

THE PRAYER-DRIVEN CHURCH PLANT

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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## **Introductory Comments**

**The following is an abridged copy of my dissertation on prayer and church planting.**

**Because the style is necessarily more academic, I deleted sections on study design and added a few illustrations to make the paper more reader friendly. I make no claim to be a good writer, so you can be the judge of whether the final product is reader friendly. I added and deleted quickly and take full responsibility for any content, spelling, or grammatical errors. I pray you'll find the information helpful.**

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## Things Go Wrong

Things go wrong. In 1998, I was working in the surgical unit of a large hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. I had the privilege of working with some of the finest and funniest people I've ever known. No pun intended, but surgical personnel are great cut-ups. One of the anesthesiologists, Dr. Golden, had a wonderful sense of humor so I had little reservation about playing a well worn and corny practical joke on him. The gag goes like this. As the victim approaches, you rub your neck like you have a terrible sore throat. "What's wrong?" asks the victim.

"I think I've got that dog fever that's going around."

"Dog fever?"

"Yes, dog fever. One of the symptoms is a swollen gland just under the jaw. Feel right here" (pointing to the alleged swollen gland).

As Dr. Golden compassionately reached out to palpate the "swollen gland", I barked ferociously – hence the name, dog fever. The reaction was better than I could have dreamed. His face contorted in fear and he fell back on the floor. As quickly as he hit the floor, he started laughing. He knew that he had been had and he loved it. He immediately attempted to persuade me that I should play the joke on Dr. Lewis. This is where everything went horribly wrong.

Dr. Lewis is a great guy and a very skilled physician, but his sense of humor is not quite as accessible as Dr. Golden's. In fact, Dr. Lewis is a pretty serious guy. He was the president of the anesthesia group and a cardio-thoracic anesthesiologist. I should never have agreed to pull this joke on Dr. Lewis. To be fair, I resisted Dr. Golden's

overtures at least once before caving in to the pressure.

Dr. Lewis was sitting in a rolling chair in the O.R. hallway. In my defense, he was leaning against the wall, precariously balancing the rolling chair on two wheels. “How’s it going, Slagle?” I didn’t even have to open the door to this joke. He was begging for it.

“Not too good. I think I’ve got that dog fever.”

“Dog fever? What’s that?”

I’ll skip to the chase. I walked over to Dr. Lewis and he reached out with the skilled hand of a concerned practitioner. I actually felt a tinge of guilt, but not nearly as much as I would feel in a few more minutes. Just as his finger touched my throat, I let out a bark that you could have heard in the morgue. At this moment, a cascade of events followed that didn’t fully conclude until 2 a.m. in the emergency room. The chair flew out from under Dr. Lewis. As his head smacked against the concrete wall, blood sprayed over that wall like a tomato. He was flailing his arms trying to break the fall and actually dislocated his shoulder. To make matters worse, the blood was not oozing from his head, but pumping out in rhythmic bursts. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the importance of this fine distinction, oozing blood is venous and spurting blood is arterial. That’s bad. Dr. Lewis was in an immense amount of pain but fully conscious and enraged. As nurses and other doctors closed in to help him, he snarled, “Back off!” He then wrenched his dislocated shoulder back into place and accepted a compress to stop the bleeding. Offering one last sharp glance back at me, he walked himself down to the emergency room for stitches. Things go wrong.

Church planting is a fertile field of opportunities for things to go wrong and challenges the most gifted gospel workers. In October 2002, God called me to plant a

church in Atlanta, Georgia. At the encouragement of two church planters, I began two important processes: planning for the church plant and developing my prayer life. The second of these two initiatives, prayer, proved the most important.

As I began planning, I determined that I needed a worship leader, money, a core team of mature believers, a place to meet, a source of income for my family, and a home in the church-planting area. In a relatively short time, I secured funding from a church and a denominational agency, two gifted worship leaders, a site for worship, and a home. Within a matter of weeks, the promises of a worship site, a home, and funding evaporated. That was just the beginning.

I will never forget the meeting. My primary worship leader was one of the most gifted individuals I've ever known. To this day, I believe he could have a lucrative career in the music industry if he desired as much. A solid Christian, he was very excited about the opportunity to start a missional church in this extremely un-churched community. I came home to Atlanta for the first "interest meeting" in Veritas Church. This was to be our first real effort at gathering a core team of believers. My previous church had graciously allowed me to return to invite individuals to come and be on the core team of the plant. Just prior to the meeting my worship leader approached me and said, "I need a couple of minutes after the meeting." I gave little thought to this meeting as my expectations were sky-high for this recruitment opportunity. Several people had called to say that as many as fifty people were expressing serious interest. Ask any church planter how they would feel about a solid core team of fifty mission-minded believers. I was already envisioning a church busting out of the gates on launch day.

Fifteen people attended the meeting. Many of the attendees were lukewarm or less

in their desire to venture into Atlanta to plant a missional church. I worked hard at exhibiting a façade of enthusiasm, but could barely keep my head up. Where were all those enthusiastic mission-minded people? As the last person walked out the door patting me on the back like I was one of the bereaved at a funeral home, my worship leader reminded me of our meeting. At least he was on board. We sat down in an empty office and I saw his speech before he gave it. As he put his hand on his head and slumped down in his chair, he said, “David, I can’t go with you.” Things go wrong.

In April 2004, my family and I were within one month of returning to Atlanta to begin planting, and our situation had changed little. In addition to the aforementioned lack of resources, we had been unable to sell our home, I had not been able to secure employment, and we had no place to live. We lacked resources and certainty and our workload seemed to increase daily.

In a matter of three days, my weekly schedule moved from a relatively undemanding day of schoolwork followed by several relaxing hours with my wife and son, to working bi-vocationally as a registered nurse and church planter. For three days of each week, I awakened early and worked several hours at a local medical clinic. Upon arriving home in the evening, I attempted to give two to three hours to church-related work. I squeezed sermon preparation in wherever I could and gave one to two days attempting to train leaders and gather a core team in this new and resistant city. Crises that vied for my attention seemed to develop almost daily.

On one occasion, my wife and I went to meet the tenants of the church building we planned to rent. This group worshipped in the facility on Sunday mornings and we planned to worship on Sunday evenings. The leadership described this meeting as a

formality in which I would receive a key to the building and an alarm code. I brought my wife with me, hoping to meet another group of kingdom-minded brothers and sisters in Christ. The pastor verbally accosted us before we could even introduce ourselves. He and the nine elders with him explained that our church was not welcome in this facility. The event stung and saddened my wife and me. We were within days of having our first worship gathering in this facility and suddenly we had nowhere to go. This calamity was only one of what became a growing list of issues that demanded time, energy, and perseverance. Things go wrong.

Though the fruits of my planning seemed to be paying few dividends, the results of a more mature prayer life were abundant. Despite our uncertain circumstances, my wife and I enjoyed a sense of peace and courage that defies logic.

Today, at 1½ years into the church plant in Atlanta, I have become acquainted with many church planters and have come to see that my experience is not unique. Church planting is difficult. Things go wrong. The process is fraught with uncertainty, obstacles, and disappointment. Resources are often in short supply. During these times, the church planter requires the faith that comes from a developed prayer life. While church planters and their families can continue without material resources, they cannot continue without a prayer life, which produces a deep and abiding communion with God.

### **The Problem**

While prayer is essential to navigate the multiple challenges of church planting, the harried pace and the enormous task list create an ongoing temptation for church planters to value activity over communion with the Lord. As a story from Luke 10 reveals, busyness has long been a temptation for those who serve Jesus. Jesus comes to

be a guest in the home of Mary and Martha. As Mary seeks to enjoy being still in the presence of Christ, her sister, Martha, hurries about the house in a frenzy of activity. The issue is not that Martha is engaged in sinful activity but that she neglects a more profitable endeavor. Luke 10:40 reads, “But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made” (NIV). Martha is indignant. She cannot conceive that Mary’s activity is good or useful. When she can no longer contain her frustration, Martha says, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40). Martha’s outburst accuses both Jesus and Mary. Martha accuses Mary of slothfulness and Jesus of apathy. “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). The Son of God is a guest in her home and she chooses activity over enjoying intimate communion with Jesus. Mary, by contrast, chooses to sit and listen at feet of Jesus. Jesus’ response is instructive. He watches one servant in frenzied activity and one servant enjoying his company and makes a distinction. Mary, who was enjoying intimate communion with him, had “chosen what is better” (Luke 10:42).

Church planting is a formidable task, and the church planter regularly faces the temptation to choose more activity over “what is better” (Luke 10:42). Steve Sjogren, the planter and former pastor of Cincinnati Vineyard Church, had the opportunity to meet and interview noted business and leadership consultant Peter Drucker. Drucker explained to Sjogren that after considering several different occupations, he viewed church planting as “the hardest job on Earth” (qtd. in Sjogren and Lewin 92). In an article in *Evangelism Missions Quarterly*, Samuel Mateer describes a fictitious but probable church-planting

scenario in which a floundering church planter begins to wonder aloud at his predicament. He begins to consider the possibility that God desires a relationship with him rather than a flurry of activity and new initiatives. Mateer writes, “God just wanted him. Before all else God’s desire was to restore in him the fellowship lost in Eden, and that everything that the missionary would ever want or do or be would come from that relationship” (205). Church planters face a variety of difficulties, which beg for more attention and could pull them away from the important practice of prayer. The following is a brief inventory of realistic and likely challenges that face church planters as they begin the planting process.

### **The Emotional Challenge**

Typical church planters assume many roles. They deliver pastoral care to those in need. Most pastors deliver a sermon each Sunday. In addition to these responsibilities, church planters face leadership challenges on a daily basis. Planting pastors juggle a number of responsibilities that include outreach, discipleship, core team development, securing rental space, and fund-raising. In the midst of these responsibilities, church planters become well acquainted with disappointment and rejection. Communicating to church planters, Steve Sjogren and Rob Lewin write about the emotional toll. The authors recommend that planting pastors should secure a counselor to help them deal with the regular encounters with rejection. Sjogren and Lewin write, “If you don’t need a therapist now, you very well might need one before you go much further down the path as a church planter. Before long you will have experienced significant rejection” (110). Rejection and perceived failure can combine to assault the emotional well-being of planting pastors. Lurking in the thoughts of church planters is the recognition that their

church plant could fail. While the identity of church planters connects directly to their task, church planters must be diligent to ensure they do not tie their well-being to the success or failure of the church plant.

### **The Spiritual Challenge**

The emotional stress of planting mingles with spiritual stress. Church planters believe they are actively pursuing God's will for their life. They may have sacrificed a lucrative career in another field or a secure staff position in a church. They may have moved to a new place far from home and family. Church planters make great sacrifices for the kingdom of God. As rental arrangements fall through, people fail to keep commitments, and expectations go unmet, church planters may be tempted to wonder why God is withholding blessings and protection. One would think church planting is an endeavor God would will to succeed. Pastors also run the risk of continuing to provide for the spiritual needs of others while neglecting their own spiritual needs. In these situations, both the pastors and those they shepherd suffer spiritually. In an interview, Rev. Danny Morris makes the following comments when reflecting upon his lack of spiritual well-being during his first church-planting experience. He says, "I felt good about my success. Yet I had dried up spiritually in the process. The hardest thing in any week was to get into the pulpit. I had nothing worthwhile to say. It was devastating" (23). The discouraging moments that inevitably accompany church planting will test the faith of the most mature Christian.

### **The Family Challenge**

The challenges mentioned thus far are limited to the actual task of church planting and do not begin to address family concerns. The time demands placed upon church

planters significantly affect planting pastors' spouses and children. Our first child, Jack, was five when we started planting the church. He was just beginning to play sports and connect more with dad than with mom. He always wanted to be with me, walk like me, dress like me, talk like me. His thirst for my attention was soaring upward as quickly as my calendar was filling up. Every time I had to say, "Not now", I looked into the future at a painful vision of my son accepting his diploma and leaving home. I agonized over choices between family and church planting responsibilities. Diminished family time is a common complaint among the families of pastors. Wayne Gordon, the pastor of Lawndale Community Church in Chicago, writes about a time in his life in which he felt increasingly unable to reign in a hectic schedule:

After a few weeks of this schedule, I paid the price. I wasn't just tired; my body screamed for rest. I felt emotionally distant from my wife and children, and they were obviously unhappy about not getting more of my time. Worst of all, I felt as though God was a star system away. (65)

Church planters carry all the demands of a senior pastor as well as an entrepreneur. Even the most dedicated individuals will battle daily with opportunities and emergencies that compete for time with family. The lack of staff and the level of need in the typical church plant create an environment ripe for work overload. The tendency of many church planters to be driven individuals further complicates family dynamics. The family of the church planter may feel the effects of an absent parent.

### **The Financial Challenge**

Financial stressors will influence the family of the church planter. Many planting pastors live on a meager income. Financial disaster can be as close as the next unexpected visit to the auto mechanic or the doctor's office. We were hoping that my wife could get a job teaching at our son's school in Atlanta. At the last minute, the offer evaporated. I was

not concerned. As a registered nurse, I knew that I could easily get a job that paid well. Ultimately, I discovered that no one was very interested in hiring a part-time nurse who had been out of the field for four years and could not work Sundays. Two weeks before coming back to Atlanta, God supplied me with a wonderful job. We still faced an issue, though, that poses a problem for a significant number of church planters. We had no health insurance. Between the high costs of individual plans and the refusals because of pre-existing conditions, finding coverage outside of a group plan was staggeringly difficult. We finally opted for a health savings account, which, at the time of this writing, is still an option worth investigating. Financial stressors can become emotional stressors that threaten to destroy a family and a church plant.

