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THE VALUE AND FUNCTION OF GROUP PRAYER

Few people question the value of individual prayer, but sometimes wonder about the purpose and value of group prayer. They have the mistaken idea that group prayer is a matter of (by sheer force of numbers) forcing our will on the will of God. Of course such a concept is entirely wrong. Group prayer has some values that are unique to it alone. It has values that individual prayer does not have, and group prayer carries with it implications that individual prayer does not carry.

One of the values of group praying is that in order to pray in harmony we pray according to the considered judgment of a group. It keeps us from veering off on our own particular tangent. You will especially realize this if you have ever been in a group that was considering praying for some proposed law that the government is thinking about passing. Depending upon one's political convictions, he may honestly pray for the passage of the law or against it. Upon the considered judgment of the entire group, in the light of our own conscience, our understanding of the Bible and the tradition of Christian thought, we can usually *agree* upon a prayer that compromises not the will of God but our own prejudices and biases. The resultant prayer

is more universal and cosmic, and we have grown and exceeded the limits of our own narrow experience.

This is no different than what we have been doing through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in history. The great social advances in history are not the work of one individual, but rather the result of a group action. We have thought so much of the safety and justice of group consideration that the more enlightened nations today have representative government and trial by jury of peers instead of committing ourselves to the whim, judgment, prejudice, bias and interest of one person.

An important implication of group praying is that it recognizes we are part of a Kingdom; we are one of a citizenry that circles the earth. Paul told some Christians he was talking to that they were a “colony of heaven.” We must never forget that. As individuals we are important, and our personal commitment is important, but our personal loyalty in this case ushers us into a new relationship with everyone and everything in the entire universe. This is what Leslie Weatherhead calls “the kingdom of right relationships.” It is right relationship with God, and then with His whole creation. We are not pampered and spoiled “only” children, but mature members of a heavenly family, the mystical body of Christ, responsible not only to ourselves but to the entire citizenry of heaven.

Then there is another thing about group praying that is extremely important, if a bit hard to define. Something above and beyond the group and the individuals in the group happens in a group that is in perfect harmony. Any speaker can cite instances where he was “caught up” in the unity and harmony of a group and “became more than he was.” Frank Laubach has a little sheet called “Dear Church Member,” ...[now out of print] that is distributed in the pews before a church service. It carries an invitation to each member of the congregation to pray for the minister while he is in the pulpit. Many ministers have said that when this spirit of divine harmony has prevailed they have found a new power and a new inspiration that is completely beyond them under the ordinary circumstances. It is as if the atmosphere were cleansed and purified and the Power streamed into him through the windows of heaven, less obscured and hindered than it could do otherwise. This group harmony under divine leadership, even when there are only two or three in perfect harmony, is unique to *group prayer*.

The same miracle happens with musical instruments. We may enjoy an artist creating something beautiful on a lone instrument; but we all know that a “miracle” happens when that instrument is “symphonized” with many others into a great orchestra. The lone instrument is just as important as it was when it stood alone, but something beyond it happens when it

merges itself with all the other instruments in its own particular "colony of heaven." In team work of any kind the "miracle" happens. A great football team exceeds the skill of any and all its players as individuals. Teams of "stars" have been known to fail all because they had not lost themselves in perfect group harmony. We all enjoy a good singer, but when that singer loses himself in a choral group in perfect harmony, who does not thrill to the miracle of overtones and undertones? So it goes all through creation. Darwin's theme of the survival of the fittest can will be interpreted to mean the fittest to cooperate.

The creating of spiritual atmosphere is something that is unique to group prayer, and atmosphere cannot be overemphasized. Astronomers tell us that the "atmosphere" around the earth is our greatest protection. They say that millions of meteors are streaking toward the earth every day, and if they ever "got through" they would make a bombardment of atom bombs look puny. What protects us is the atmosphere of the earth. Our atmosphere burns up the meteors by sheer friction and wears them out, reducing them to nothing before they can reach us. In group praying we perform something of the same miracle.

Helen Keller, without sight or hearing or speech, tells us that she can tell the minute a person comes into the room if he is angry, afraid, happy, etc. He gives off "vibrations," for want of a better word, that change the atmosphere. A child can "sense" the feelings of the parent even though the parent may try to hide them. A parent afraid of thunder and lightning may put on a good *act* to hide the fact from the child, but it is not long before the child living in a climate of fear becomes afraid. He feels the insecurity and fear of the parent and falls prey to them. So, creating the right atmosphere is extremely important.

