Hope Heals!

A few days ago Ruthie was on a prayer call with several of the prayer leaders in one of our conferences. As is often the case, the president was also on the call. It was an intense time of intercession, but when the president began to pray it caused an instant lump in the throats of everyone on the call. With a seldom-heard passion he cried out, “Oh, God, please show us how to make every church in our field a house of prayer!”

According to Jesus’ words (Matt. 21:12-13) it is His will that this should be our name, our identity. As important as preaching is, Jesus never called His church a house of preaching. As essential as music is, He never called His church a house of music. But Jesus Himself said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer.”

The president’s words hung in the air as the group prayed. They could sense a rise in the intensity of the prayer time. They perceived that God wanted to say something of importance, that a dream was birthing, a vision was coming to light … Every Church a House of Prayer. What if …

What if, as people drove by your church building on a Wednesday evening, they had the distinct sense that something of eternal significance was happening inside?
What if, when a neighbor was facing a crisis, one of us knocked on their door and asked if we could come in and pray?

What if, when a new school term was beginning, we invited parents from our community – and their teachers – to a special Sabbath (or Sunday?) morning time of prayer for our public schools?

What if, when the church board met they decided they would spend as much time praying as they did in discussion of the business agenda?

What if the mid-week service became prayer meeting night again, and there was such a strong awareness of God's presence you had trouble finding a place to sit?

What if there were victories and healings and marriages repaired and kids reclaimed and sinners turned heavenward. What if ...

Well, God would be honored. That's why as we move forward you will see much about HOPE Heals. HOPE is an acronym for Houses of Prayer Everywhere. We urge you to ask God to show you what that would look like where you worship.

Don Jacobsen

God Went Home at 5:30

It seems that prayer meetings are not right at the top of every believer's list of favorite things to do. Why is that? Let me carefully venture some answers to that question ...

Repetition is the mother of boredom. Predictability is often the stuff of lethargy. If there are no answers, if nothing changes, if “prayer meeting” is thirty minutes spent reading from an inspirational book, vague prayers by the same 5 people, a prayer list comprised of all the woes the group can think of – including the ones from last week and last month – many feel, who needs it?

The early church discovered that when they assembled to pray, everything that came after that was better. Where is the disconnect here? It’s 7:00 Wednesday evening and to the group assembled it’s almost like God went home at 5:30.

Make no mistake; we pray even when we don’t immediately see God’s answers. It’s called faith. But when our communal prayer would sound pretty much the same if we played a tape from last week and lip-synched the words, maybe it suggests that our passion has gone south, our intensity cooled, our expectation wilted. If when we pray we do not expect God to answer, it robs our prayers of their power. God is impatient to give us blessings we’ve never even considered asking for. Spending time on our knees with God’s people provides opportunity for our hearts and God’s will to intersect, and that’s when grand and supernatural things happen.
Most Christians pray though sometimes they aren’t quite sure it’s going to make much difference. But to give perspective to what we’re doing, reflect on that event in Antioch (in today’s Syria) when the young church met to pray (the story is in Acts 13:1-3). The events that happened that night were a powerful force in shaping the future of the Western world that is still being felt today. Now there’s a prayer meeting that made a difference! But they all can.

When God’s people kneel together and worship Him and intercede, and worship Him and bring Him their repentance, and worship Him and seek His will, He is committed to show Himself strong. Prayer is the means God often uses to give us what He wants. Not every prayer season is followed by a revival, but it is certain that no revival ever occurs without one.

So we pray, “God, we’re not bringing our needs before You just now, we have to come to listen. What is on Your heart this evening? What do You want us to pray about? For what eternal matter do You want our intercession right now? Speak Lord, for Your servants are listening.” Then let Him lead the prayer time. After all, He didn’t go home at 5:30.

Don Jacobsen

It’s Not When or Where

Recently we met with a group of pastors, to talk – and to listen – on the topic of HOPE Heals (Houses of Prayer Everywhere). They were really helpful. They were not shy. They spoke candidly about the mid-week prayer meeting in their churches.

One described how the Wednesday night group was enthusiastic, though small. One acknowledged that the prayer meeting idea had kind of raveled out at his church and he thought he’d wait and try to resurrect it at some future time. Another said that there were only a few – older folks – coming and when he tried to suggest some ideas to revitalize it they wanted him to leave it alone – so he did. A handful meet on their own as usual. They seem to be happy.

One younger pastor, fairly new to that field raised the issue of a new generation of believers who aren’t really dialed in to a mid-week meeting of any kind. They’re busy; young family; heavy schedule, and it just doesn’t work. He admitted he felt guilty trying to convince them to insert another “meeting” in their week.

It got me thinking. There’s nothing biblical about the church meeting together on Wednesday night. Or any night. The first communion service was held on Thursday evening. The church met to hear Paul preach on a Saturday night. Other than that and the clear record of the New
Testament that the church met for worship on the Sabbath there isn’t a lot of counsel on when it ought to meet.