### **The Cultural Challenge**

The cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity also proves a formidable challenge. Eddie Gibbs joins a chorus of authors who point to the rapidly changing culture as a potential barrier to church planters who hope to reach their community. Prior to 1960, the majority of Americans attended church and had a favorable opinion of Christianity. Gibbs writes about the diminishing influence of church in America. Gibbs writes, “During the past four decades, churches have found themselves increasingly marginalized and their influence on society increasingly weakened. The church’s loss of social strength has revealed its spiritual impoverishment so that there is a loss of nerve” (10).

The Enlightenment era informed the values and presuppositions of modernity. The characteristics of modernity included a confidence in science and technology to solve the problems of humankind (Kimball 44; Webber 43). Despite the best efforts of the

modern era, the world is still afflicted with disease and war. While the term “postmodernist” is not synonymous with the designations such as Baby Buster, Generation X, or Generation Y, the individuals in these generational groups markedly influence postmodern culture. These individuals are understandably skeptical of the confidence their forebears placed in science and technology. Their skepticism extends to many other areas of life as well. They have watched their parents divorce in record numbers.

Those who represent the Christian faith in the minds of postmoderns have proven to be a disappointment. Many in the postmodern era came of age when televangelists broadcast their hypocrisy for the world to see (Kimball 88). Most recently, the Catholic Church has been embroiled in controversies surrounding pedophile priests and attendant reluctance to deal assertively with the crisis. The Catholic Church has since taken aggressive steps to deal with this issue, but the effects of the crisis are incalculable. The current level of attendance in mainline churches in the United States reflects that the Church has become irrelevant in the lives of many Americans.

Many individuals born in this era are indifferent at best and hostile at worst regarding the Christian faith. Commenting on the difficulty of planting churches in the postmodern culture today, a church planter quoted by Ed Stetzer states, “Postmodern seekers have never been to church (They’re not ‘coming back’ like modern seekers). They’ve been educated in politically correct schools that Christianity is bigoted and small minded” (131). Leslie Newbigin says that the philosophy of the postmodern culture can be characterized this way: “Only an open mind can hope to reach the truth, and dogma is the enemy” (7). Church planters willing to preach the exclusive claims of Christ meet no

little resistance from the flourishing pluralist culture of America.

### **A Challenging Life and a Prayer Life**

Henri Nouwen considers how pastors strive for success and importance. Referring to Jesus, he writes, “He asks us to move from a concern for relevance to a life of prayer” (Name 71). Against a backdrop of emotional, spiritual, financial, familial, and cultural trials, church planters face the same choice put before Martha and Mary. The planter must choose to devote energy to the daily task list or choose that which is better. To sacrifice prayer in favor of activity, however, is to sacrifice unity (John 17:11), boldness (Acts 4:31), a harvest (Matt. 9:38), growth (Eph. 1:17), open doors (Col. 4:3), wisdom (Jas. 1:5), courage (2 Thess. 2:16), and peace (Phil. 4:6-7). Prayer also develops faith. Stetzer expounds upon the importance of faith in the life of the planting pastor: “Though every pastor needs faith, the church planter needs extraordinary faith... the church planter who does not have faith that God is planting a church through his efforts should not be a planter” (81).

Church planters can learn a great deal from the faithful men and women of Scripture. E. M. Bounds notes that prayer uniformly precedes the great acts of faith in Scripture. Consider the following prayers of the saints. Bounds notes that Joshua prays in battle and lengthens the day and Hannah’s prayers result in the birth of the great prophet, Samuel (377, 79). The Israelites cry out to God and God frees them from Egyptian bondage. Repeatedly in the book of Judges, the Israelites cry out to God and he sends them deliverers such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. On Mount Carmel, the servants of Ahab engage in a frenzy of activity without result. The writer of 1 Kings recounts God’s response to Elijah’s prayers: “Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the

Sacrifice. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (1 Kings 18:36-39). When the Israelites were fighting the Hagarites, the author of 1 Chronicles notes, “God handed the Hagarites and all their allies over to them, because they cried out to him during the battle. He answered their prayers, because they trusted in him” (5:20). Prayer and faith are inextricably connected.

In view of the biblical assurance of the power of prayer to overcome, sustain, encourage, and bear fruit, one would expect prayer to be the first priority of church planters. Busyness frequently pushed the discipline of prayer to the periphery. Donald S. Whitney writes, “Even with the consistent evaluation of priorities, the godly person will continue to be a busy person. However, the busy person is also the one most tempted to lapse in the very disciplines that lead to Godliness” (227). Bounds comments on this tendency as it goes to the pressing need to raise funds: “All our plans and devices drive toward the one end of raising money, not to quicken faith and promote prayer” (369). Bounds states that church leaders behave as if money is the means to spiritual success. The irony, he argues, is that just the opposite is true. Bounds writes, “If we get the church involved in the business of praying, and thus secure the spirit of missions, the money will more than likely come as a matter of course” (369). While Bounds’ words ring true, many of the people attempting to start a church are not simply raising money for a new church building or a second church bus, but a salary that will pay for groceries, shelter, and medical bills. The church leader wants to believe Bounds’ assurances and the assurances of Scripture, but as the planting process begins, the questions of trust, reliability, and faith are no longer theoretical. The stakes are personal and feel higher as planters come home and look into the real faces of family members who are counting on

them to make a real living.

Servants who venture forth into an uncertain future to gather a new local body of believers face a dilemma common to all who would follow Jesus. They must choose to live a life of dependent communion with God, or allow the pressures of this chosen life to drive them to labor independently of God. Henry Blackaby notes that spiritual leaders frequently allow the cares of this world to diminish time spent with God. He writes, “Everything spiritual leaders do should flow out of their relationship with God. ... When spiritual leaders become disoriented to God, they imperil their organizations. Unfortunately, for most leaders it is easy to allow other activities to preempt time with God” (212). Speaking of his greatest temptation in ministry, Salvation Army officer Brengle says, “It’s the temptation to want to do something for God each day before I’ve first spent time with Him” (qtd. in Seamands 18). P. T. Forsyth echoed these sentiments: “It is possible to be so active in the service of Christ as to forget to love him. [Pastors] get in front of him by the multiplicity of their own works. It will ruin you if you do” (qtd. in Escott 108). Forsyth’s words certainly hold true for the church planter. Every seminar promises a new activity, church growth technique, or marketing gimmick that will propel the local church toward success. George Barna writes about the misplaced confidence of church leaders: “The Church has relied upon greater sums of money, better techniques, bigger numbers and facilities, and more impressive credentials. ... These elements have failed us; in our efforts to serve God, we have crowded out God himself” (37). Ministry that does not have God as its source of power and provision does not belong to God.

Minimal resources and great demands upon church planters’ time engender a sense of frantic urgency that can tempt planting pastors to devote less and less time to

prayer. Calvin Miller addresses this issue in a chapter entitled, “Breaking the Tyranny of the Urgent.” Grieving the tendency to respond slavishly to the clock, Miller notes, “John Wesley often attributed his power in preaching to prayer that lost itself in such heavy adoration that it never watched the clock” (54). He refers to a particular night in 1738 when John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitfield prayed until 3:00 a.m. At that point, Wesley notes in his journal, “[T]he power of God came mightily upon us so that many cried out for exceeding joy and fell to the ground” (qtd. in Miller 54). The Wesley brothers and George Whitfield understood the value of prayer. Competing pursuits that are not always ignoble, but frequently less essential, perpetually challenge prayer as the most worthy endeavor.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Prayer is the primary role of church planters and their core team. Jesus taught that God provides the harvest and the workers in response to the prayers of the saints (Matt. 9:38). Neil Cole writes, “The more prayers we offer, the more workers we’ll see. The more workers raised up, the greater the harvest” (4). Prayer provides the wisdom and understanding necessary to deal with the monumental cultural shifts created by the advent of postmodernity. Busyness is an enemy to prayer, and church planters’ lives are replete with busy work. In light of the high value of prayer and the ever-present demands that oppose the discipline, the purpose of this study is to explore the value of prayer in the church-planting effort as indicated in the life of the church planter and the core team. This study does not assume prayerlessness on the part of the church planter, but does acknowledge the overwhelming list of responsibilities afforded by church planting and strong enticement to give more and more attention to the same. Ralph Moore writes about

the importance of an implemented plan of prayer during the planting phase of a local church: “If anyone plans to start a new church, they had better have a group of honest friends praying. ...A group of people who pray is the foundation of a core ministry team” (78).

Several reasons exist for implementing an organized plan of prayer. First, church planting is clearly one of the most arduous tasks in the kingdom. Second, church planting is the single most effective method for reaching pre-Christian people (Wagner 11). Finally, Jesus indicates his deep affection for the church when he describes the Church as the bride and the body. The saints share in his affection for the Church when they intercede on its behalf.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will serve to guide the study.

#### **Research Question 1**

What were the prayer beliefs and practices of the church planter before and after the church plant began?

#### **Research Question 2**

Which prayer resources, such as events, books, individuals, or sermons, influenced or reinforced the beliefs and practices of the church planter?

#### **Research Question 3**

What were the benefits of prayer for the planting pastor’s life during the planting phase?

#### **Research Question 4**

How did the planting pastor cultivate and evaluate the beliefs and practices of

prayer by the core team?

### **Definition of Terms**

Definitions for the principal terms in this study are as follows.

#### **Prayer**

*Prayer* is communion with God.

#### **Church Planter**

*Church planter* is one who responds to God's call to establish a new local church and is actively engaging in the process of church planting.

#### **Core Team**

*Core team* is the group of individuals who form a team alongside the church planter for the purpose of planting a church.

#### **Population and Sample**

The population for this study consisted of thirty North American male pastors who planted Protestant churches in the last ten years and have moved beyond the core team development phase and into the public worship phase.

### **Biblical, Theological, and Historical Foundations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the value of prayer in the church-planting effort as indicated in the life of the church planter and the core team. Missiology and the theology of prayer represent the theological foundation for this study.

The book of Acts recounts the original missionary efforts of the Church. Because Acts details the church-planting practices of Paul, Barnabas, and others, key passages from Acts provided biblical, theological, and historical support for this study. While Acts served as the primary source, I referenced other passages from Scripture that explicitly

affirm what Acts implies. The words and examples of Jesus, Paul, and other modern-day theologians and practitioners regarding prayer also provided biblical, theological, and historical support for this study.

The great temptation of church planters is to choose activity over prayer. When enthusiasm for outreach efforts are flagging and the church is not experiencing growth, pastors are tempted to spend more time developing a marketing campaign. Jesus' answer, however, is to give time to prayer. In Matthew 9:27, Jesus laments that the potential evangelistic harvest is great, but the number of individuals prepared to disciple the harvest is inadequate. He implores his followers, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:27). Resources for church planters are often scarce. As the launch date approaches and pastors require financial resources, a salary, rental space, and advertising, they might be tempted to sacrifice prayer time in favor of fundraising.

Hardships and discouraging news often assail planting pastors. Paul, the original church planter, would certainly empathize. Paul recounted horrific trials he endured while planting churches across Asia Minor. The weight of trials and disappointing news will crush planting pastors who have not learned to depend upon prayer. Prayer is foundational in the life of the Church. The infant Church in Acts was devoted to prayer. Prayer is the essential discipline for church planters. Chapter 2 examines in more depth the biblical, theological, and historical foundations for this research project.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Church planting is a missiological endeavor and cannot succeed apart from prayer. The following review of the literature considers works on prayer and church planting. From this literature, I established a foundation for the study and determined the role of prayer during the planting phase of a local church. While I have utilized non-biblical sources for this study, their contribution remains secondary to the role of Scripture.

### **Biblical and Theological Foundations**

The purpose of this study is to explore the value of prayer in the church-planting effort as indicated in the life of the church planter and the core team. Church-planting is mission work. Missiology and the theology of prayer represent the theological foundation for this study. This study focuses on the church planter and the core team in the phase of church planting up to the public launch. Christians typically make up the core team. The planter gathers these individuals and trains them as participants in the upcoming missional effort; therefore, much of the evangelistic work begins after the launch. The role of prayer in the harvest is important but not in the timeframe of this study.

#### **The Sending God**

“Go” is the ubiquitous directive of God in Scripture. The Scriptures present God as a sending God who continually asks his servants to go. To Abraham, God said, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Darrell L. Guder et al. allude to the sending nature of God when they state that Yahweh is a “missionary God” (4). Gruder et al. state that God has always

taken the initiative in bringing people to himself. They write, “Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘*Mission*’ means ‘*sending*,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history” (4).

The mission of the church is what theologians such as Stuart Murray refer to as the *missio Dei*. Murray states that missiologists use this phrase to communicate the conviction that “mission is not the invention, responsibility, or program of human beings, but flows from the character and purposes of God” (39). Gospel workers, no matter how gifted, cannot accomplish God’s mission without God’s intervention.

Several biblical passages that identify God as a sending God. In Genesis 12:2-3, God blessed Abraham and his seed to be a blessing to the world. God sent forth a host of prophets to Israel and Judah encouraging them to repent. In Isaiah 6:8, Isaiah describes a loving God searching for someone to go and bring a message of warning to Judah. Isaiah writes, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’” The first two verses in the book of Jonah read, “The word of the LORD comes to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’” The Bible is a historical record of servants collaborating with God as he sends them to participate in the redemptive process.

### **The Sent Ones**

The Gospels and the book of Acts recount the origin and work of the apostles or “sent ones.” *Apostle* is a key word in the New Testament. Gerald F. Hawthorne discusses the New Testament apostle: “We note sayings which reveal Jesus’ consciousness that he was ‘sent.’ He said: ‘whoever receives me receives ... him who sent (*aposteilanta*) me’”

(47).

