



“All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.”

Psalm 25:10

Keys to Renewing the Historic Church

PRAYING YOUR CHURCH TO LIFE

If you love your church, but feel frustrated because . . .

- ◆ It is stagnating or declining
- ◆ Growing older and losing its young people
- ◆ Struggling financially
- ◆ Seems uncertain about what it believes and why
- ◆ Doesn't seem to be able to find or keep a good pastor
- ◆ Recycles its leaders who are themselves struggling with depression
- ◆ Comes back to the same old divisions and quarrels on a periodic cycle
- ◆ You are the pastor and think about quitting at least once a week

Then it is time to pray your church to life. Your Lord, Jesus Christ loves your church more than you do. He died for it. It is His bride. He promised that if you would ask, He would act. Most of us, however, feel small and powerless before such a task. How do we begin? What do we ask God to do? What difference will it make? Here are 10 simple strategies that have brought UCC churches back to life across the United States. Some of these churches had come down to fewer than a dozen people in worship. Some were deeply divided. One entertained a motion to close at their annual meeting and the motion died for lack of a second. Today, they are thriving, spiritually dynamic congregations reaching their communities with the saving reality of Jesus Christ. Today, they have 150 – 1200 in worship. The sanctuaries are filled with children and young families. Your church can be prayed to life.

1 Ask and seek for a group that will pray with you every week. The key in almost every congregation that has experienced transformational renewal has been a group of 5–7 people praying for that church every week for 5–7 years. Ask God for partners and you will find them. Then pray. Don't gossip or commiserate, just pray.

2 Start with yourselves. Thank God for all He has done in the church since its founding. Acknowledge His purpose, role, and position in all of its history. Confess your own sins. Allow the Holy Spirit to conduct a thorough examination of your heart in order that your intercession can be effective.

3 Pray strategically. Pray for the pastor and leaders by name. Pray through all the things that take place in the body life of the church.

- ✓ Pray for the gospel to be preached,
- ✓ Pray for people to come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord,
- ✓ Pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon the members of the church,
- ✓ Pray for evil to be bound and for false teaching and practice to be exposed and removed.

4 Pray in concert with the call and mission of your church. Go back and read the history. Why was your church called into existence? What scriptures are on the pulpit, or windows or narthex or doorposts? What was its original mission? What is its founding statement of faith? Renewal always involves restoration and completion of what God began (Philippians 1:6). Then pray for these realities to once again define your life

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together. In New England many churches were founded to be the “light set upon the hill” that would take the gospel to the whole world. Almost every renewal church in New England from Wethersfield, to Byfield, to York, is a living rebirth of that vision.

5 Prayer walk. If you have never done it, now is the time to begin. You may want to read some books by writers like Frangipane and Dawson to get the drift, but it isn’t hard. You find a friend or a group and you walk the church grounds, the neighborhood around the building, and then strategic areas in the town. While you walk, let the Holy Spirit prompt you to pray for things that come to mind. Don’t hesitate. When it comes to mind, say it! You may find the first time “spiritual” realities and forces are revealed to you to be a bit “spooky,” but God is still speaking and it is all right. One congregation after prayer walking the neighborhood and town for a number of years, now owns several of the surrounding properties for ministry, has watched Christian faculty be hired and come together for Bible study and prayer at the public school, and seen the business district revived and a number of Christians take key positions in town government.

6 Pray for the men. Many churches lack effective male leadership. Many men in our society feel confused about their role in spiritual leadership. Fatherlessness is THE presenting social problem of our age. If you are the Pastor or a key leader, make a list of men that God lays on your heart. Twelve is a good number. Pray for them as often as possible, once a day if you can. A year later, review your list. You will be amazed by what God has done in the lives of those men. You will be thrilled to see how some of them are impacting the life of the church. Some of them, however, will have made decisions to go in the other direction. Prayer is a catalyst both for commitment and rejection. When you review the list with the Lord, He will often give you new names to add and subtract. In our ministry, all the men who are and have been effective Spirit-filled leaders have been on the “list” at some time in the last 21 years.

7 Pray for the church that isn’t there. Every historic church lives with ghosts. They are the ghosts of old pastors and confirmation classes and building committees and women’s groups. Occasionally they are the ghosts of old moral failures and bitter disputes. Often these ghosts seem to speak more loudly than the living in shaping the current life of the church. In one con-

gregation each historic family had their section in the pews. When an influx of newcomers responding to an outreach gravitated toward one section, the pastor was told they shouldn’t sit in the “Hutchinson pews,” even though the last remaining Hutchinson was in a nursing home and was unlikely to procreate. The old days aren’t coming back. As Coach Rick Patino once famously said when he coached the Boston Celtics, “Larry Bird isn’t walking back through that door.” Prayer can exorcise these ghosts.