Our function as Christians in creating the right atmosphere for the entire world is well stated by a layman writing to *The New York times*, "The Power of God for good can be so organized by our country and by the right-thinking people of the world, that it can minimize if not destroy the power of the atom for evil." This we must do, and group prayer holds a central if not THE central part of the battleline to destroy evil.

And, why not have a prayer group? Those interested in photography form photography clubs where they study the subject and enjoy the company of those of like interests. The same thing happens with those interested in politics, writing, astronomy, woodworking, stamps and innumerable other subjects. If these subjects are important enough to form a club, it says very little for us if we do not think enough of our relationship with God and communion with God to form a group to practice and to study and enjoy the company of those of like interests. And if it is done right, we ought to expect as much refreshment, entertainment, skill and enjoyment to come out of it as comes from these other clubs. If our interest is genuine, we *will do it*.

So, group prayer is important and it has unique and particular values for you if you would grow into spiritual maturity. It gives power to our prayers by protecting us from our own bias and therefore bringing our prayers more in line with God's goodwill for everyone; it makes us conscious of our heavenly "citizenship"; it creates the atmosphere whereby the Spirit of God can flow into us with greater freedom and power than it can when we are alone; and it is an indication of our genuine interest.

NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO GROUP PRAYER

When one considers the scriptural basis for group prayer there immediately comes to mind the instance of the disciples asking Jesus to "teach us to pray." John had taught his disciples to pray and they wanted to have the same training and privilege. Certainly the Scripture is clear enough that the disciples as a group, sometimes only two or three of them, and surely at other times all of them, were present when Jesus gave an audible prayer. It would be unreasonable to assume that there were not times when they cooperated as a group in praying, each one voicing his intent and hope to the Father.

Jesus made it plain enough that there was great value in praying with two or three others. "Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of them." He thought it important enough to tell them that very plainly. It was undoubtedly assumed that individual prayer was habitual; here Jesus is telling them and us that there is another side to it—group praying.

Not long before the crucifixion Peter made the bold boast that he would never forsake his Lord, but Jesus turned to him and said, "Simon, Satan hath desired to have thee that he might sift thee like wheat—but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not." How often many of us have wished that Jesus would pray for us! And, yet he did pray for us, each one of us. In the great prayer of John 17, Jesus prays one of the most intimate and famous prayers of Christian history. This has been called the High Priestly prayer. Here Jesus prays for himself, then for his disciples, and lastly he prays for all those who will believe because of his disciples. That means each one of us. Jesus prayed for you. "Nor is it for them alone (the disciples) that I make petition, but for those who trust in me through their teaching; that they may all be one, even as Thou art in me, O Father, and I am in Thee; that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send me." **THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE!** He and his disciples and us all wrapped up in a union with God. That is group harmony if ever there was group harmony. That is the goal set for group prayer by Jesus Himself.

The meeting of the disciples at Pentecost along with Mary the mother of Jesus, other women, and the brothers of Jesus, to pray and wait for the coming of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is a good example of sustained group prayer. This does not mean that they did nothing else but pray, for they selected a successor to Judas and must have attended to other affairs that concerned them; but they did meet together in faith and hope and great expectancy. After such prolonged prayer is it any wonder that the Spirit revealed Himself as He did at Pentecost? If we were as faithful over such a period as they, we too could expect something wonderful to happen, and it would.

In the 12th chapter of Acts there is one of the most thrilling stories of group prayer that is possible to find. King Herod had arrested and beheaded James, the brother of John, and then arrested Peter. It was his intention that after the Passover, he would also publicly execute Peter. The fifth verse says, "...but long and fervent prayer was offered to God by the Church on his behalf." One night Peter sat sleeping and chained between two guards, an angel slapped him on the side and told him to arise, and as he did so the chains dropped from him. Then the angel led Peter to freedom. Peter said to himself when this happened, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent his angel and has rescued me from the power of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were anticipating (public execution)." Now listen to what the record of Acts says, "So, on reflection, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John surnamed Mark, where a large number of people were assembled, PRAYING." Can you think of a more thrilling example of the power of group prayer?