In the New Testament, Jesus' final directive to the twelve disciples, recorded in Matthew 28:19-20, begins with the command to "go." Acts 10 reveals that God's love extends beyond the Jews. When Peter went up to the rooftop to pray, God gave him a vision and told him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (Acts 10:19-20). God sent Peter to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, to bring the gospel to his home. As Peter took the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul, Barnabas, and other "sent ones" began to spread the gospel to the world.

### **Jesus and the Missional Church**

Jesus defines his purpose in coming to earth in missional terms when he says, "The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus' primary means to "seek and save what was lost" was and is the Church. Jesus made explicit reference to the power and importance of the Church in response to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus says, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). In this verse, Jesus establishes that he will build the Church, that the power of hell cannot overcome it, and that his followers will be the chosen vessels to usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. In Acts 1:8, Luke records that Jesus continues to give emphasis to the Spirit-empowered, missional church when, just prior to ascending into heaven, he says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Matthew also contains a version of the Great Commission in which Jesus states, "All

authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). Jesus’ response when given “all authority in heaven and on earth” is to command his followers to evangelize the world.

The Church begins in Jerusalem just weeks after Jesus gives the Great Commission to his followers. A short time later, in response to persecution, the believers disperse throughout Judea and Samaria. In Acts 13, Luke begins to give the detailed account of the missionary journeys of Paul and others as they established local churches from Antioch to Philippi. Paul’s zeal for missions indicates that he did not view missions as one more activity of the Church. For Paul, missions defined the church. Gruder et al. advocates the missional mandate to churches today: “Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with a mission to a missional church” (6). The Church is God’s missional body in the world.

### **Prayer and the Missional Church**

Yahweh is a missional God. The missional Church is his chosen means for the proliferation of the gospel, and the prayers of the saints represent the catalyst that moves God to act powerfully through his missional Church. Prayer is the cornerstone of successful missions. Bounds describes prayer as the primary catalyst for missions. “The mightiest successes that come to God’s cause are created and carried on by prayer in God’s power.... God’s conquering days are when the saints have given themselves to mightiest prayer....God shapes the world by prayer” (12). Nouwen states, “Whatever happens to you, never give up praying. It would be like giving up breathing. A man or woman who does not pray is no longer a minister” (qtd. in Seamands 15). James writes,

“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” (Jas. 5:16). Prayer is a central discipline for the follower of Christ.

The Gospel of Luke contains one of the most telling passages regarding Jesus’ commitment to the prioritization of prayer. Luke writes, “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:15-16). The news of Jesus’ ministry is growing and several people begin to flock to him for healing and teaching. A crowd of this size is a church planter’s dream. By today’s standards, this meal constitutes the best example of servant evangelism. Just as his ministry seems to be at its zenith, Jesus leaves to pray. Jesus’ decision to depart must leave the disciples questioning his sanity, but Jesus is modeling the prioritization of prayer.

Both Jesus and Paul state that followers of Christ should ask God for the things they need. Jesus says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (John 15:7). James offers the negative corollary to this verse when he writes, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (Jas. 4:2).

When Jesus’ disciples ask him how to pray, he offers them counsel and a model. He counsels them to pray sincerely and not like the hypocrites (Matt. 5:5-7). He also assures his disciples that God is fully aware of their needs before they pray (Matt. 5:8). One important aspect of Jesus’ model for prayer is the intimacy with which he speaks to God. Jesus encourages his disciples to refer to God as Father. Secondly, Jesus teaches his disciples to recognize the majesty of God and to welcome his kingdom on earth. Thirdly, Jesus invites his followers to ask God to meet their needs for sustenance, forgiveness, and

deliverance from evil. Foster writes of the holistic quality of Jesus' prayer in Matthew 5: "The Paternoster is really a total prayer. Its concerns embrace the whole world, from the coming of the kingdom to daily bread...nothing is beyond the purview of this prayer" (Prayer 184-85). Jesus' words concerning prayer characterize God as the intimate, loving Father and the source of all provision for his followers. Jesus' example teaches that prayer is vital to the child of God.

### **Historical Foundations**

The book of Acts recounts both the origin of the Church and its original missionary efforts. Because Acts details the church-planting practices of Paul, Barnabas, and others, key passages in Acts provide the historical foundations for this study. Writing about the praying saints of the early Church, Luke, the author of Acts, writes, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (1:14). That Pentecost, the birth of the Church, is immediately preceded by all the saints joining "together constantly in prayer" should encourage church planters in the discipline of prayer. Luke writes, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Salvation came to three thousand people in one day at the birth of the Church, and, significantly, prayer preceded and followed the event.

Acts, the story of the beginning of the Church, is replete with significant references to prayer. The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible reveals that some form of the word *pray* occurs thirty-four times in the book of Acts (1060-62). In Acts 1, Luke describes a community in which prayer saturates the lives of believers:

“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (1:14). After Pentecost, the fervent dedication to prayer continues. Luke writes, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Soon after the birth of the Church, officials imprison Peter and John and later release them. Upon their release, they go back to meet with the believers in Jerusalem and the believers begin to pray. Luke reports amazing results immediately following their prayer. Tremors shook the building, the believers were filled with courage to proclaim the gospel, and unity and extravagant generosity permeated their fellowship (Acts 4:31-35). The priority of prayer at the birth of the Church is undeniable. The results are equally unquestionable.

One of the first crises in the history of the Church affirms the importance of prayer. In Acts 6, Luke describes an incident in which the Grecian Jews complain about a perceived inequity in the distribution of food. The apostles’ solution reveals an important insight. The apostles announce, “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4). They had given priority to activity over abiding. They clearly believed more time in prayer and the ministry of the Word was the best use of their time. Some might argue that the apostles’ time would have been better spent serving alongside deacons, but this passage teaches a valuable lesson about delegation. Church planters cannot do everything. Wayne Cordeiro writes, “You were not designed to do church alone. You are not a one man band. No one is” (92-93). A reluctance or refusal to delegate will pull planting pastors away from the

better work of prayer and the ministry of the Word. The inclusion of the ministry of the Word in this passage reveals a concomitant priority. Prayer divorced from the will of God as revealed in Scripture results in impotent ministry. Luke documents the results of the apostle's decision to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. He writes, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). The word *so* that begins this passage reveals that Luke views the evangelistic fruit in Jerusalem as a result of the apostles' decision.

The references to prayer throughout the book of Acts establish prayer as integral to the birth of the Church and the church-planting efforts of Peter and Paul. Bounds agrees: "The very movement looking to offer the blessings of the Christian church to the Gentiles was born on the housetop on the occasion when Peter went up there to pray" (371). Luke was careful to note that Paul's first missionary journey began with prayer. After the Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas, Luke writes, "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3). The leaders at the church of Antioch enjoyed a clear answer from the Holy Spirit in response to prayer. They may have been tempted to act immediately after discovering God's will, but they did not. Luke is careful to note that the leaders of the church did not act on the revelation of the Holy Spirit until they prayed. Bounds notes that prayer was the catalyst that opened the door to this special revelation: "This was a subsequent call to a work born of special and continued prayer in the church at Antioch" (371).

Acts is the most concise record of the missionary and church-planting efforts of the first century Church and abounds in references to prayer. Luke records that the first

century Christians pray prior to the birth of the Church, prior to choosing missionaries, prior to sending out missionaries, at the establishment of local churches, and during times of imprisonment and persecution. God responds to the prayers of his saints with great evangelistic harvests, workers for the harvest, provision, community, protection, and encouragement. Acts is the church-planting record of the New Testament and the centrality of prayer is unambiguous.

Peter Wagner states, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches” (11). Moore affirms Wagner’s assertion: “One American denomination found that 80 percent of its converts came to faith in Jesus in churches less than two years old” (23). Formal church-planting activity did not begin immediately, but Moore notes that it swiftly became a primary evangelistic tool. “It took eight years for the gospel to escape Jerusalem. But when it did, it sparked a church-planting movement in Antioch that quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire” (28-29).

Acts is the story of the beginning of the Church and chronicles the activity of Paul, the most prolific church planter in the infancy of the Church. A casual reading of the church-planting efforts of Paul in Acts and the Epistles reveals not only a committed church planter but also a church planter convinced of the power of prayer.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is communion with God. Matthew 6 and Luke 11 contain Jesus’ most basic teaching on prayer. These prayers represent a model for prayer. When Jesus’ disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, he begins his prayer by referring to God as Father. Jesus’ words imply an affectionate parent-child relationship. Jesus’ prayer is beautiful

and reveals a great deal about the purpose and attitude of prayer. Jesus' teaching indicates that people learn to pray. Jesus does not scold his disciples for their inability to pray but teaches them how to pray. In this model for prayer, Jesus gives honor to God and acknowledges that daily provision comes from the hand of the Father. Jesus also points to the Father as the source of forgiveness and establishes prayer as an act of humility wherein people recognize their dependence upon God. Matthew states that Jesus prayed a similar prayer in the Sermon on the Mount but includes the phrases, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and "but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 5:10, 13). The first phrase points to the primacy of the kingdom and the second acknowledges both the reality of evil and reliance upon God for protection.

Jesus teaches the discipline of prayer in both word and deed. Luke reveals prayer to be an important discipline of Jesus' life. He writes, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). In the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals his purpose for regular communion with God. He states, "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20). Jesus expresses his desire to be in perfect harmony with God. Prayer makes possible his resolute in his commitment to doing nothing outside of the will of the Father. Jesus' ability to conform to the will of the Father is a result of his communion with the Father. As he communes with the Father, the Father reveals himself and his will.

### **Prayer and Activity**

Pastors are busy. The demands of pastoral care, leadership, family, ministry, evangelism, and discipleship can conspire to make prayer time a lower priority. Stephen

Seamands addresses this issue: “Our immediate response is to point to the incredible time demands of the ministry, and to talk about how busy we are. Be assured, we would like to pray more—if we only had time” (22). Planting a church requires pastors to meet the unique demands of church planting and pastoring. Even the most passionate prayer warriors are tempted to fall into a routine of more activity than prayer. Leadership Journal published a survey of 749 pastors in which they asked pastors about hindrances to their spiritual growth. David Goetz writes, “When asked to check the most common obstacles to your spiritual growth, the top five were busyness (83 percent), lack of discipline (73 percent), interruptions (47 percent), sin (33 percent), and anger (17 percent)” (33). As the daily burdens and anxieties grow, church planters find their passion for prayer lessening. Samuel Mateer penned a lament for these pastors: “Yet, as time passed, he found himself back in the world of plans, programs, and progress reports—and before he knew it, before he knew anything had changed, the radical lifestyle of time with God was history” (206).

Church planting is difficult work. In light of the magnitude and difficulty of the task, church planters may be tempted to rely upon the wisdom of the world to meet the challenge. The world encourages those who want to succeed to rely upon more activity, better marketing, and ingenuity. Apart from prayer, church planting and all forms of mission become the mere activity of human hands. Larry Crabb reflects on this behavior and asks, “How do we give up digging our own wells so that we can turn to the well of living water?” (110). S. Murray alludes to this tendency toward busyness: “Church-planting is not an end in itself, because the church is an agent of God’s mission” (40). When church planting becomes the end in itself, church planters may not feel the need to

seek God in prayer. They cannot know God or his plans apart from prayer. Only people who seek God first can know the mission of God.

### **Jesus, Prayer, and Activity**

Jesus is aware of the propensity toward frenetic activity and Jesus speaks to those driven by worry to engage in feverish activity. Jesus asks, “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these” (Matt. 6:28-29). The prescription of the world is to engage in endless activity, but Jesus commends a different path. Jesus says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:28-33). Jesus states that the answers lay not in toiling but in seeking.

Jesus models the prioritizing behavior he calls for in Matthew 6:33. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record thirteen occasions when Jesus goes away to pray. Luke states, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Jesus goes to lonely places to pray because he is committed to doing the Father’s will. Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19).

The sobering words of Jesus in John 15 speak directly to the Christian servant who sacrifices abiding in Christ for activity. Jesus addresses this issue in what is known as the Farewell Discourse of the Gospel of John. The weight of his words is underscored by the proximity of the cross. This discourse represents the final instructions to a group of apprentices who will inaugurate the Church of Christ on earth. In these precious final hours, Jesus reiterates the importance of remaining vitally connected to him. In John

15:1-8, Jesus uses the metaphor of viticulture to emphasize the gravity of one's choice to abide in him. Jesus paints a picture that would have been familiar to his listeners. The imagery of the grapevine had a long and sacred history in Judaism, and Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah employed the imagery of the grapevine to illustrate Israel's failure to bear fruit (Burge 417). Isaiah 5:3-5 reads, "What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it?" In his remaining hours, Jesus could offer a final and thorough primer in Christian theology, but he does not. Jesus could give an impassioned plea for social justice, but he does not. Instead, the focal message of this discourse is to abide in him. Jesus says, "I am the vine; 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" (15:5). Abiding in Jesus results in an abundance fruit, but apart from Jesus a servant can do nothing. The contrast is stark. Jesus Christ, the Creator and Bridegroom of the Church, identifies the presence or absence of abiding as the chief determinant for fruitfulness or failure. Jesus speaks these words to his disciples just hours before his crucifixion.

In speaking of the Greek phrase that John uses for *abide*, Walter Bauer characterizes it as one of John's favorite phrases used to connote "enduring personal communion" (504). Prayer is the most fundamental means of communion with God. While the concept of abiding extends beyond the discipline of prayer, prayer is clearly the central aspect of abiding. Foster writes, "Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us" (Celebration 30). These words constitute Jesus' final instructions to the Church prior to his death.

