Jefferson Baptist have identified twenty-one blessings that God has brought into the church since they devoted their lives to the ministry of prayer. Some of these tangible blessings include a marked increase in unity, a deeper and evident love for one another, and a growing vision for evangelism and missions.

One blessing is especially important to him personally. "God has changed me. I had always loved God deeply, and I went into ministry to obey Him. But I had just tolerated people. I had few relational skills and little desire to develop close relationships. For me, 'loving people' had been pure duty. But when the people of Jefferson Baptist began to pray for me, God dramatically changed my heart toward the people—and He has changed their hearts toward me as well."

Out of this growing movement of prayer, Jefferson Baptist's mission statement was born. "Jefferson Baptist Church is the 'I love You' church," Pastor Duke declares. "We are continually saying, 'I love You' to God, to each other, to the greater body of Christ, to our unsaved neighbors and friends, and to the whole world, until the whole world can say, 'I love You, God.'"

The church motto has become “Much prayer, much blessing; little prayer, little blessing; no prayer, no blessing.” Under Dee Duke’s prayerful leadership, church members are asking God to bless them so they can be a blessing to the world. “Thanks to all those sheep who pray faithfully for me,” he says. “I now love shepherding even more than I loved taking care of the cows on the old family farm!”