It is much easier to find precise references to individual prayer in the Scripture than it is to find them for group prayer, but there need be no doubt that group prayer was a vital function of the first Christians. In times of persecution, such as those early Christians endured, the practice of group prayer must have been one of their main sources of strength. We had the experience during the Second World War of nations drawing together for mutual protection and strength. In the face of danger it is always so. In times of religious persecution it is true also. Meeting together with each other, and finding in the shared experience of the members of the group a new strength that gave them hope to go on, and then finding that in the harmony of the group another Presence comforting and strengthening was an inevitable result of the situation they were in. It worked in times of stress and the habit has continued to the present time with the complete blessing of the Lord.

If the habit of group prayer is not as widespread as we hope it might be, that too seems to be a normal reaction of the human being. In human history, danger seems to force people to cooperate with each other. A good example of it was the United States and Russia during the last great war. When peace comes and the danger is passed we tend to stray apart and follow

our own way. In religion it is the same, unfortunately. In times of stress we come close together, and during the periods of peace when no demands are made upon us that we feel we cannot face alone, we drift apart. But, there have always been those with enough foresight to continue the practice that means so much "when the chips are down." And they have benefited by it tremendously. We must become wise enough to do the same.

PRAYER GROUPS TODAY

No one knows how many prayer groups there are today, but there are many more than most people realize. We tend to think that the era of prayer groups is over because the old-time mid-week prayer meeting has almost vanished. The old mid-week prayer meeting had its faults, there can be no doubt about that, but it also had its strengths. Praying churches are strong churches, and many of today's churches would be wise to do something about it. They may not have to go back to the old-time prayer meeting, but simply to throw it out without meeting the same need has left many churches with an internal weakness that leaves them barely able to maintain themselves. This is not a plea for the return of the old mid-week prayer meeting, for what meets the needs of one generation will often not do for the next, but the need is still there and it must be met in some manner.

It is safe to say that today there are more prayer groups outside churches than there are in churches. I know one church that has two or three small prayer groups run by the members of the church, and yet not one of them is recognized officially. Many prayer and study groups have members from numerous churches in an area. They do not attempt to become officially recognized. They meet in homes, rotating among the members, and do much good.

A group of businessmen meet in a room at the YMCA every other week for about 40 minutes during their noon hour. It may not be a formal group, but they do pray and get results. What more can anyone ask?

Red Cap 42 of Grand Central Station meets with others in an empty train coach every noon hour for prayer. Men come from all walks of life and present their problems and what is closest to their hearts and offer it up in group prayer. Miracles have happened there.

Another group of eight couples meet once a month. Each month they meet in a different home, have refreshments, enjoy good conversation, discuss things of a spiritual nature such as how to apply Christian principles in the home and in the office, listen to the experiences of members, read from some book or magazine of a religious nature and discuss it, and then pray about what is closest to their hearts. Talk of a denominational nature does not

enter in at all. The members of this group have gained not only new peace and confidence and power for themselves, but they have been thrilled to see some of their prayer projects succeed as they had hoped they would.

A group of women meet periodically at the home of a woman in whom they have confidence. This lady has been of help to many of them over the years and they recognize in her one of Christian strength and common sense. They meet at her home and study and discuss and pray. No person in this particular group belongs to the same church. They are welded together by their belief in prayer under the leadership of one they trust.

A group of students meet once a week during their noon hour to pray and study and hear the experiences of members of the group. The views of individuals in this group range all the way from fundamentalist to extreme liberal. All believe in prayer and have experienced its worth.

Some men and women who are unable to get together at a set time, because of home and business duties, telephone one another on a certain morning of the week and tell what is closest to their hearts. It is a small group so this can be done. Sometimes they all telephone one person to make it easier. When the concerns of the group are known to all, each member holds these close to God in conscious thought during the day. They will tell you it works.

A business establishment takes fifteen minutes off every morning for a short meditation and prayer.

And so it goes, many times over. Multiply these instances by the thousands and remember that most of them are not "prayer groups" in the formal sense, nor are they recognized officially by any particular church, and you begin to get a faint glimpse of spiritual leaven working through society, quickly, lovingly and efficiently. We have no idea how many of our friends belong to such groups for most people are reticent about describing these activities. But, they are there, and if we only knew it, much of the unexplained strength we find at times when we need it is the result of someone or some group holding us up in prayer.

The demise of the old-time prayer meeting did not mean that prayer went out the window. Its seed was merely scattered. The prayer need was and is still there and it will be met.

