

HELP FOR

HOW TO WAKE UP

PRAYING SMALL GROUPS

YOUR PRAYER TIMES

Our group met monthly to pray for the persecuted church around the world and for missionaries from our church.

We were all committed to God, to prayer, and to each other, and several of us were experienced pray-ers. Yet some of our prayer times—well, most of them really—seemed to drag by.

Often my mind wandered during prayer; seldom did I feel we were connecting as a group. Although I knew God was with us, I rarely felt lifted into His presence. Many times I drove away glad we had met, but not particularly inspired.

Why did our group struggle to “click” when we interceded together? Like many small groups, we lacked effectiveness in this area because we failed to take into account two key dimensions of group prayer.

BY ANDREW R. WHEELER

GOD MAY HAVE AN INFINITE ATTENTION

A BALANCING ACT

Group prayer—unlike private prayer—involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions. When we pray in a group, we are praying *to* God (the vertical dimension) *with* other people (the horizontal dimension). Effective group prayer requires a balance between both of these dimensions.

When the horizontal isn't taken into consideration, the result tends to be long, winding prayers that diminish overall participation in the prayer time. When the vertical is lacking, prayers are often said more for the benefit of other people than for God and can move the focus away from God rather than toward Him.

Balancing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of community prayer doesn't happen automatically. However, our group has discovered some principles and practices that can help. Let's look at the horizontal aspect first.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Praying with people means that we pray as a team, sometimes even limiting our individual prayers for the benefit of others.

Focus. One way to improve a group's ability to pray as a team is to focus the topic. Prayer times in the early church often centered on a single overriding concern. Acts 1:15-26 describes a group of believers praying for God's guidance in choosing a replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot. Acts 12 shows a similar assembly praying for Peter's release from prison.

Narrowing the focus in this way allows a number of people to express to God their desires about a particular situation. When multiple subjects for prayer are opened simultaneously, participants often skip from topic to topic rather than developing a prayer together in unity and agreement.

Our group made three changes that helped

us focus our prayer time. First, we limited our topic to the persecuted church. Second, instead of praying generally for countries where persecution is rampant, we now pray for specific needs in three to five countries using a recent prayer list from International Christian Concern (www.persecution.org). Finally, we changed the format of our prayer times. We used to read through all the requests on the list and then pray. Now someone reads aloud the information for the first country, and we pray about those needs. When there is a general sense that we've covered that country, we move on to the next nation.

This format could be adapted for nearly any prayer focus. For example, if you're praying for members' personal requests, focus on one person at a time instead of gathering everyone's requests at the beginning. You'll experience greater unity in prayer and help people remember what to pray for.

Short and sweet. Praying short prayers is another way to improve the horizontal dimension of group prayer. Our tendency, however, is to do the opposite. Long, winding prayers may be perfectly appropriate in the prayer closet, but they are seldom conducive to community prayer. Prolonged prayers often cause group members to tune out. God may have an infinite attention span, but we do not!

Long prayers also communicate—usually unintentionally—that the pray-er is not interested in the contributions of the rest of the group. Such lack of consideration discourages others from participating and destroys a sense of community.

SPAN, BUT WE DO NOT!

Since our group began to concentrate on one country at a time, our individual prayers have been briefer and more targeted. When we read through the entire list of requests before praying, some members responded by covering a number of subjects in their “turn.” These prayers grew long, causing people to tune out and preventing any real agreement in prayer. Our new format limits the scope of individual prayers and makes it easier for us to keep them short.

Narrowing the topic and keeping individual prayers short helps us acknowledge the horizontal dimension of community prayer. But how do we incorporate the vertical dimension?

THE UPSIDE

Praying to God means that we talk to Him rather than addressing others in the group. We also focus on His presence and will rather than our circumstances.

Centered on God. First, we remember that God is our real audience. In a group it’s easy to slip into addressing the group in prayer rather than God: “Lord, may *we* be more seeker-focused, may *we* reach out to our lost neighbors, may *we* be prepared at all times to speak the gospel.” This type of prayer draws the focus away from God and often leaves the group feeling preached to rather than prayed for.

Here’s how we might pray for the same subject in a way that puts the attention on God: “Lord, would *You* give us a greater heart for the lost and open doors for us to share the gospel?” The distinction in wording may be subtle, but the difference in

focus is clear. The second prayer clearly asks God, not the group, to act. Praying this way honors God’s sovereignty and encourages group members to seek Him for life-change rather than attempting to accomplish it on their own.

We can also lose sight of our real audience by offering prayers that are more descriptive than intercessory. God knows what we need before we ask (Mt. 6:8). When we load our prayers with information aimed at group members rather than God, we accentuate the horizontal dimension of community prayer at the expense of the vertical dimension.

Our group had this problem. Because we all read the list of requests silently before we prayed, we weren’t sure others had read (or remembered) the entire list. So we spent much of our prayer time reviewing the information in the lists.

Now that one person reads the information and requests aloud, we know everyone is on the same page, and we can focus on

interceding for God to act. The key here is to make sure the entire prayer time isn’t taken up by sharing information.

Kingdom requests. Focusing our prayers on God involves not only whom we address, but also what we ask for. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:9-10). Jesus then instructed the disciples to seek God for their daily needs, for forgiveness, and for guidance. A few verses later, Jesus told His disciples to

seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [such as food and clothing] will be given to you as well. —v. 33

It seems Jesus intended “your kingdom come, your will be done” to be the context in which all other prayers are brought to God.

Often, however, our prayers are dominated by immediate concerns such as

financial or medical issues. Those are valid topics for prayer, but it's possible to "seek first his kingdom" as we're praying for them. We pray for God's financial provision, but we pray also to be content with what He has given, for wisdom in financial decisions, and for a steward's heart. We pray for healing, but we pray also that God will develop Christlike character in us through our trials.

Praying this way may not come naturally at first. But as God works in our hearts, we begin to desire what He desires, and the focus of our requests shifts. We seek His bigger purposes—even as we ask Him to act in the daily circumstances of our lives.

Our group continues to meet monthly to pray. Now that we've begun to incorporate these principles, we're growing in our ability to pray together well. Although we're still experimenting and tuning our approach, the unity we experience in our meetings indicates that we're on the right track. (U)



about the author

ANDREW R. WHEELER has been leading prayer groups since he was in college. Currently he codirects prayer ministry for the McHenry County branch of Willow Creek Community Church. This article grew out of his vision "to help groups pray together more effectively by addressing the 'logistical' problems" that trip them up.