But there is even a more dynamic prayer for the invisible church that should be pursued with passion. This is your prayer for church of the not yet. Pray for the children to be born. Pray for the newcomers whom God is going to bring through the door to find Christ. Pray for the missionaries God is going to send from your church. Pray for the seminarian who will one day be your pastor.

8 Pray during worship. If you are now a group, split up. Put an intercessory prayer person in different key places around the sanctuary including the balcony (where you can see everything), the choir loft, and the ever-popular back rows. Pray for every key person in the sanctuary, especially the pastor. Pray for the message. Pray for the not yet there. See what a difference it makes in what happens.

9 Keep a journal. Real prayer will produce real change. Write down what you ask for. Write down the insights you receive while praying. Write down the answers God gives and the changes prayer produces. God is honored by the testimony to his action in response to our request. Besides, this is the real history of the church.

10 Persevere. If you watch the trends of political change in the United States you will see that power is achieved by those who persevere. The movement that mobilizes support for one vote on one issue and then loses interest, gives way to those who, undaunted by single defeats, continue to mobilize to produce change over the course of a generation. Authentic church renewal requires deep commitment. Prayer is a tough ministry. Pursuing God in prayer on a regular basis over an extended period of time requires far more stamina than serving on all those committees and subcommittees for back to back terms. Yet all the organizing in the world is of small consequence to the exercise of the power of God.

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BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER

Establish a relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ

“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” 1 John 5:5

“Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:33

“I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. . . . If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” John 15:1,7

Acknowledge God in praise

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Philippians 4:6

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. . . . Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, praise his name! . . .” Psalm 100

Confess your sins

“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” James 5:16

“If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” 2 Chron. 7:14

“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” 1 Peter 3:12

Pray for the things that will glorify God

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” 1 John 5:14-15

Pray with the authority in the name of Jesus

“I will give you the keys to the kingdom and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Matt. 16:19

Pray believing it will happen

“Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Mark 11:24

“He answered their prayers, because they trusted in Him.” 1 Chronicles 5:20

Allow the Holy Spirit to prompt specific requests

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” Romans 8:26

Keep praying

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. . . stand firm then . . . and pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Be alert and always keep on praying.” Eph 6:10-18

Thank God for the answers and give Him credit

“Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” Psalm 115:1

“I will praise you O Lord with my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” Psalm 9:1-2

“I will praise you forever for what you have done; in your name will I hope, for your name is good. I will praise you in the presence of your saints.” Psalm 52:9

Recommended Resources on Prayer

Among the hundreds of titles available on prayer are these classics that should be a part of any library on prayer.

Three Battlegrounds

Francis Frangipane, Arrow Publications, Cedar Rapids, IA 1989 (paper)

In-depth view of the three arenas of spiritual warfare: the mind, the Church, and heavenly places that lays a foundation of insight, wisdom, and discernment for the nature of the battle and the keys to victory. Other books by Frangipane: *This Day We Fight!*; *Breaking the Bondage of a Passive Spirit*

The Beginner's Guide to Intercession

Dutch Sheets, Regal Books, Ventura, CA 2001

This book is for seasoned prayer warriors as well as those just starting. Covers all reasons and goals of intercessory prayer in an easy to read and challenging style, including how to pray effectively, learning to pray alone and in groups, and maintaining your enthusiasm. Other titles: *Watchman Prayer* and *Intercessory Prayer*

Churches that Pray

C. Peter Wagner, Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 1993

How prayer can help revitalize your congregation and break down the walls between your church and the community. Focuses on the nature of prayer, prayer within the church, and ways to pray in your neighborhood. Also: *Warfare Prayer*; *Prayer Shield*; *Breaking Strongholds*

What Happens When Women Pray

Evelyn Christenson, Victor Books, Wheaton IL, 1975

Not just for women. This is a classic how-to on the basics of effective prayer. It has helped tens of

thousands who are just beginning or uncomfortable with praying aloud to engage in powerful and dynamic prayer. Also: *What Happens When God Answers Prayer* and *Battling the Prince of Darkness*

Partners in Prayer

John Maxwell, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1996

Another book on the basics of effective prayer skills with an emphasis on how to pray for your pastor and church leaders. Includes how to organize or start a prayer ministry in your church.

Taking Your Cities for God

John Dawson, Creation House, Lake Mary FL, 1989

The primer on spiritual mapping and prayer to break spiritual strongholds in your city. Covers why this is important, examples of how God acted, and the how-to of discerning the "gates" of our city, learning to fight, and five steps to victory.

Transformations: A Documentary

Hosted by George Otis, Jr., the Sentinel Group, Linwood, WA, 1999 www.sentinelgroup.org

The first of a series of videos/dvds that document how God has moved in answer to prayer to break spiritual strongholds in various geographic areas. Powerful and inspiring!

Others in the series: *Transformations II: the Glory Spreads*; *The Quickening* (training and encouragement); *The Sea Resounds* (covers revival in Fiji)

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*"Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today,
so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (Hebrews 3:13)*