THE FIRST STEP IN STARTING A PRAYER GROUP

Dr. Clifford H. Richmond of Chevy Chase Methodist Church, Chevy Chase, Maryland, says, "One vital thing to realize in starting a prayer group is that prayer groups are not organized, they are 'born.'"

We can say the same thing about anything of lasting value. It is born, not organized. You can organize until you are blue in the face, you can utilize all the known psychological techniques to ensure success, you can spend money in advertising and get testimonials lauding it to the skies, and it will fail—UNLESS you are meeting a need. And, when you are meeting a deep human need, you are dealing with something that has a touch of the eternal in it. It is *in* time and at the same time *outside* of time. You have touched on the permanent and the eternal.

Writers and artists and scientists tell us over and over again in their memoirs about *brooding* over an idea. They go about their business day by day always with a sense of brooding over-shadowing them. They have an idea but they do not know yet how to put it across. So, unknown to anyone with whom they may be working day by day, they have this sense of *waiting* surrounding their mind. Then, one day it is BORN! They see the whole project from beginning to end and begin to work feverishly to get it on paper or on canvas. The urge had to be there first. The seed had to be planted at some time. The seed, the urge or idea, had to have time to lie dormant, to die in the unknown soil of the ethers (we may call it sub-conscious, superconscious, God, or what have you, but we really do not know where) and when it had time to lose itself in another universe, then it was born! The writer, the artist and the scientist take no credit for it. It is as if another Being had taken control of him and said, "See! This is what you have been trying to think out. Here it is. Now get to work and put it where others can see it too."

Something of the same sort must be the beginning of a real prayer group. Someone must have the urge, the brooding idea and thought, the felt-need for it. Someone must feel the need for participation in a group of seekers who are interested in the invisible God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, that which holds together all we can see and touch and smell and hear and taste. The person who has the soul's sincere desire of this kind is the seed to begin a prayer group, or else he is sure to find his place in a going group that will meet his need. The need, the desire, the urge, the brooding expectancy is the only basic foundation for starting a prayer group. When all this is there, a prayer group is BORN. Sooner or later it is BORN in answer to the wistfulness and longing of a human soul.

When a group is started in this way, nothing on earth can stop it. Just as a blade of grass, if given time, will crack a cement sidewalk because it has the irresistible forces of the universe surging through it, so a prayer group founded upon the magnet of God pulling forth the deepest desire of the human heart is irresistible. It will meet the need that brought it forth. No power on earth can stop it.

THE FIRST VISIBLE STEP

With the need there, it is true that at some time someone takes the first step to bring the group into visible activity. This step must be the result of guidance—the feeling that what you are doing is the right thing to do because something inside gives you the conviction that it is right. This is fundamental and must preface the next few paragraphs.

One minister placed this small announcement in his bulletin: “All those interested in adventuring in the Realm of Prayer, seeking to release its power in their lives and through their lives in the life of the world, are invited to meet at the church, Tuesday, 8:00 P.M.” Thirteen people came and the group was actively started.

In your associations you must know of someone who is interested in prayer. Perhaps you have heard some remark dropped in a conversation. Or, perhaps you assume it because of the type of meetings a certain person attends. Maybe you can surmise it from the books he had on his table, the pictures on the wall, or from the magazines on the end table. At the right time you could call this person on the telephone and suggest it might be a good idea to begin a group. You may know one or two others, she may know one or two, and these others may know one or two. When such a group meets for the first time, a group devoted to prayer and spiritual topics is born.

Louise Eggleston tells of going to visit those who are sick and telling them that although she does not know the answer, God knows it, and then suggests prayer. These people, in the deep distress of sickness, finding Another Presence and Help, eventually are good candidates for a prayer group. Taking the step is the advent of birth.

As to when to talk, when to ask, follow your inner guidance. Rely on God’s guidance. C.T. Studd once said, “When God wants to tell me something, He places a desire in my heart.” Follow these desires regardless of your reception; leave the result with God.

PRAYER GROUP PROCEEDINGS

“How do you conduct a prayer group? What do you do?” are questions that are both natural and heard frequently. There is often the unspoken implication that one cannot just sit there with the head bowed for the entire period, that one cannot think of enough things to pray for during a thirty minute or an hour period, and this is true unless one has had much experience. The purpose of this section is not to give hard and fast rules for procedure, and certainly not to lay down a rigid ritual, but rather to give suggestions that have proved successful in establishing groups. Once these have helped you over the initial hurdle of procedure, you will then be able to improvise and improve at will according to the interests and composition of your own group.