### **Paul, Prayer, and Activity**

In the epistles of Paul, his frequent requests are not for more activity but more

prayer. Paul, the original church planter, states, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col. 4:2). In Romans 12:12, Paul writes, “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Paul reminds the Thessalonians to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). In each of these verses and most clearly in his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul uses language in which he encourages his readers to pray incessantly. The admonishment strikes the reader with incredulity. Putting Paul’s words into practice seems an overwhelming task. To charge that Paul actually meant less is to ignore the consistent nature of words and phrases such as “devote,” “on all occasions,” and “always keep on praying.” Paul’s directive sounds like great advice for contemplative individuals with a great deal of time to spare but hardly seems like reasonable counsel for people in the twenty-first century. Yet, when Paul directed his readers to be devoted, alert, faithful, and incessant in their prayers, he was not writing to ascetics committed to silence and solitude but the leaders and attendees of new churches. In attempting to understand Paul’s direction without diminishing what he desires to communicate, Henri Nouwen offers the most straightforward explanation of praying without ceasing:

Convert your thoughts into prayer. As we are involved in unceasing thinking, so we are called to unceasing prayer. The difference is not that prayer is thinking about other things, but that prayer is thinking in dialogue. It is a move from self-centered monologue to a conversation with God. (Deepening 118)

Paul is not offering a hyper-spiritual or mysterious directive. In fact, Nouwen presents the idea in terms of an ongoing communion with God. Instead of a compartmentalized and

edited prayer life, one can enjoy unfiltered communion with God. Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing echoes the imprecatory prayers of the Psalmists and Jeremiah's laments. God was pleased to include their un-sanitized pleas and accusations in his Holy Word. Nouwen is careful to describe the process as a dialogue, differentiating the unceasing prayer life from a hasty devotional time comprised solely of a list of requests to the Lord.

### **Modern Theologians, Prayer, and Activity**

Some of the greatest thinkers in Christian history attest to the danger of giving priority to activity over prayer. Oswald Chambers writes, "We slander God with our very eagerness to work for him without knowing him" (277). Nouwen writes, "Like all great disciples of Jesus, Mother Teresa affirmed again the truth that ministry can be fruitful only when it grows out of a direct and intimate encounter with our Lord" (Way 31). To prioritize prayer over activity is not to suggest that activity is unimportant, but in Richard Foster's words, it is to affirm prayer as "the main business of life" (Celebration 34). Eugene Peterson uses stronger language than Foster when commenting on the priority of prayer: "Busyness - which is essentially laziness - is the enemy of spirituality. A busy person is a lazy person because they are not doing what they are supposed to do (Peterson 237).

### **Modern Missionaries, Prayer, and Activity**

This study explores the value of prayer as indicated in the beliefs and practices of church planters and their core team. Church planting is now considered a missiological endeavor. The North American Church historically viewed herself as the sender of missionaries rather than the receiver of missionaries. Gruder et al. write, "Rather than

occupying a central and influential place, North American Christian churches are increasingly marginalized.... It is by now a truism to speak of North America as a mission field” (2). Church planting is a key facet of mission work and holds great promise for reaching the lost in North America. Wagner states that church planting is the single most successful means for reaching the lost (11).

Modern missionaries deal with the temptation to prioritize activity over prayer. Paul Cho, pastor of the largest church in the world, says, “...that if he had another church to found, he would start by shutting himself up in a room for three weeks and do nothing but pray” (Mateer 206). Cho follows a host of great modern missionaries who have left behind a legacy of prayer. J. Hudson Taylor writes about his harrowing days as a missionary in China in the late nineteenth century. Lamenting the time that so many Christian missionaries give to activity, Taylor says, “Should we not do well, rather, to suspend our present operations and give ourselves to humiliation and prayer for nothing less than to be filled with the Spirit, and made channels through which He shall work with resistless power?” (qtd. in Steer 328). Bounds writes about the prayer lives of some of the greatest missionaries: “The most noted and most successful missionaries have been preeminently men of prayer. David Livingstone, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Henry Martyn, Hudson Taylor, and many others form a band of illustrious praying men whose impress and influence still abide” (372). The diaries of David Brainerd, missionary to the North American Indians, abound in references to long hours and even days in prayer. A. J. Gordon writes about the amazing prayer habits of David Brainerd, stating, “David Brainerd did his greatest work by prayer....He spent whole days in prayer” (Smith v). Because he did not understand the native tongue of the Indians he desired to

reach, Gordon writes, “He knew that anything he might do must be absolutely dependent upon the power of God” (Smith v). Elisabeth Elliot describes Amy Carmichael’s zeal as a missionary to Japan, China, Ceylon, and India. Elliot writes that Carmichael was convicted “that the work she was called to was without question God’s work, and could not possibly be done without the help of God’s people—‘prayer warriors’ who would share the bitterness of battle with her” (88). William Carey, the great missionary to India, believed prayer to be the priority of every missionary. Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi write about Carey’s view of prayer in the life of the missionary. In their biography of Carey, they quote him as saying, “One of the first, and most important of those duties which are incumbent upon us is fervent and united prayer” (80). Adoniram Judson, nineteenth century missionary to India, encourages those who desire to grow in the faith to pray. His son, Edward Judson, quoted his father as saying, “Arrange thy affairs, if possible, so that thou canst leisurely devote two or three hours every day, not merely to devotional exercises, but to the very act of secret prayer and communion with God” (572).

These missionaries constitute a veritable missionary hall of fame. Their combined efforts have seen thousands of individuals come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and the common thread that runs through each life is an unqualified conviction of the prioritization of prayer over activity.

In a time when culture is more pluralistic and resistant, modern missionaries assert that prayer must not be neglected. The advent of postmodernism reveals an American culture quick to embrace spirituality but increasingly hostile to the churches and the gospel. Gospel workers will not overcome resistance to the gospel through more reasoned arguments and apologetics. While shouting louder and demeaning the

opposition may be normal fair in the political arena, these tactics bring reproach upon the kingdom and bear no fruit. These are natural schemes and the kingdom of God will not extend through such measures. Gary Corwin, the editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly, offers some good news. In an article on reaching resistant people groups, Corwin points to positive developments: “[a] growing awareness that reaching the resistant will not happen apart from concentrated prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. Praying like it all depends on God (because it does) is propelling a lot of global energy to work like it all depends on us (how God most often does it)” (144). Describing how to effectively reach the inner city for Christ, Harvie M. Conn writes, “[S]trategy planning, for all its good, is never good enough without a pleading spirit before God” (6). God’s glory is revealed when weak servants submit to his supernatural power through prayer.

### **The Temptation**

Christian servants are continually tempted to give priority to activity over prayer. Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willowcreek Community Church, suggests that the issue relates to the strong inclination to achieve results autonomously. “Prayer is an unnatural activity. From birth we have been learning the rules of self-reliance as we strain and struggle to achieve self-sufficiency. It is an assault on human autonomy, an indictment of independent living” (qtd. in Allen 28). Culture pushes back against the notion of giving up control. Charles Colson states, “Prayer is the act by which the community of faith surrenders itself, puts aside all other concerns, and comes before God himself. In addition to striking at the heart of our independence, prayer invites the discomfort of introspection” (Colson 119). Nouwen identifies prayer as an invitation to God to examine one’s heart and mind. Nouwen writes, “Praying is no easy matter. It demands a

relationship in which you allow the other to enter into the very center of your person, and allow the other to see so much that you would rather leave in darkness” (Resistance 151). Dallas Willard points to a third and very insightful cause for the diminishing importance of prayer in the life of a Christian servant. Willard states, “The visible world daily bludgeons us with its things and events. They pinch and pull and hammer away at our bodies....But instead of shouting and shoving, the spiritual world whispers ever so gently” (Seeming 157).

### **The Merits of Prayer for the Church Planter**

Jesus, Paul, and many great Christian theologians and practitioners assert the importance of prayer and caution against attempting to work for God apart from listening and talking to him.

#### **Prayer and Provision**

Prayer is the ultimate expression of dependence upon God. When believers ask God for his daily bread, they acknowledge that God is the source and provider of daily bread. David writes, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24:1). If the earth and everything in it belong to God, every supplied need, material or otherwise, comes from God. When God provides Abraham with a ram to sacrifice in place of his only son, Abraham calls that place, “The LORD Will Provide” (Gen. 22:14). Foster notes that people often view petitions for material needs or requests, which are largely self-serving, as somehow less noble: “This, I submit to you, is a false spirituality. Petitionary prayer remains primary throughout our lives because we are forever dependent upon God” (Prayer 179). Planting pastors must be comfortable asking God to supply each need. Correctly understood, petitioning is not a selfish act but an

attitude of humility. Church planters who ask God to supply food, land, money, or anything else are appropriately acknowledging God as the Provider. Moore affirms the importance of petitioning in the life of the church planter:

God offers support to churches. He promises to “supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.” As a church planter, you need to pray and you need to teach people to give and to be careful stewards of their money. (97)

Aubrey Malphurs notes that church planters are prone to worrying about the provision of resources. He points to Jesus’ promise in Matthew 6:25-34 and writes, “They must understand that just as God provides for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, so He will provide for His disciples” (48). While the Scripture assure God’s concern for the needs of his children and his ability to provide, the Bible is equally clear that they must ask. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given to you.” James 4:2 states, “You do not have, because you do not ask God.” When resources for the church plant are in scarce supply, church planters will be tempted to forsake time in prayer in order to dedicate a great deal of time in fund raising and making contacts with potential donors. Bounds cautions missionaries against this trap. He writes, “Financial resources are not the real muscles of war in this fight. Machinery in itself carries no power to break down heathen walls, open effectual doors, and win heathen hearts to Christ. Prayer alone can do the deed” (368). God will not honor activity apart from prayer.

### **Prayer and the Workers for the Harvest**

In Luke, Jesus says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost” (19:10). Church planters must commit to reaching non-Christians rather than growing their church by taking Christian members from other churches. Studies support that reaching non-Christians is one of the particular specialties of new churches (Malphurs

44).

While the actual harvest is outside the scope of this study, the preparation of the workers for the harvest is a principle aspect of the study. Church planters need to work with a team. Church planters will quickly realize the task will require several mature believers who can help reach and disciple the lost. Once again, more activity might appear to be an adequate solution. Heeding the well-intentioned guidance of church planting experts to launch with a crowd, church planters may invest a great deal of time recruiting individuals who, in the end, may or may not be qualified to help. Jesus advocates a better method. In Matthew 9:27, Jesus laments that the potential evangelistic harvest is plentiful, but the number of individuals available to reach the lost are few. Jesus implores his followers to “ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” In an article in the International Journal of Frontier Missions promoting missions in the city, Viv Grigg describes the overwhelming challenges that face those in the mission field and the importance of prayer in this effort:

Given these contexts of massive urbanization, globalization and impoverishment of the city populations, what is our goal in praying? Let us look to our Master to find the answers. He came preaching the Kingdom of God. Preaching, teaching, healing, and delivering were his primary activities. He trained his disciples in the same methodology. We are to pray for laborers who can do the same. (196)

Bounds writes, “Missionaries, like ministers, are born of praying people. A praying church begets laborers in the harvest field of the world. The scarcity of missionaries argues a non-praying church” (374). Both the provision of a harvest and workers are dependent upon the Lord of the Harvest. Just as the harvest was plentiful in Jesus’ day, so is the harvest plentiful today. The issue in this passage is not a shortage of lost people. The issue is not a lack of available disciples. The critical issue in this passage is prayer.

## Prayer and Well-Being

As has already been established, the potential for discouragement in the life of church planters is great. The Bible is replete with individuals who suffer periods of great discouragement and find their strength in the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 11: 23-28, Paul, the original church planter, recounts a great deal of suffering. He speaks of floggings, stoning, incarceration, shipwrecks, robbers, hunger, thirst, and lack of sleep.

If any church planter has cause to be discouraged, it is Paul. Paul never declares that he did not experience discouragement, but he clearly communicates that his solution for discouragement is prayer. While in a jail cell in Rome, Paul writes a letter of encouragement to one of the churches he had planted: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4-7). At the time of this writing, Paul is not only imprisoned, but his life may well be in jeopardy. Despite these circumstances, Paul writes a letter encouraging the Philippians to live a life of joy. The passage from Philippians clearly indicates that Paul’s well-being is the direct result of his communion with God through prayer.

The writings of Paul also teach that real unseen forces work against the kingdom of God. Moore suggests that church planting is a direct assault against the enemy:

You are on a mission that will change the face of history. There will be more people in heaven because you plant a church. Addicts will be set free. Suicides will be averted. Bankruptcies avoided. Men will become better husbands and fathers. Women will find their roles in the Lord and in their families. Children will enjoy childhood and reach adulthood with both partners in the house. If you are successful, you can glue a target to your forehead. You will not be popular on the opposing side of the battlefield. (246)

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Successful church planting results in salvation, healthy marriages, freed addicts, and healed individuals. Satan will not be idle while those enslaved to sin are set free. Paul’s instruction to the Ephesians is to engage Satan and his forces with supernatural artillery. In Ephesians 6:18, he writes, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” Tony Evans writes, “The kind of prayer Paul has in mind here is intense, fervent, knowledgeable prayer that enables you to reach into heaven and make withdrawals on your spiritual account” (277). Dr. Ed Murphy is careful to note that Paul does not speak of prayer as an additional piece of weaponry. He writes, “Prayer is not a seventh piece of spiritual armor, however. It is too grand, too foundational, too essential, too all encompassing to be listed as just another piece of spiritual armor, as important as they are” (412).

