



For Whom Are You Praying?
*Modest Changes with the Potential for
Big Impact for Congregations*

Prayer patterns for small groups in established congregations often focus on the health, life transitions, and bereavement of family and friends. These are important. Nothing should depreciate or marginalize the prayerful compassion shown towards people.

Still, this litany can primarily focus on looking inward at the hurts and hopes within the congregational family. The mission of God calls on Christian congregations to also focus on sharing His love outward. This is essential to continually renew the base of our congregation as the primary resource for Christian mission. More important, it is our prime directive as Christians.

What if?

What if prayer focused more on people outside the congregation – particularly ones in the community context or among the affinity groups with which God wants your congregation to connect? Their health, life transitions, and bereavement situations are of foremost importance. Congregational members say they want their congregation to grow. If so, what are your prayer actions about specific people who may need to receive help from the spiritual community present within a congregation?

Going farther – what if the focus was not just on the health, life transitions, and bereavement needs of people inside and outside the congregation? What if a strong focus existed on the spiritual needs of people in the family, friend, neighborhood, and work networks of congregational participants?

Even farther – what if you made intentional efforts to name specific people outside the congregation with spiritual needs – especially their relationship to the unconditional love of God best expressed in the life, ministry, and eternal sacrifice of Jesus? What if we made a commitment to pray for the spiritual needs of people with equal or greater faithfulness as the prayers for people with health, life transitions, and bereavement issues?

“Yes,” you may say, “I am willing. This has just not been part of my practice. If this conversation is focusing on people without an eternal life relationship with Jesus, I really do not know many – or any – of these people. My life revolves around other Christians. I do not know non-Christians.”

You May Be Surprised!

If you are willing to be serious about praying for the spiritual needs of people in the context of a Christ-centered life, here are two exercises to try.

Exercise One: This exercise has two parts. Part one is for everyone in your small group to count – no names at first – the number of people you know in your family, friends, neighborhood, and work environment that you believe are not Christians. Or those who claim Christianity as their identity, but are going through a stage of estrangement from God and active involvement in a congregation.

Share your total number with your small group. Often this exercise reveals a much larger number of people than anyone expected. It is not unusual to discover a number at least seven times the number of people in a small group.

Part two is for all within your small group who would willingly do so to share the name of one person each time your group meets who has a spiritual need. Add them to the small group's ongoing prayer list. Pray for these people by name. Pray that God would give you the courage to find ways to deepen your relationship with these people until such time as you have compassionate confidence to engage these people in a spiritual conversation.

Ask your small group to hold you accountable for not only praying for these people, but for seeking ways to provide a witness in word and deed. You may be surprised how often natural opportunities arise to share and say words of the love of Jesus to these people – if you intentionally look for ways for this to happen.

Question. Has a nervous, anxious feeling swept through your body as you read these last two paragraphs? Are you wondering, "Who me? I was hoping that is what we asked the pastor and staff to do." Do not worry. That is a natural feeling. If you express openness and share your anxiety with your small group, they and God can help you work through these feelings.

A New Priority on Spiritual Needs

Exercise Two: The second exercise makes praying for people with spiritual needs so important in your small group that it changes your prayer pattern, and for whom you show Christian compassion. Transition over time to a point that when sharing prayer requests you intersperse health, life transition, and bereavement needs with spiritual needs – people close to you and God, and people far away from you and God.

When the request comes for prayer concerns, the first name mentioned is typically someone having a health challenge or a death in their family. This is fine. After sharing this type of prayer request, the second one should be about someone with a spiritual need. Only then mention another person with a health, life transition, or bereavement. The fourth prayer request should be about a person with a spiritual need.

Here is the catch to this exercise. Keep alternating until you run out of names to share in the next category. At that point stop mentioning more names until you can balance your list.

This means you must increase the people you know with spiritual needs. You have many prayer requests that focus more internally, and not many about people with a distance or estrangement from God. Go ahead. Stretch to discover and mention more people with spiritual needs.

This is awkward at first. It is a new discipline. It takes a while to change your prayer pattern. Over the next weeks and months small groups may discover they are spending an increasing amount of time talking and praying about people with spiritual needs. They may also experience significant increases in their life actions and focus on people who need spiritual comfort and challenge.

For whom are you praying? Would you accept this challenge? Would your small group agree to engage in this prayer pattern innovation?