One more word about procedure before we actually get into specifics. Some form of procedure is definitely recommended. When there is no procedure followed, all too often the group disintegrates because of lack of a goal and preparation. Some say that there should be no preparation and no procedure because we ought to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There is no question about the fact that we must always be open to the leading of the Spirit, but remember that the Spirit can also guide us and lead us when we have some training and some talent and some skills. In fact, one might say that the Spirit can accomplish more with skilled workmen than He can with untrained laborers. The greatest works of art were produced under inspiration and guidance by *skilled* artists. Because of their very skill, when they threw themselves open to inspiration, the result far exceeded what could have been accomplished by someone entirely untrained. No training, no preparation, no ideas to discuss, no problems to pray for, no expectancy, all these lead only to spiritual anarchy. So, follow some procedure.

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In pages 75 and 76, Glenn Clark in his book *Two or Three Gathered Together* suggests a procedure that has proven itself in his experience. Without trying to quote the passages, I shall try to outline them as clearly as possible.

“... The first step to take should be to draw the thoughts of all together and bind their souls and hearts in Oneness so that the hour will be as truly spontaneous and inspired as possible.” Dr. Clark says this can be accomplished by one or more of the following methods: (1) repeating great passages of Scripture and Bible promises, or reading in unison some inspiring passage like the 91st Psalm, John 14 or the 13th chapter of First Corinthians; (2) ask the group to open their Bible to a certain chapter and read it silently, meditate upon it silently, and

then have each one read aloud the verse that meant the most to him; (3) using the hymnbook, read one hymn as a prayer with a silence between stanzas and softly sing the last stanza.

The next step Dr. Clark suggests is to have a period of sharing personal experiences of answered prayer during the past week, of spiritual discoveries, or Bible promises that have been a rock of strength.

Then comes a period of silence and the members of the group give over their problems one by one. This part is closed by giving the Lord each member of the group by name.

The last step is to mention the problems of the world that come to your mind spontaneously, and not from a prepared list. You should consider the problem that comes to mind as guidance.

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A prayer group in Wyoming composed of Protestants and Catholics find that studying a book along with the actual practice of prayer has been very helpful. One year they read a chapter a week of Agnes Sanford's *The Healing Light*. At each meeting they discussed the chapter, relating it to their own experience, and incorporating the lessons learned in their prayer practice. Their present procedure is roughly as follows. The meeting is opened with a prayer, and someone (previously selected) gives a meditation. They discuss whatever they are studying and share what they have experienced during the past week. Problems to pray about are discussed so there is unity on understanding (both world and personal problems), a period of prayer with each member praying as he or she is led by the Spirit, a period of silence and a closing prayer.

* * *

A group in St. Louis opens with a prayer, then a passage of Scripture is read. This is followed by a silence after which anyone may tell what the passage has meant to him. Then they ask for any report of the projects they have been praying about. Prayer problems for the present meeting are then mentioned and discussed. As the group agrees to a prayer project, each member writes down on a sheet of paper (this paper is placed where they will come across it every day. At least every morning and evening this prayer sheet is read and as it is read prayer is made for each item on it). When their prayer projects are completely recorded, prayer is then made for the items on the sheet one by one. Any or all members of the group may pray for each item as it is read. A complete reliance on the guidance of the Spirit is evident

about when or when not to pray. A prayer of faith and thanksgiving is then made for all those items and for all the items of prayer of the past. The meeting is closed with a prayer of praise.

* * *

In Oklahoma City a group meets by forming a circle. First they have a period of silence followed by an audible prayer. A period of sharing or discussion follows. One in the group may, for example, bring to the attention of the group a problem that is vexing him and gets the considered advice and judgment of the group. Examples of answered prayer and the reality of prayer are then given. Here passages of Scripture may be read or referred to. Then comes the consideration of people and problems to pray for. The area inside the circle is imagined as a sea of love, of the highest love, of God's perfect, healing love. As each problem and person is discussed they are completely given to "the sea of love." This group is almost completely informal, bound together by the experienced power and love of God. The leader is apt to say when someone in need of prayer is mentioned, "Let's give him a good dunking in love." Sometimes the giving of the person to the sea of love is done by actual arm movements. The group ends with prayers of thanksgiving.