### **Prayer and Wisdom**

Church planters need wisdom. They must understand how to implement the God-given vision for the church plant. They must answer questions about purpose, missions and core values. They must select staff and core leaders who will exhibit character and effectiveness in fulfilling the vision. Together with their leadership team, church planters must continually make weighty decisions that will have a great impact upon the trajectory of their church plant. The book of James contains a great promise for church planters who stand in need of wisdom. James writes, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (Jas. 1:5).

Church-planting is one of the most fundamental tasks of missiology in the twenty-first century. Church-planting and all attempts at bearing fruit depend upon prayer. All Christian servants and church planters can learn from the devotion to prayer modeled by the first-century Church, Jesus, and Paul. Planting pastors and the church-planting process will benefit from the rich, personal prayer life of planting pastors and an organized plan for prayer during the planting phase of the church.

## **INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

### **Profile of Participants**

Each participant had gathered a core team and planted a local church within the last ten years. The pastors come from a variety of church backgrounds and affiliations. Some had Christian parents, attended church regularly, and learned to pray at home and at church. Some did not become Christians until they became adults and never enjoyed instruction in prayer. Some, even though raised by Christian parents in a church-going environment, have no memory of instruction in prayer. Some have since moved to a new work, but most still pastor the church they planted. The attendance of each work varies from as few as twenty-five to as many as fourteen hundred.

Table 4.1 gives the characteristics of each church plant at the time of launch.

**Table 4.1. Participant Profile**

<b>Denomination/ Affiliation</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Launch Date</b>	<b>Core Team Population</b>
United Methodist	Flowery Branch, GA	September 1997	14
United Methodist	Spring, TX	April 1999	18
United Methodist	Tupelo, MS	December 1998	20
Southern Baptist	Palm Coast, FL	September 1995	20
United Methodist	Mobile, AL	September 2005	24
Vineyard	Hixon, TN	February 2005	18
Non-denominational	Conway, AK	March 2005	12
Wesleyan	Lancaster, NY	March 2005	50
United Methodist	Lexington, KY	April 2004	18
United Methodist	Loganville, GA	March 2002	17
United Methodist	Gardner, KS	January 1996	65
United Methodist	Fayetteville, GA	September 1995	16
United Methodist	Baltimore, MD	May 2002	20
United Methodist	Northpoint, AL	August 1999	40
Christian and Missionary Alliance	Rancho Cucamonga, CA	January 2005	40
Wesleyan	Bangor, ME	March 1996	15
United Methodist	Orlando, FL	September 2002	24
United Methodist	Shreveport, LA	March 2004	65
Quaker	Corona, CA	March 1997	35
Non-denominational	Orlando, FL	March 2002	70
Southern Baptist	Lakeland, FL	April 2004	35
Southern Baptist	Eerie, PN	October 1995	15
Non-denominational	Bothel, WA	March 2003	8
Non-denominational	Fortuna, CA	November 2002	50
Non-denominational	Va. Beach, VA	March 2003	35
Non-denominational	Wheeling WV	March 1999	19
Evangelical Free	Atlanta, GA	June 2003	8
Evangelical Free	Atlanta, GA	June 2003	8
Covenant	Lexington, KY	March 1996	20
United Methodist	Des Moines, IA	June 2003	5

## **Beliefs and Practices**

Research Question 1 focused on the beliefs and practices of the church planter. Some pastors identified parents who began modeling and teaching prayer from childhood. Some pointed to pastors or college mentors careful to imprint the value of prayer into their hearts and minds. A remarkably high number of church planters reported having navigated a course of self-study that included books, seminars, and trial and error. Most reported that the actual process of church planting was more formative in developing their prayer life than any other single event, book, sermon, or individual.

In addition to inquiring about specific resources that informed their beliefs and practices, I also questioned the participants about the content of their beliefs and practices both before and after the church-planting phase. Most communicated that their beliefs did not change but that their practices changed dramatically. In addition, almost every pastor used the same word to describe the reason for the shift in practice—desperation.

### **History of Training before Planting**

Christians learn to pray. Jesus' disciples say to him, "Teach us to pray." Apparently, the disciples recognize a deficiency in their prayer life and ask for help. The request does not surprise Jesus, and he immediately offers them instruction in prayer. Doug Bannister alludes to this process, stating, "Spiritual growth is normally a long, slow journey. Only rarely is it a dramatic boost forward" (172). Research question 1 explores the interviewees' history of training in the discipline of prayer prior to the planting process. Research Question 2 explores specific resources throughout the participants' lives that have proven beneficial in developing maturity in the discipline of prayer. When asked about their history of training, less than one-third of the interviewees mentioned

their parents as having any influence upon their prayer lives. Those who mentioned parental influence were careful to say the instruction went far beyond saying a prayer before meals. These parents, and often the mother specifically, were careful to model and teach a healthy prayer life. One pastor who described the intentionality and pro-active nature of his parents' training stated that his father, a pastor, began praying over the mother's womb at the very moment they understood they had conceived.

Some pastors mentioned training in a church or seminary setting, but the limited influence of clergy was striking. Only seven church planters mentioned clergy in their history of training in the discipline of prayer. Seven of the church planters interviewed stated their instruction in prayer did not begin until they were actually serving vocationally in a church setting. Thirteen church planters owed their primary influence in prayer to a seminary class.

Five respondents credited a personal mentor. In a Leadership Journal article, Rev. Richard P. Hansen reveals that a mentor was invaluable in helping him to overcome his own struggle with developing a consistent prayer life. When Hansen shared his difficulty with psychologist David Wall, Wall shared a helpful insight as to why individuals either embrace or resist a new behavior. One of the key factors in resisting the adoption of a new practice is the lack of confidence in one's ability to succeed. Dr. Wall indicates, therefore, that training, particularly training with a mentor who has mastered the task, is paramount (61).

Some participants were trained in parachurch organizations such as Campus Crusade, InterVarsity, and Youth for Christ. One of these individuals credits three elderly women with tutoring him when he accepted his first staff position in a church. The largest

segment cited a particular book as having the greatest influence upon the growth in their prayer life. Most of these individuals specifically referred to Foster's Prayer.

**Table 4.2. Prayer Growth Influences**

Planter	Personal Practice	Parent	Clergy	Non-Clergy Mentor	College/Seminary	Book	Seminar	Small Group	Para-church
1					x	x		x	
2	x					x	x		
3		x	x		x			x	
4					x				
5			x					x	
6								x	
7						x			
8			x					x	
9					x				
10	x			x					
11		x		x				x	
12						x		x	
13	x				x	x			
14					x				
15		x							x
16		x	x						

**Table 4.2. Prayer Growth Influences, cont.**

Planter	Personal Practice	Parent	Clergy	Non-Clergy Mentor	College/Seminary	Book	Seminar	Small Group	Para-church
17									x
18						x			
19						x			

Planter	Personal Practice	Parent	Clergy	Non-Clergy Mentor	College/Seminary	Book	Seminar	Small Group	Para-church
20								x	
21				x	x				
22	x	x			x				
23	x	x			x		x		
24	x	x			x				
25	x	x	x	x	x				x
26	x				x	x	x		
27	x	x	x	x	x			x	
28	x						x		x
29	x						x		
30	x		x			x		x	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>

### Prior to the Planting Process

Jerry Bridges writes, “It is possible to establish convictions regarding a life of holiness, and even make a definite commitment to that end, yet fail to achieve the goal” (98). The disparity between the beliefs and practices of the church planters would support Bridges’ conclusion. Most of the participants used positive words to characterize their beliefs about prayer. Regarding the primacy of prayer, many church planters used words that communicate prayer as having extremely high value; words such as foundational, essential, indispensable, and important. Interestingly, while the participants uniformly used words that communicated the highest level of importance to describe their beliefs prior to planting, they viewed their pre-plant practices as substandard when compared to their post-plant prayer lives.

When speaking of their beliefs about the effects of prayer, many pastors reported a focus on the power, direction, and wisdom afforded by prayer prior to the plant. All of the church planters were married, and most had children at the time of the plant. Many worked bi-vocationally. Because church planters are actively engaged in the unique work of planting in addition to carrying out the ongoing responsibilities of pastoring, church planting is something of a bi-vocational pursuit. Church planters described a frenzied life of gathering core team members, raising funds, preparing messages, training the core team, searching for meeting space, and discovering leaders for worship and the children's ministry. Finding the physical, mental, and emotional energy to address these issues, work a second job, and participate in family life requires power, direction, and wisdom.

The interview went beyond exploring the beliefs about prayer to examine the actual practice of prayer in the life of the planter. Prior to the church-planting process, most of the pastors described their prayer lives as consistent but perfunctory, routine, and need-oriented. Only in retrospect did they conclude their prayer lives, while consistent, were not entirely healthy or mature. Ted Haggard commented on this kind of prayer life writing, "When you pray only because you think you ought to do it, it becomes a miserable trap. It's dry, rote, and lacks connection." The participants in this study typically described a pre-plant prayer life that consisted of a fifteen minute to an hour-long early morning ritual of devotional reading and prayer. The word many used to describe this regimen was "formulaic." Several of the participants stated that tasks such as leadership training, sermon preparation, and systems development offer a greater sense of accomplishment than sitting quietly to pray. One planter phrased the temptation this way: "I study the Scriptures better because I feel like I'm doing something. But prayer is

more of an aspirational value.” Most planters described need-oriented prayers asking God to intervene in the task-filled day ahead.

### **After the Planting Process Began**

While many of the pastors initially focused on prayer as a means to power, direction, and wisdom, their prayer lives eventually evolved into a trusting relationship. Working in a church with abundant financial resources, ancillary staff, and building space can have the effect of denying the opportunity for trust. When a pastor steps out of the well-resourced environment into a life of church planting, trust becomes less propositional and more experiential. One pastor made this statement of his transition from church staff to church planter:

I was freed from the distraction of blessing. The church where I was serving had everything. I was well resourced, but then at the time of the plant I got more desperate. It became more personal—more of a friendship with God.

Several study participants described a similar transition that included formulaic prayer, desperate prayer, and intimate communion.

The participants became more aware of prayer as a means of deepening communion and intimacy with God and less focused on the hunger for power, wisdom, and direction. While these pastors still required these gifts, their understanding of the primary effect of prayer had changed. Indeed, for some the church-planting process affirmed more richly the power of prayer. One participant described how the planting experience deepened his belief in the power of prayer:

I mean its stronger confirmation about things you believe about prayer when you see answers to your prayers. If you’ve planted a church, you know how desperate you are. There’s nothing to hold on to. It’s all theory and so the amount of time you spend in prayer and you see God working things out, it carries you to a deeper conviction of the power of prayer.

Without question, the greatest shift noted was that of prayer as a means of securing God's help to a greater understanding and practice of prayer as relationship with the living God. One participant said, "Most of our focus was on the doing the show and the organization and planning. So I'd say we prayed. After the church plant process began though, it became a necessity, a desperation thing." Desperation is the key word that appeared repeatedly in these interviews. Most encouraging was the shift from desperation to what God can do to a hunger for his abiding presence. As the planters shifted from a routine and need-oriented prayer life, many used the word "conversational" to describe their communion with God. One of the church planters commented on the evolution of his prayer life:

The length of prayer time was extended, especially in the early days. I would just go places where distractions were few. I learned different ways of praying. I learned I did better when I walked. It became more conversational. I also prayed with people more than I used to.

This pastor's growth and experimentation in the discipline of prayer was echoed in the stories of several study participants.

Another significant shift in practice after the church-planting process began was the departure from a formulaic prayer life to live a life of praying without ceasing. The following comment reveals shift away from formula to praying throughout the day: "In the church plant though, I learned to pray without ceasing, because I was so overwhelmed. The power of prayer gives insight as to what to do and what to leave undone. That's real important in church planting." Another pastor reveals his utter dependence upon prayer:

After church-planting, prayer became my lifeline. It was a conversation throughout the day. "That was great, God," or "Oh, God." We came to

Palm Coast with more zeal than experience so we were like the dog that catches the car. Okay, now that I've got it, what do we do with it? The only thing we knew to do was pray. We prayed Monday through Friday. "God we don't know what we're doing. Help us." It was more out of desperation than any real spiritual reason. God taught us so much about himself and about ourselves, how fearful we were, and how we didn't know what we were doing.

This pastor's brief and frantic prayers reflected the harried pace of his life.

The practice of praying without ceasing and the understanding of prayer as communion with God was evolutionary. The initial shock of the church-planting process actually drove most participants away from even a regular routine of prayer. One pastor reflected on his own experience of trying to pray during the planting process:

I had to fight for it. Fight for my time because of the stress at times of church planting—the busyness. On the up front when I was putting together vision, plan, and strategy, there was a lot of prayer, but when I got into it, um, I found that my own personal practice was stressed, so it was less rather than more.

Another pastor said, "Just a few months into the plant that I was so busy, and I realized that busyness impacted my prayer and Bible study time."

While the prayer lives of most participants evolved through the initial intensity of the planting phase, some admitted to a long-term inability to stop and break away from the daily tasks long enough to pray.

### **Resources for Growth**

Each of the participants was queried as to the resources that had proven helpful in developing their prayer lives. The planting pastors were asked to identify specific books, seminars, sermons or individuals. As stated earlier, few of the participants cited parents or clergy, but several pointed to books that were helpful in the process of training.

### **Resources Mentioned**

Foster's Prayer was the book most often cited by the participants. Interestingly, the Bible was only mentioned three times. The only seminar mentioned by name was Foster's Renovaré Conference. Several of the students who had graduated from Asbury Seminary or Asbury Seminary's Beeson Institute mentioned teachings by Drs. Reg Johnson, Donald Demaray, and Paul Yongi Cho of South Korea. Many of the individuals mentioned are everyday saints who are not clergy, seminary professors, or published authors and are obscure in the eyes of the world but who had a great impact in the lives of these church planters. Again, most participants mentioned books more than other resources regarding their growth in the discipline of prayer. Table 4.3 includes the authors and books mentioned.