* * *

Helen Shoemaker, in her little pamphlet, "Prayer Groups—And How to Conduct Them" (now out of print), suggests these steps that she found very effective.

"The group should gather in a circle, or around a table. The leader calls for silence and suggests that the members relax. The leader suggests that one or two members share with the group some experience from the past week. Then the leader offers a prayer of thanksgiving, using the Prayer Book or some manual of prayer, or offering a spontaneous prayer. After this there is a reading from the Bible, the Prayer Book or some devotional classic. This is followed by an unhurried silent meditation on what has been read. This is a time of surrendering to these great insights. A short prayer is then given and the members of the group share with each other some new illumination of insight that has come to them during the meditation. Now comes the time for intercessory prayer. For fifteen minutes intercession is made for the problems of the world. Each member of the group should participate with sentence prayers, closing with a prayer by the leader. Next, comes a period of intercessory prayer for the nations in the world, and for the church in the nations. Each member offers sentence prayers as before, and this is closed with a prayer by the leader. Then comes a prayer petition for their own personal concerns. At the end of this period of fifteen minutes the leader offers a prayer of thanksgiving and affirmation, asking the group to stand with her at the end."

* * *

Dr. Richmond of Chevy Chase Methodist Church in Chevy Chase, Maryland, suggests two procedures that his group has used effectively.

“At the beginning they used a simple method that worked well for their stage of development. They gathered in a circle, had an opening prayer followed by a period of sharing experiences of the past week. The leader then gave a brief meditation. Prayers were next offered by the members of the group for the world. These were prayers of faith. We saw God doing what we were asking and we thanked Him for it. These first meetings took less than an hour.”

The Chevy Chase group now follows a more elaborate procedure. They enter the Prayer Room which is darkened except for two candles illuminating Sallman’s “Head of Christ.” The chairs are arranged in a circle. For five minutes the leader repeats verses of Scripture with time for meditation after each verse. The lights are then turned on and fifteen minutes are spent singing. Then comes thirty minutes of sharing spiritual experiences of the preceding week. This is one of the most enriching parts of the entire program. A few announcements are made. A meditation of about 25 minutes by the leader is next. A hymn is sung, and they return to the quiet, reverent atmosphere of the beginning of the meeting. For five minutes they are very quiet as the leader recites such verses as, “Be still and know that I am God.” Now for about thirty minutes they go into the prayer period. All these prayers by members of the group are prayers of faith. Here they pray for the sick, the world, the oppressed and all other concerns. This part is ended by standing in a circle holding hands as they recite in unison the prayer of St. Patrick, “Christ with me, Christ before me, etc.” Sometimes they end this period by singing softly a great hymn or thought such as, “God clothes the world safely round with Infinite Love and Wisdom.” The meeting ends with the singing of the Doxology.

* * *

As we can see, there is no set pattern for conducting a prayer group. Do not follow a procedure slavishly. Improvise to fit the needs, temperament and interests of your own group, but follow some procedure.

While procedure is important, let us never forget for one minute the most important foundation of a prayer group. Without these stones to make the foundation, all the techniques in the world will fail. We must have the inner harmony of complete faith. We must be honest and sincere with each other. A prayer group is no place for gaining social recognition or recognition as a leader. We must come in the spirit of humility, submitting ourselves to the will

of God and to the laws of the Spirit. And, we must come together in love, a love that overcomes the barriers of color, social position, economic level, or anything else. And, lastly, we must be completely expectant, confident that God is there, that He hears and that He will act! These are the important things, much more important than procedures.

THE SIZE OF A PRAYER GROUP

The size of a prayer group may seem like an important item to consider, but as a matter of fact it is probably the least important aspect of the entire subject. Some may think that in order to have a “successful” prayer group it ought to be of considerable size. The ambition to be “successful” and to measure that success by numbers is one of the surest ways to kill whatever power there is in a prayer group. We Americans tend to assume that anything “big” is successful. The more money we spend, the greater the show, the more talk there is about a project, the publicity we get, the more successful we think it is. We ought to consider, however, that the most important things in life never get newspaper headlines. The average home never makes headlines because the average home is law abiding. The average church program never gets in the newspaper. It is such a common thing! Hospitals seldom make headlines because we take them for granted. And, what about the moon and the stars and the sun? Seldom do they ever make the papers. Yet, who would say all those things are not important? So never measure success by numbers nor by the amount of talk and publicity you get.

Most prayer groups run from four to twenty. The average is likely ten or twelve. In fact, one might say go above ten or twelve at your own peril. We are assuming, of course, that you want every member to participate. After all, complete participation is what we are striving for. Simply to have another group where everyone comes to listen to a neat little lecture and to hear a tidy little (or long) prayer, is not the purpose at all. We have plenty of opportunity for this sort of thing, and while it is good in its place, let us keep it in its place.

You can start a prayer group with two or three. The main thing to look for is complete trust, complete honesty, complete faith, complete belief. If you have these and there are only two members, you and another soul partner, you are very successful. As Glenn Clark says, “This is so tremendously important that no effort should be made to carry on such a group until this is assured. Far better to limit the group to two or three rather than include one single person whose antagonism, egotism or indifference might block the voice of the Spirit. Jesus Himself considered this so important that He frequently reduced His twelve to three—the first little ‘prayer cell’ of Christendom. But this little group generated so much power that it started forces in motion that have changed the world.”

Many have found that when you go beyond ten or twelve the group becomes so unwieldy that it becomes almost impossible to achieve the harmony, unity, participation and love that we must have if we are to find it worthwhile to meet at all. Some groups have even set a limit on the number they will permit in a group. When the group reaches a certain number, it is divided into two groups. In this way the power of the Spirit multiplies itself.

If there were one important admonition of the particular phase that we should make it would be: Keep it small!

THE GROWTH OF A PRAYER GROUP

The desire to have a prayer group grow in numbers is not always striving to inflate our own ego. The members of a group may be receiving so much good from it that they selfishly want to share their bounty of good with others. There is nothing wrong with this at all, so a word on how a prayer group grows has its proper place.

Members of Louise Eggleston's prayer group call regularly on the sick. Naturally these people remember it, and many of them become members of the group when they have recovered and thought about it. We may assume that a sick person is visited regularly for prayer, and if so then undoubtedly friendships spring up and interests in prayer are awakened. Their joining the prayer group is then a normal and natural outflow of their own interest and gratitude.

Most groups grow by word of mouth. In our everyday associations we meet people every now and then who show an interest in spiritual topics. From some chance remark dropped during a conversation we can tell if the person would be interested. The thing to do then is to ask the person *if you feel led to do so*. Some will welcome it and others will not be interested. Do not feel crushed or embarrassed if you meet with refusal. This "is your ego showing." Your responsibility is to be loyal and true to the moving of the Spirit within you.

Many groups contribute to works of charity (this will be touched later) and very often because of their donations, or help in any direction, attention is drawn to them. Someone might ask a member what kind of a group they are, and there is the opportunity.

While we are mentioning the few ways a prayer group grows, we ought also to mention that the personnel of a group changes not only by growing but also by having members drop out. When this happens a group ought always to hold that member in prayer and love. His

leaving may be his guidance and leading to something that he needs in order to grow. Every group ought to regularly bless all its members; past, present and future.

If the group helps in any social project, such as group work in a settlement, old folks home, visiting mental institutions, etc., they will as a matter of course attract new members who see their good works and want to be associated.

And, lastly, pray as a group that the right people will be led to join the group.

PRAYER GROUP PROJECTS

Many groups find that their periods of prayer lead to other activities that seem to be the natural outflow of their prayers.

One group collects clothing and sends it to Germany [which was still recovering from World War II]. Such a project is usually limited to members of the group, but at times these collections are also sought from friends and neighbors.

Another group has built up and sponsored a lending library of deeply devotional books. These books are lent to members of the group and to others outside the group—such as those confined by illness.

Through the study and practice of group prayer, some groups find that a healing group comes naturally. In most cases the healing group is but a prayer group emphasizing healing by prayer and faith. They study of such books as *The Healing Light* by Agnes Sanford, *Everyman's Search* by Rebecca Beard and others of a similar nature. As such books stress prayer above everything else, such a group fits in nicely with a regular prayer group. Other groups simply make healing by prayer part of their regular prayer group.

Other groups do not have such formal projects, but when something comes up which they think should receive their help, they give it. One group did not think that the local newspaper was giving adequate or just coverage to constructive news items, such as reports from the U.N., so they formed a committee and called on the editor of the paper. This particular editor was very open to their suggestions, agreed with them on the publication of constructive news, and a friendship was made.