**Table 4.3. Book List**

Resource Information	Mentions
<u>Prayer</u> by Richard Foster	13
<u>Could You Not Tarry One Hour</u> by Larry Lea	5
<u>Hearing Ear Learning: To Listen to God</u> by Larry Lea	1
<u>Too Busy Not to Pray</u> by Bill Hybels	1
<u>A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants</u> by Rueben Job and Norman Shawchuck	1
<u>The Holy Bible</u>	3
<u>Praying the Psalms</u> by Thomas Merton	1
<u>When the Well Runs Dry</u> by Thomas H. Green	1
<u>The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer</u> by E. M. Bounds	2
<u>A Testament of Devotion</u> by Thomas R. Kelley	1
<u>Pursuit of God</u> by A. W. Tozer	2
<u>John Calvin's Institutes</u> by John Calvin	1

**Table 4.3. Book List, cont.**

Resource Information	Mentions
<u>Moravian Daily Texts</u> by the Moravian Church	1
<u>Sacred Pathways</u> by Gary Thomas	1
<u>Intercessory Prayer</u> by Dutch Sheets	1
<u>Prayer Warrior</u> by C. Peter Wagner	1
<u>Churches That Pray</u> by C. Peter Wagner	1
<u>The Complete Works of Andrew Murray</u> by Andrew Murray	1
<u>The Inner Way</u> by Henri Nouwen	1
<u>Touch the World through Prayer</u> by Wesley L. Duewel	1
<u>The Spiritual Secret</u> by Hudson Taylor	1
<u>From Bondage to Liberty: Dance, Children, Dance</u> by Jim Rayburn	1
<u>Partners in Prayer</u> by John Maxwell	1
<u>With Christ in the School of Prayer</u> by Andrew Murray	1
<u>My Utmost for His Highest</u> by Oswald Chambers	1
<u>Experiencing God</u> by Henry Blackaby	1
<u>The Spirit of the Disciplines</u> by Dallas Willard	1
<u>Effective Prayer Life</u> by Chuck Smith	1
<u>Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire</u> by Jim Cymbala	1
<u>A Godward Life</u> by John Piper	1
<u>Practicing the Presence of God</u> by Brother Lawrence	1
<u>Celebration of Discipline</u> by Richard Foster	3
<u>Life Together</u> by Dietrich Bonhoeffer	1

### **The Influence of the Resources**

The participants described how various resources influenced their beliefs and practices. Several planters described a paradigm shift in which they felt free to move from one rigid formula of prayer to experiment with a variety of styles. The understanding that different people commune with God in different ways was a pleasant revelation to individuals who had struggled with praying for extended periods in early morning devotions. Gary L. Thomas comments on this experience: “For some people, the

formulaic quiet time seems too cerebral.... And why should everyone be expected to love God the same way, anyway?" (16). When asked how particular resource influenced their prayer lives, many participants alluded to this particular revelation in their prayer lives. Some described the impact with permission-giving terms. One participant said, "Reg Johnson helped me to let go of some of my assumptions about what prayer should look like." Epiphanies like this one empowered many of the participants to experience a greater freedom in when and how to pray. These insights related to topics as simple as the physical posture of prayer. Another paradigm shift was from obligation to communion. One participant commented that his previous instruction in prayer had moved him to intellectualize the practice of prayer. One participant credits A. W. Tozer with helping him to move away from this approach:

Tozer has impacted me that there are always two sides, the propositional and the experiential. Both sides jump hard on their bandwagon and you create a relationship based on one person of the Trinity. I see Tozer as one of the few guys who is very reformed, very intelligent, very non-hyper experiential, but experiencing a God is with you and empowering you, but he balances that through the Word and through propositions. Seminary almost kicked me out of the relationship mode.

A number of participants spoke of a mentor or author who suggested a paradigm shift in terms of being authentic before God. They stopped using what one participant described as "King James" talk and began to converse with God as he might a spouse or a friend. Several pastors also spoke of the freeing influence a particular resource had in terms of where and when a person might pray. One pastor felt a sense of relief to learn that he could pray while driving, jogging, or even playing with his children. One individual described how prayer became a more practical part of life:

Yes, for me it's all about practical. It's been reinforced by sensing opportunities where I'm in the middle of God's activity and it drives me to

interact with him, talk to him, and pray to him for whatever that moment requires. It has helped me to understand my role as a follower of Jesus.

While the resources impacted the study participants differently, many of the church planters mentioned a greater freedom to explore different ideas and methods of prayer.

When asked about the extent to which these pastors made transferable resources available to their core team, a surprisingly small number of pastors did so. In some instances, the participant assumed the reading would be too difficult for the average layperson. The resources offered to core team members included the Bible, Larry Lea's Could You Not Tarry One Hour?, John Maxwell's Partners in Prayer, Deitrich Boenhoeffer's Life Together, and Henry Blackaby's Experiencing God.

### **Benefits of Prayer**

Research Question 3 focused on the benefits of prayer for the planting pastors' lives during the planting phase. The initial query investigated general ways that the participants benefited and a follow-up question was asked to inquire into specific instances of answered prayer.

#### **General Benefits of Prayer**

The participants reported that prayer offered them a host of important benefits such as intimacy with God, peace in the midst of turmoil, assurance in the midst of uncertainty, encouragement in times of profound discouragement, wisdom when perplexed, and faith and hope when the future seemed bleak. Peace was mentioned more than any other benefit. One pastor described the peace he experienced through prayer:

It gave me peace in a place of desperation. My wife and I bought a house and that was overwhelming. I knew that this was going to have to be the work of God and not of man. I would think this is exciting one day, and the next day this is crazy.

This pastor's comments are reminiscent of the peace Paul writes about in Philippians 4:7.

Several pastors spoke of the general sense of spiritual opposition they faced as they attempted to establish a presence in the community. Some told stories of calamity, physical and emotional attacks, and disruptive influences in the community. One pastor commented on the power of prayer to protect them and to create evangelistic opportunities.

Several participants referred to the sustaining power of prayer. All of the pastors interviewed faced a defining moment when they were tempted to quit. When money, time, and people are scarce commodities, and rejection, disappointment, and frustration are ever present, the best church planters begin to question the call, the location, the timing, and whether they can face one more day. People make promises about donations and do not follow through. Mother churches waffle on promises, and core team members walk away without explanation. Church planters who work bi-vocationally run low on energy and enthusiasm. When a spouse or a child becomes legitimately frustrated with the lack of quality time, the temptation to walk away is great. One pastor spoke of his frustration:

Probably the biggest thing was a roller coaster ride, during the times of discouragement. It reinforced the need to stay faithful to God and stay the course. There are times in church planting where you want to throw in the towel, and it helped me to trust.

Very few church planters would be unable to identify with these sentiments. Church planting is a supernatural calling and requires supernatural intervention.

### **Specific Answers to Prayer**

This portion of the research was inspiring. Each of the pastors recounted specific answers to prayer directly or indirectly related to the church plant. One pastor

stated, “At one point we had no money and we needed a trailer. We got a check for about 10,000 dollars.” Another church planter was denied use of a facility by a local board of education. As their launch date was nearing, he called his people to pray for a reversal on this decision. Churches had challenged this same ruling for over fifteen years to no avail. Just after denying this church use of the facility, the same board became embroiled in a controversy with the community after telling school bus drivers they could not say “Merry Christmas” to students on the bus. In order to decrease the tension in the community the superintendent not only reversed this decision, but also, for the first time in fifteen years, allowed churches to begin to use school buildings for worship. Table 4.4 displays some of the answered prayers described by the participants and the length of time spent in prayer for each issue.

**Table 4.4. Answered Prayers**

<b>Answered Prayer</b>	<b>Time in Prayer</b>
The church needed a trailer but had no money. A check arrived for \$10,000 dollars.	3 weeks
A legal battle to utilize a school building ended with a previously uncooperative board of education conceding.	1 year
A non-denominational church needed funding to begin the plant. \$100,000 was donated.	8 years
Several acres of land were donated to church.	1 year
A worship leader was provided.	1 year
A resistant school board overturned their policy and allowed the church to meet on site.	3 months
God provided a worship leader.	6 months
A resistant school board overturned their policy and allowed the church to meet on site.	7 months
An individual donated \$500,000 dollars to begin construction on a building.	1 week
The previously divided church agreed on a new meeting space. Half the core team had threatened to leave only a month earlier over the issue.	2.5 months

**Table 4.4. Answered Prayers, cont.**

<b>Answered Prayer</b>	<b>Time in Prayer</b>
When a friendly principal left, the church faced expulsion from a school building. One of the church members became the new principal and the issue was resolved.	2 months
The preacher's voice was restored seven minutes before he was to deliver his message on launch Sunday.	24 hours
The planters asked God to introduce them to a black individual who would affirm their calling to plant in this new city. In two hours, a black pastor approached the planters and said God had told him to look for "two white guys who wanted to start a ministry."	2 hours
The planter asked God for a coffee house to plant the church and one was donated.	1 week
A resistant principal who had said "no" twice agreed to let the church worship on site.	6 months
Healing for a man who was told he had two weeks to live.	2 weeks
A church planter put \$2,400 dollars worth of equipment on his personal credit card to be able to launch the following Sunday and two days later a local businessman gave him a check for \$2,500 dollars.	2 days
God provided printers, copiers, computers and \$14,000 dollars.	40 days
Planter's son was failing in school and diagnosed with auditory hearing delays. He was healed and now makes straight As and reads more than the planter's entire staff.	4 years
The church needed someone with a large truck to pull the equipment trailer, and a man showed up the following Sunday with a large truck asking, "Do you need anyone to haul your trailer?"	1 week
Pastor of spiritually young church cried out to God for a mature couple to lead and God provided the most mature couple he has pastored in twenty years.	2 months
Member healed of addiction to cigarettes and has not smoked for two years.	Immediately
Pastor asked God for 400 people to come on launch day and 401 came.	2 weeks
Claude King, co-author of <u>Experiencing God</u> , came to encourage a discouraged pastor after a prompting from the Holy Spirit. Claude was home with his family when he received the prompting and had not met the pastor or been to his office before.	31 minutes
A pastor cried out to be healed from panic attacks that began with the planting process.	3 minutes
An individual donated property valued at \$48 million dollars to the church.	3 years
God provided a children's minister.	1 year
God provided a worship leader.	6 months
God provided a worship space.	8 months

One pastor in the study was engaged in a “parachute drop” church-plant. In this challenging type of church start, the pastor starts a church in a new area with no prospects. Just prior to moving to the area, however, his denomination called him to say they had discovered five families who wanted to help plant a church in the area. They were all mature Christians ready to give their time and resources. The planter was excited but encouraged the group to study Blackaby and King’s Experiencing God together for twelve weeks at the local association office and then to make a decision about whether to continue the relationship. After eleven weeks, the pastor felt confident everyone was on board and excited about the future. He instructed them to come back to the association office at 6:30 p.m. on week twelve if they wanted to continue with the plant. If no one returned, the group would accept that as a decision not to be a part of the plant. By 6:45 on week twelve, no one had returned. His entire core team had left him. Dejected and alone in the association office, this church planter said that he was overwhelmed with discouragement. He prayed. At 6:46, Claude King, the co-author of Experiencing God, came into the association office. He explained that he had never been in the office before but that God spoke to him and told him he needed to go there. This church planter described how Claude stayed with him for two hours and prayed with him and encouraged him. Within two months, the planter launched with a core team of nine. Three-hundred and ninety-two people came to the launch service.

The respondents described healings from cancer, a voice restored just prior to preaching on launch day, multi-million dollar land donations, explosions of peace in the midst of unspeakable pain and disappointment, checks that arrived just in time, donated land and facilities, and hard-hearted individuals coming to Christ and ultimately

leadership within the local body. Many times the provision was simply the encouragement of a friend to keep one's hand to the plow when the church-planting dream became a nightmare.

### **Prayer and the Core Team**

Research Question 4 inquires as to how the church planter cultivated and evaluated the beliefs and practices of prayer by the core team. Here again is an example of the disparity between belief and practice among the church planters. Almost all of the church planters used words like *essential*, *foundational*, and *vital* to describe their beliefs about prayer. Only a small number of the church planters, however, were able to identify specific and intentional methods they employed for the cultivation of the beliefs and practices of prayer among the core team. An even smaller number stated that they had ever evaluated the passion for prayer among their core team.

Those who were intentional about cultivating the beliefs and practices of prayer among the core team mostly did so from the pulpit or through modeling. In their book, Power House, Glen Martin and Dian Ginter write, "No matter where your church is in the process of becoming a house of prayer, the pastor will be the one to lead the process, help impart the vision, and set the pace" (45). Martin and Ginter point to the importance of preaching about prayer and modeling a healthy prayer life (45). When I asked more about modeling prayer, the answers were ambiguous. While several stated they had preached on the topic of prayer, very few could remember the specific passage they had preached. A significant number remembered having preached the Lord's Prayer and teaching it as a model for daily prayer. A small number of pastors disciplined others in the practice of prayer among other disciplines. In each instance, however, only the elders were disciplined.

When asked about evaluating the passion for prayer among the core team, most pastors responded, “How would I do that?” One pastor suggested that he evaluates the passion for prayer based upon the number of individuals on his core team who are comfortable praying aloud.

### **Summary of Interviews**

1. While their history of training in prayer varied widely, all of the respondents communicated that they had actively sought out and benefited from training.

2. Seminary training and the book Prayer, by Foster, were mentioned more than any other influence in the planters’ history of training.

3. Twenty-one participants indicated no change in their beliefs about prayer after the church-planting process began. Eight participants stated their beliefs were strengthened and only one indicated his beliefs actually changed.

4. Twenty-eight participants indicated a change in their practice of prayer after the church-planting process began, moving from a routine, formulaic prayer life to a conversational prayer throughout the day. Two participants stated their practice did not change.

5. Twenty-three participants used the word “desperation” to describe their motive for prayer at the front end of the church-planting phase.

6. The benefits of prayer described by the planters were peace, power, and provision, and twenty-nine of the planting pastors identified unity as the primary benefit of corporate prayer.

7. While all of the pastors stated they benefited from resources such as books, seminars, and sermons, only 11 made these resources available to their core team.

8. Eight pastors were able to identify ways they cultivated and evaluated the beliefs and practices of prayer among their core team.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the value of prayer in the church-planting effort as indicated in beliefs and practices of the church planters and their core teams. The experiences of the study participants revealed church planting as a crucible that reveals the substance of one's communion with the Father. Prayer proved to be the supernatural means to endure the crucible.

### Major Findings

As I examined the patterns and experiences of these thirty church planters, I observed a consistent evolution in prayer beliefs and practices. The pastors were asked to describe their beliefs and practices before and after the planting phase. Four important shifts began to take place as the pastors moved through three distinct phases of church planting. The phases can be described as pre-plant, planter shock, and acclimation. While all of the planters went through all of the phases, not all experienced the shifts precisely the same way. The scenario described is a composite of the experiences of most of the participants. A second identified value, which will be described in more detail, was simply that of provision in the life of the church planter. None of the church planters would characterize God as a "Celestial Santa Claus"; neither would they deny that all good gifts come from God. The third value of prayer to be addressed is that of creating and sustaining unity in the core team.

### Pre-Plant Phase

The pre-plant phase describes that time before the church planters were actively engaged in the work of planning or directing the work of the church plant. Many served

on staff at a local church or enrolled in a seminary. While life was not without its challenges, life was somewhat predictable, and their perceived stress levels were not as high as they would be once the church-planting work began in earnest. A striking difference can be seen in how many church planters used the word *desperation* to describe their demeanor once they moved out of the pre-plant phase. In my own experience, I had enjoyed a positive, growing, enjoyable, and even relaxing year in the Beeson Institute at Asbury Seminary in the pre-plant phase. Participants described the blessings of working on staff in an established church. The senior pastor carried the burden of vision, senior staff oversight, and leadership training. Many of the participants had never concerned themselves greatly with the budget details of the church. The copier machine was just down the hallway and provided an endless supply of paper. Secretaries fielded all the calls, and a maintenance crew cleaned the church and landscaped the grounds.

During the pre-plant phase of life, many of the participants described their style of prayer as formulaic. Many described a pattern of reading from a devotional book or the Bible and then moving through a series of predefined steps. Several used the Lord's Prayer as a model. They would honor God, seek his will, ask for his provision, seek forgiveness, and ask for spiritual protection from the devil and his demons. Some used the JOY acronym as they directed their attention in prayer to Jesus, others, and [your]self. Other patterns were mentioned, but all of the pastors remembered a formula being central to their prayer life.

The respondents also described a consistent routine of prayer during the pre-plant phase. Most set aside a specific time during the day, usually early morning, and

spent fifteen to thirty minutes in a devotional book such as My Utmost for His Highest or the Bible, and then fifteen to thirty minutes marching through the formula for prayer.

Many participants described their primary motivation for prayer during this time as need oriented. Some even alluded to a sense of obligation. The responses did not suggest that the church planters' prayers or motivations were dishonorable but that the driving motivation during this relatively calm time were needs. Often the needs for which they prayed were selfless and included those of the other staff, family, and people in the congregation. While one would desire that love be married to obligation, obligation should not be seen as a dishonorable motivation.

Barring unusual events, the demeanor of the participants during the pre-plant phase could be described as static. Their lives were not entirely without stress nor entirely peaceful. The typical demands of work and home continued, but not on an extraordinary level.

### **Planter Shock**

Putting a definite date on the transition from the pre-plant phase to the planter-shock phase is difficult, but the respondents were all aware they had moved into a different and more challenging phase of life. The word that almost every participant used to describe this time was desperation. In my own experience, I felt a growing sense of inadequacy and a rising level of anxiety. New challenges appeared almost daily. Two key staff members and two families backed out before our first core team meeting. I needed a second job to pay our bills and could not find one. One of our biggest donors was talking about renegeing on promises made. My family had no health insurance and my son was still experiencing regular asthma attacks. We were weeks away from our first meeting

with no space in which to meet. Individuals were asking me questions about by-laws and constitutions, children's ministry, small group curriculum, and a worship leader. The feeling of moving out of the pre-plant phase to actual church planting was like stepping onto a rapidly moving treadmill. Like many of the planters I interviewed, I felt desperate.

The style of prayer described by most participants during this phase could best be characterized as disorganized. Many of the planters described an inability to remain focused as their minds would drift to writing sermons, returning e-mails and calls, stopping by the hospital, finding leaders, gathering a core team, and raising support. The need to do something frequently overwhelmed the desire to remain in an attitude of prayer.

While no one indicated that their prayer lives ceased during the planter-shock phase, many described their routine as inconsistent. As they attempted to pray at their previously scheduled times, their minds would drift, creating several short interrupted prayers instead of one cohesive communion with God. The interruptions were created by the temptation to accomplish one of the many pressings tasks.

Desperation was the primary motivation during this phase. As a multitude of concerns overwhelmed the planting pastors, they would briefly reconnect with God throughout the day. Several described times of intense crying out to God.

The demeanor that best describes the planting pastor during the planter-shock phase is harried. The concern of whether or not the plant will survive perpetually hangs over the planter. Several described a concerted attempt to avoid focusing on numbers, but numbers represent people and a church cannot survive without a gathering of people. Attendance, finances, space, family, and work are just a few of the real concerns that vie

for the planters' attention. The quick fix for so many pressing concerns is to attack the task list. The thinking is that the list can eventually be diminished to something that feels more manageable. The drive to complete or reduce the list of tasks could explain the apparent lack of intentional training of the core team in the beliefs and practice of prayer.

### **The Tipping Point**

In the pre-plant phase, the formulaic prayer life was useful in preparing church planters to engage in the planting process. In this way, prayer influenced the planting process. Once the process began, however, the demands of church planting influenced the church planters' lives in general and their prayer lives specifically. The church planters were faced with the choice to allow the demands of the planting process to erode or refine their prayer life.

The process of breaking free from the anxiety, distraction, and the harried pace of life is difficult. When Jesus called people to him, he did not call them to a burdensome life. He said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light" (Matt. 11:29-30). Dallas Willard writes, "That offer, like his call to follow him, is clearly made to us here and now, in the midst of this life where we labor and bear impossible burdens" (3). Many of the pastors had to make a decision to adopt new practices to live the kind of life of which Jesus spoke. In my own experience, actually committing to a Sabbath day was critical, and this "Sabbath" I did not define as the day the church worshipped corporately. Sunday, our day of corporate worship, is my busiest day of the week. For me, a Sabbath day is defined as a day to absolve myself of church work and any other work that does not promote a feeling of personal restoration. A.W. Tozer

writes, “The burden borne by mankind is a heavy and a crushing thing. The word Jesus used means ‘a load carried or toil borne to the point of exhaustion.’ Rest is simply release from that burden” (111). The pastors described several different methods for setting boundaries. One pastor left his mobile phone in the car when he arrived home for the evening and made liberal use of the caller I. D. screening feature on his home phone. This same pastor described his need to check his e-mail as an addiction and had his administrative assistant screen his inbox instead. Another pastor mentioned an agreement he made with his wife to be away from home only three of four nights in the evening.

A few pastors commented on the tendency to awaken in the middle of the night obsessing on various church-planting tasks, anxiety for the future of the plant, or financial worries. Once awakened, each of these individuals would describe an inability to get back to sleep for as much as several hours. Upon awakening the following morning, the ability to concentrate during a time of prayer was hindered by both a lack of sleep and the same concerns that plagued their sleep the night before. Roger Barrier comments on this tendency in his own life. The problem became so life altering that he made an appointment with a professional counselor. The counselor helped Roger understand the physiology of his condition:

You have what I call a runaway mind.... Every thought initiates a physical circuit of chemical changes in the brain. The more we think the same thought over and over again, the deeper we entrench that circuitry. I like to think of it as a race track with horses going around and around. The more we worry, the harder it is to stop the horses. (37)

Barrier developed new skills in his prayer life to deal with his “runaway mind” as he initiated a study of 1 Corinthians 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 2:10-13. In these passages, Paul describes the practice of praying with his spirit and receiving the ministering

spiritual words of the Holy Spirit. Barrier states, “The study changed my life. I discovered that the human spirit is our God-consciousness, the seat of our communion with God.... I discovered not only the power to survive, but the energy to thrive” (38). Barrier followed his study with a new practice of meditating upon Scripture for a few minutes at a time. As he practiced the discipline, the minutes grew into extended periods of stillness before God. He writes, “I think this is what Paul meant when he testified to praying in his spirit” (38).

### **Acclimation**

The evolution of the prayer lives of the pastors was not a unidirectional process wherein prayer refined the plant or the plant refined the prayer life. Rather, the two worked in concert to refine the other. The final phase is acclimation. In this phase, the planters successfully moved out of the planter-shock phase, but not to return to the formulaic prayer life. Instead, in their desperation and through prayer, the planters acknowledged their weakness and confessed their inability to accomplish the many tasks before them and the primary task of church planting. In the end, prayer prevailed as the chief refiner. The prayer life of the planters who navigated to the acclimation phase was substantively different from the pre-plant phase.

As to the style of prayer, most of the church planters used the word *conversational*. Previously the planters spoke to God through their grid of formulas, acronyms, and patterns. In this phase, the planters became comfortable speaking to God as one might converse with a spouse or a dear friend. One can hardly imagine scheduling a spousal conversation for an hour in the morning only to usher one another through a predetermined formula and not speak again for the remainder of the day. In this phase,

prayer flowed naturally throughout the course of the day. This style of prayer is reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards' reflections on his own prayer life: "Prayer seemed to be natural to me, as the breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent" (17). Several of the participants credited authors such as Foster or seminary professors such as Johnson at Asbury Theological Seminary with offering permission to have conversations with God in various ways and various places. Permission giving seems to be an important role for those who would mentor others in a healthy prayer life.

As to the routine of prayer, many of the church planters stated they were praying throughout the day. The planters did not describe harried, thoughtless prayers, but affectionate conversations with the living God.

This research was not simply an academic exercise for me. As one experiencing the trials of church planting while writing this paper, I also lived through the transition from formulaic prayer to conversations with God throughout the day. As I reflected upon this experience, I concluded my definition of prayer is inadequate. Initially, I defined prayer as communication with God to express worship, love, dependence, repentance, emotions, and gratitude. This definition was developed early in the pre-plant phase of my own church plant and reflects a prayer life of speaking to God more than the dialoging with him. As the planting process developed, I enjoyed speaking, listening and being in his presence.

The motivation that was previously characterized as need oriented and desperate evolved to relationship. While the church planters were still aware of various needs and continued to experience periods of desperation, the overarching desire was to commune with the Lord as a friend to a friend. J. I. Packer writes, "There is, however,

equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as his friend” (37). Perhaps the primary value of prayer in the life of the church planter is to partner with the process of planting to move planters into a previously unknown depth of relationship with God.

Finally, the words used to characterize the demeanor of the planter in this phase are *peace* and *trust*. Early in the process, every disappointment and setback threatened to end the plant or the planter. As the planters acclimated and adopted a prayer life of walking with God throughout the day, the words they used to describe their lives, even in the midst of chaos, were peace and trust. The planters described a pervasive sense of God’s presence, power, and sovereignty despite challenging circumstances.

I was struck that while almost none of the pastors stated a change in their beliefs about prayer, almost all of the planters indicated a dramatic change in their practice of prayer. One can reasonably conclude that heartfelt belief is not enough to change a person’s behavior. When describing their beliefs about prayer prior to church planting, most of the participants used words like *essential*, *foundational*, *vital*, *indispensable*, *important*, and *relevant*. Despite these superlatives, most of the planters described a prayer life that was formulaic and routine. When prayer partnered with the stress of the planting process, the practices of the church planters began more closely to match their beliefs.

### **The Value of Prayer for Provision**

As seen in the supporting literature, provision is an important value of prayer. In Matthew 6:11, Jesus prays to the Father, “Give us this day our daily bread.” This simple statement is far more than a request for a meal. As Jesus responds to his disciples’

request, these words reveal his utter dependence upon the Father, and God as the source of all provision. In Acts 2, Peter experiences the truth of Jesus' teaching as he stand before a large crowd preparing to preach. God provides Peter the words that lead thousands to salvation. When Peter is arrested, the Father supernaturally provides freedom from prison (Acts 5:19). God provides the needy individuals described in Acts 2 with everything they need.

The value of prayer for provision for the church planters and the core team was undeniable. All of the church planters were able to recount specific instances of recognizing a need, praying for God's provision, and recognizing God's provision. Many of the church planters found themselves in situations that required supernatural intervention, and God supplied. In some instances the realized answer to prayer took months and years, and in others only minutes. One pastor asked his core team to circle up and pray for a worship leader and after they prayed, one of the members of the group explained that he played the guitar. He became the new worship leader. The planters shared stories of God's provision of land, money, staff, healing, and sometimes for the wisdom to pray differently or walk away from an opportunity that seemed too good to be true. In most instances, God's provision was not a tangible gift but the courage to remain faithful to the calling to plant a church and a fresh perspective that comes with prayer.