Sometimes a group will take up an offering for a missionary or for a mission program. One group did this and mailed the money to India. Months later they received a letter from the

mission station that the entire staff had been in extreme financial straits and had been praying for a specific sum of money. The amount from the prayer group was the exact amount! Though the check had been mailed before the staff of the mission station prayed, and before they even knew they would be in extreme need, God in His loving foresight had chosen this particular group as His instrument of abundance.

One men's group is particularly interested in the alcoholic, and on certain nights of the week they go and visit the taverns where they will find those in need of help. Some of the men in this group are former alcoholics and know how to approach men of this type. Sometimes wives of alcoholics call them up for help. This group sponsors the local A.A.

These are but a few of the activities that prayer groups get into. The main thing to remember is that whatever your group decides to do ought to be done entirely through guidance. The prayer group is not a place for some to force their pet projects. If it needs to be forced, then drop it immediately. If the group does not warm to your ideas, then be big enough not to insist. When the right thing comes along, your group will know it, and it will fit the group perfectly.

BOOKS TO AID PRAYER GROUPS

The books listed below are not primarily for "groups." Some of them have references to groups, but they apply to groups and to individuals. If the individuals have the right attitude, the proper faith, adequate spiritual foundation of knowledge in the Bible and history, and complete dedication to Christ, then the *group* has the ingredients to be successful. Just as participation in a group saves us from personal prejudice and bias, good books have the same function in that they give us new ideas to build into our spiritual body. The world of good spiritual books is a wonderful world and if you do not know it, begin right now for it is something that knows no age limit and one that does not care about your surroundings. When you have sampled some of these books, your own interest will carry you on.

[The following list of books was last updated in 1960 and thus includes some books that are out of print. However, many of them are still available through used book sources including those on the internet. If you cannot find a book you want to read, contact the United Prayer Tower and we will try to help you. Some current books are also listed as "Recommended Books on Prayer" at <http://www.unitedprayertower.org/recommended-books-on-prayer.html>].

Prayer The Mightiest Force in the World, Frank Laubach
You Are My Friends, Frank Laubach
The Way, E. Stanley Jones
The Way to Power and Poise, E. Stanley Jones
The Sermon on the Mount, Emmet Fox
The Transforming Friendship, Leslie Weatherhead
His Life and Ours, Leslie Weatherhead
This is the Victory, Leslie Weatherhead
In Quest of a Kingdom, Leslie Weatherhead
Manifest Victory, J. Rufus Moseley
Perfect Everything, J. Rufus Moseley
Love Can Open Prison Doors, Starr Daily
Recovery, Starr Daily
The Healing Light, Agnes Sanford
Oh, Watchman, Agnes Sanford
The Doctor Alone Can't Cure You, Rolf Alexander
First Steps in Prayer, Kermit Olsen
How to Find Health through Prayer, Glenn Clark
I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes, Glenn Clark
Two or Three Gathered Together, Glenn Clark
The Soul's Sincere Desire, Glenn Clark
Fishers of Men, Glenn Clark
What Would Jesus Do? Glenn Clark
The Way, the Truth and the Life, Glenn Clark
The Three Meanings, Harry Emerson Fosdick
The Greatest Thing in the World, Henry Drummond
Beyond Personality, C.S. Lewis
Change Your Life through Prayer, Stella Mann
Change Your Life through Love, Stella Mann
The Dark Night of the Soul, Georgia Harkness
Faith Is Power, Daniel A. Poling
Faith Can Master Fear, G. Ernest Thomas
Gaining the Faith You Need, James Gordon Gilkey
The Great Answer, Margaret Runbeck
Answer Without Ceasing, Margaret Runbeck
He Lives, Austin Pardue
Prayer Works, Austin Pardue

A Guide to Confident Living, Norman Vincent Peale
Guideposts, Norman Vincent Peale
New Guideposts, Norman Vincent Peale
A Guide to True Peace, Fenelon, Guyon, and Molinos
Gandi's Autobiography
Man Does Not Stand Alone, C. Cressey Morrison
The Loneliest Journey, Frances I. Jackson
Kagawa, William Axling
More Than We Are, Margueritte Harmon Bro
Teach Us to Pray, Charles Francis Whiston
Prayer, Alexis Carrel
Way of Praying, Muriel Lester
A Testament of Devotion, Thomas R. Kelly
The Way of Holy Affection, Starr Daily
God's Reach, Glenn Clark
Every Man's Reach, Rebecca Beard
Every Man's Goal, Rebecca Beard