### **The Value of Corporate Prayer**

The review of literature indicated that unity is an important benefit of prayer and almost every participant identified unity as the primary benefit of corporate prayer. The book of Acts, which served as the primary source of literature for this study, reveals an early Church committed to prayer and growing in unity. Luke describes the prayer and

unity of the early church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:42-45)

This was no ordinary community. Luke's description betrays more than a casual interest in prayer. These individuals were devoted to a prayer life that thrived in an environment of fellowship. The result was a deep unity characterized by sacrificial generosity. This is surely the kind of supernatural generosity to which Jesus referred when he said, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one." The promise that Jesus' followers could be as unified as the Father and the Son is truly one of the great promises of Scripture. Many of the participants in this study experienced this promise as they dedicated themselves to corporate prayer.

The participants in this study experienced described rich times of intercessory prayer preceding each core team meeting, and most indicated a willingness to set aside the agenda in favor of extended times in corporate prayer. As the core team learned of the suffering of others, they began to rally around those individuals. Likewise, they would celebrate with those who rejoiced. Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk state that this kind of "passionate spirituality" that moves the body to learn to pray and to intercede for one another is a critical component of a growing church (63-66). Watching God answer the corporate prayers of the body was also instrumental in building excitement and unity among the core team.

### **Theological Reflections**

Christians are always presented with the choice to operate in the flesh or in the Spirit. My brother, also a church planter, had a good friend who decided to reward himself with a cruise after graduating with his M. Div. Why not? He had deprived himself and counted ever penny for three years and it was time to celebrate. He worked with a travel agent to schedule a seven day cruise that began the day after commencement exercises. Everything was going smoothly as he and his luggage made it on board the ship. One hour into the cruise, he realized he had lost his wallet. He was devastated. His costly cruise appeared to be turning into an expensive disappointment. For seven days he lived off of crackers and water from his cabin sink. On the last day, one of his newfound sailing friends inquired about his diet. “Why are you always eating crackers?”

“I lost my wallet on the first day out at sea.”

“So?”

“So, I haven’t had any money to buy meals.”

“Dude, your meals were a part of the package.”

To say nothing of his pain and suffering, this guy skipped exquisite meals of steak, lobster, and shrimp. A feast was his for the taking, but he lived off of water and crackers for a week. This is how many Christians, Christian leaders, and church planters live. The same power that raised Christ from the dead indwells every Christian church planter, yet opt to settle for planting in their own strength.

God’s servants in the Old and New Testaments are frequently faced with this choice. In Judges 6, Gideon is anointed in power by the Holy Spirit. In Judges 7, Gideon faces a Midianite army too great to be counted. Just after his calling, he is forced to choose between going to battle in the strength of 32,000 men or to listen to God and

operate in his power with only three hundred men. Gideon goes to battle in the power of the Lord and is victorious. In 1 Samuel 16, David is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and in 1 Samuel 17 he faces overwhelming odds in a battle with Goliath. While Goliath faces David in the power of the flesh, coming against him with sword, spear, and javelin, David faces Goliath in the power of the Lord and prevails. In Acts 1 Jesus gives his followers a great task and then tells them to wait in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from the Holy Spirit. They do as they are commanded, and three thousand people become Christ followers and a sweet spirit of community overwhelms God's people. God's servants will always be tempted to operate in the flesh rather than in his power. Church planters are typically driven individuals with a strong desire to achieve results. When faced with the many and varied challenges of church planting, church planters are tempted to attack the long lists of tasks rather than to pray. This behavior amounts to placing one's confidence in the flesh. In Philippians 3, Paul describes the self-confident existence as a life of misplaced confidence. Dutch Sheets talks about the secret of remaining fresh in service to the Lord: "It is prioritizing relationship over service, worship over work....It is difficult to believe God wants us more than our service" (190-91). Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, state, "For our service to become truly holistic, we must offer our lives to God. In the Great Commandment, the part about loving your neighbor is the second half. It depends on the first half" (130). If church planters will become weak before God, confess their inadequacy, and rely upon the Lord, the Lord will transform them into people of trust and peace and accomplish all he desires.

God uses prayer in concert with trials to transform his servants. As the

participants characterized the church-planting experience, the concept of a trial or an ordeal was present in every description. As stated earlier, the word *desperation* was used by most planters to describe how they felt as the church-planting process began in earnest. The participants entered the process with a sense of adequacy or confidence. As the process began to unfold and multiple challenges began to arise, the planters moved to a place of inadequacy and desperation. Finally, the participants embraced their weakness, cried out to God, and resolved to rely upon his adequacy rather than their own. I did not perceive that any of the participants entered the planting phase in a bold or arrogant way, but the process could be seen as burning away of the last vestiges of self-reliance to enter into a state of dependence upon God. The trial alone did not have the power to humble the planter, but the trial in concert with prayer created an environment for God to transform his servants. These trials seemed to be a greater motivator than beliefs. While almost all of the pastors confessed an ardent belief in the importance of prayer both before and after the planting process, the trial of church planting was the necessary catalyst for change in their prayer practices.

God desires that prayer be a means of unceasing communion with him. As stated earlier, most planters entered into the planting phase with a consistent but formulaic prayer life, but the trial of church planting moved them experientially to understand the value of what Paul described as praying “without ceasing.” The formulaic prayers were not useless. If prayer could be described as a tool, the planters experienced a time when this tool served them well. Church planting brought the planters to a new phase that required something more than formulas. Their prayers moved away from being primarily need oriented to reflecting a communion with God. As their communion with

God deepened and became more pervasive, they also experienced a corresponding deepening of their peace and trust in God and a pervasive sense of his presence.

### **Practical Applications**

Interviewing the participants, analyzing their responses, and reflecting on my own journey in church planting, raised a number of questions and considerations for me. Church planting is difficult but a difficult life is not uncommon among dedicated Christian servants. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Jesus communicates that following him is difficult and even dangerous regardless of one's aspiration to plant churches. Christians in the United States are only just beginning to appreciate these words and only in the smallest ways. The landscape has changed, and ministry, in general, and church planting, in particular, are more daunting tasks than they once were.

First, those who aspire to plant churches are typically driven, entrepreneurial individuals with a strong tendency toward action. Prayer simply does not feel like action, and church planters are people of action. The orientation to activity is part of their make-up as leaders and prompts them to undertake the bold adventure of church planting. These characteristics are at once a virtue and a curse. The same qualities that drive them to pursue great tasks also tempt them away from being still before God.

Second, as stated earlier and by many other more qualified individuals, attendance in the local church is and has been on the decline for years, and the ratio of new church plants to churches closing their doors for the last time is unfavorable for those who want to see a thriving church in the United States. Prayer is the only hope. Jesus says that he would build his Church (Matt. 16:18). In Acts 1 Jesus communicates

that his followers would co-labor with him in this task and admonished them to wait until they were clothed with power from on high. In John 15, Jesus states clearly that his followers can do nothing apart from him. Those who train and hold influence in the arena of church planting must renew their commitment to emphasizing the importance of spiritual formation. A discussion of prayer cannot be an added to a long list of methods. Prayer must become the epicenter around which methods orbit. Techniques and cultural awareness are important but valueless apart from the pursuit of a deep, abiding communion with God.

Third, the temptation to see the church plant succeed can become all consuming to the level of idolatry. The temptation is elusive to planters because they are doing “God’s work.” Church planters would do well to find planting coaches or accountability partners who are committed to helping the planters daily give their hearts, minds, and souls to the Lord rather than the church plants.

This study has particular relevance in my life as I completed the study while planting a church. During my year in the Beeson Pastor Program, I had the opportunity to pray and dream about the plant. Because I did not work or serve a local church, I enjoyed something of an eleven-month hiatus from stress. I felt calm and relaxed. In most ways, my pre-plant phase paralleled the participants in this study.

My providential encounter with Ken Werlein, the pastor of Faithbridge United Methodist Church, influenced my renewed fervor in the discipline of prayer. Ken shared the story of his prayer journey with me, and two of his comments made an impression on me. The first comment grew out of Ken’s experience overseas. While in Seoul, Korea, Ken spent an entire night seeking the Lord in prayer on Prayer Mountain. The Holy Spirit

convicted Ken that his prayer life was weak. Ken received the conviction, confessed, and repented. He wrote in his journal that he was through “giving lip service to the practice of prayer.” When I heard Ken recount this story, I realized that I had given “lip service” to prayer. I am blessed in that I received this conviction well before the process of planting and began making significant changes to my prayer life. I began to set aside multiple times throughout the day to get away from the crowds to pray. These sweet encounters in the Beeson Center Chapel prepared me for the trials ahead. The second comment came to me from Ken, but was original with Jim Leggett, a pastor in Houston, Texas, and Ken’s mentor in prayer. While preparing to plant Faithbridge United Methodist Church, Jim said to Ken, “Ken, you will either plant this church in the flesh or in the Spirit.” My experience in church planting affirms this statement. The flesh represents the great temptation to succumb to more furious activity. Ironically, as the efforts of the flesh inevitably fail, some will respond with more activity. In Ephesians 1:17-19, Paul’s words reveal the indispensable connection between living in the power of the Spirit and praying in the power of the Spirit:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Paul indicates that he keeps on asking and praying so that the Ephesians will embrace and live by the same Holy Spirit power that raised Christ from the dead. That one can operate in the furious and futile activity of the flesh is the implicit and alternative message.

Church planters would do well to memorize this passage and, like Christ, resist temptation with the Word of God.

The biblical advice of Ken and Jim has served me well. One of the areas where my family witnessed the power of prayer was in our effort to sell our home and find a home in our mission field. Homes in our neighborhood were not selling quickly. The homes in the neighborhood that represented our mission field cost three and four times the value of the home in which we lived. We prayed. We sent out a prayer request to our team of seventy-five prayer warriors to pray. Within days, an individual called us to say he owned a home in our mission field. He said, "I believe in your mission, and I will sell it to you for whatever you can afford." He gladly accepted an offer that was several thousands of dollars beneath the appraised value of the home. The original owners built the home just after World War II, and several maintenance issues needed to be addressed. The home was also very small. We deemed these issues unimportant. We felt blessed to have an affordable home in our mission field. One month after moving into the home, a friend named Chuck Spinks called me to say, "God is leading us to double the size of your home." My wife and I were amazed. Twelve hours after this conversation, a friend from a different walk of life called and said, "David, my wife and I feel that God is leading us to pay to double the size of your home." The blessing was staggering, and my wife and I reeled in the joy of God's overwhelming goodness and mercy. I called Chuck to let him know that a second person had made an offer to pay all the expenses to double the size of our home. Chuck's responded by saying, "That's a good thing. My wife and I do not have the money. We were just obeying God's leading, believing he would provide the money." My wife and I could not have orchestrated these events. We have simply been the recipients of God's "incomparably great power for us who believe." Over the last nineteen months, God has provided a place to live and employment. He has grown

our church from three people to eighty regular attendees. We have watched individuals cross from death to life in Christ.

As previously stated, the observations of this research project were not exterior to my own experience, but an experience in which I was actively participating. I enjoyed a pre-plant phase which was largely carefree. My prayer life, like most of the pastors I interviewed, was formulaic. I lived through planter-shock phase in which I regularly questioned my decision to plant. There were days were I could not concentrate long enough to pray for a solid minute and would give up in frustration. I have never suffered from depression in my life, but after one forty day fast during the planting phase, I sank into a deep feeling of sadness and could not find a way to feel better. For several weeks I cried out to God to heal me. I experienced great difficulty in praying, sermon preparation, and conversation. The sadness ended as abruptly as it began. As I reflected on this episode, I felt the Holy Spirit was revealing a character flaw within me. I am a prideful man. The church plant had slowly become about me. I saw every empty seat and every Sunday with a low turn out as a reflection of my worth or abilities. I realized that I agonized over my sermons because I wanted people to applaud me. During one of my Bible studies, I felt the Spirit lead me to the story of the prideful Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 5. I noted the Lord did not carry out his judgment until twelve months after Daniel interpreted the dream. I felt the Holy Spirit was convicting me of my pride and urging me to assertively deal with this within the next twelve months. As I have daily died to my pride and given glory to God, I have begun to experience a sweet dialog with God. This remains a daily battle for me.

My core team has enjoyed a season of growth during our plant and this research

project. Together we have experienced the desperation described by other church planters in this study. We were inspired as we watched God give clear answers to specific prayers. We suffered alongside one another when God seemed absent from our efforts. The key leaders were horrified, overwhelmed and puzzled as they listened to the stories of pastors attempting to start new churches. All of my key leaders indicated that the research encouraged them to develop a deeper communion with God. Each one has been faithful to hold me accountable to push Veritas Church in the discipline of prayer. Because of the research, our awareness of our dependence upon God is more acute.

To be sure, our faith has been stretched and we have experienced times of sorrow and disappointment. I have watched individuals join this embryonic church plant as enthusiastic and close friends and leave without warning. I have watched promises of financial support evaporate. We have experienced harsh words from believers and nonbelievers alike. One staff member who expressed his “undying support” left before we had our first meeting. The fear, uncertainty, and discouragement have sometimes been so great that I could articulate nothing more than a groan. More than a home or material gifts, God’s sweetest blessings to me have come during these inevitable dark times of church planting. He walks this path with me and assures me of his deep love for me and my family.

Dear Church Planter, pray. Pray hard. Plant your church in the Spirit, not the flesh.

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