The mid-week prayer meeting is a relatively new idea. It’s mentioned occasionally in the religious history of late 1700’s America. Then in the 1800’s D L Moody held noon-hour prayer meetings in conjunction with his evangelistic campaigns. In 1857 and 1858 an awakening occurred that some would call the Prayer Meeting Revival.

Here’s how it happened. On September 23, 1857, Jeremiah Lamphier launched a weekly noon-hour prayer meeting for businessmen in a third-floor classroom of a church in New York City. No one showed up for the first half hour; six men straggled in to pray the second half hour. Twenty people came to pray the next week; more than thirty attended the weekly prayer meetings the following month.

Secular papers began to publicize what they called the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting late in October. By early November it had become a daily prayer gathering with some 200 people from a wide variety of denominations attending each day. Other prayer meetings sprang up across the city, and by the following April 10,000 people were gathering daily to pray. These developments proved to be so significant that even the secular press began publishing regular updates of the blossoming prayer movement and its spiritual impact on the nation.

Here’s my take-away: It doesn’t matter what we call it or when we schedule it, the fact is that God has never freed us from the assignment that He counts on His church coming together to pray.

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

Awful and Yet Glorious

If you want to read something that will set your candles aglow just Google the Welsh Revival of 1904 and 1905 and watch the unfolding of a supernatural work of God – a work we plead for in our day.

Years ago when we were conducting evangelistic meetings in the west of England, I came across a story from the great Welsh Revival. As I read it there grew in me a deep longing that has never gone away. One vignette that caught my attention was this, “A truck driver was approaching the church with a load of meat for the market down the road. So strong was the Spirit’s presence that by the time he could see the church he had tears rolling down his cheeks. He would explain, ‘I couldn’t help it; the Spirit of God was all around.’“
How long has it been since I was in a prayer meeting that did that for me? I’m not pleading here for an emotional experience, I am simply describing a heart cry, that when I come together with God’s people His presence is so real, so vivid, so palpable that I am in awe before Him. I hear His voice; I sense His guidance; I know He hears my praise. When truckers rumble past my church on Wednesday evening the drivers sense that something of eternal consequence is going on in there. Do it again, Lord.

Listen to this from that Pentecost in Wales: “The role of the police changed from hauling drunks into the jail to helping get cars into and out of the parking lot.” O Lord, let it be so again. In my church.

And for our kids ... Again from Wales: “A bus arrived one evening and it was discovered that the youngsters had been singing, but before they arrived at the church a spirit of repentance had already broken out.”

There was a time, early-on, when we were not timid about our collective walk with God. In 1855 Ellen White described an event in Topsham, Maine: “Twenty-eight were present; all took part in the meeting. Sunday the power of God came upon us like a mighty, rushing wind. All arose and praised God with a loud voice ... It was a triumphal time. All were strengthened and refreshed. I never witnessed such a powerful time before.”

Four years later, in Kalamazoo, she would enter in her diary: “In the eve the church followed the example of their Lord and washed one another’s feet, and then partook of the Lord’s Supper. There was rejoicing and weeping in that house. The place was awful, and yet glorious, on account of the presence of the Lord.”

Glorious on account of the presence of the Lord. Do it again, Lord. Please, do it again.

Don Jacobsen

A House of Prayer

Ever been to Greg’s House of Guitars ... you can also buy harmonicas and banjos there, but Greg primarily deals in guitars.

Ever been to Hilda’s House of Boots ... you know you can get other things there, too, like shoe polish and slippers, but boots are their specialty.

I am intently trying to hear what Jesus wanted me to hear when He stated plainly that His house was to be called a house of prayer.

Ever been to a House of Prayer ... other things happen there, too, but the focus, the emphasis, the heart of what happens there is prayer. It’s the specialty of the house.
When people go there they anticipate that fervent prayer has been part of the preparation for everything that will happen. It's not enough to gather, sit for an hour and listen to a lecture, spiritual though the lecture may be. It is not acceptable that the bulletin secretary chose the morning hymn. It is not sufficient that at the time for “special music” someone stands and inquires, “Well, was anyone asked to sing for us today?” If prayer is the specialty of the house, the worship ingredients must be soaked in prayer, bathed in it, marinated in it. This is not a plea for better planning; this is an appeal for better praying.

What does a house of prayer look like? Well, for instance...

Perhaps on Friday evening some of the members gather in the worship center. To pray. They prayerwalk the Sabbath School rooms entreating God that salvation will happen there the next morning in the hearts of their children. They prayerwalk the platform, the baptistery, the greeters' station at the front door. They pray at the piano. At the organ. They walk among the pews pleading for those who will be sitting there in just a few hours. They bless the mothers’ room.

The next morning, maybe half an hour before the worship service begins, the pastor and the elders gather somewhere – to pray. Just to pray. Some young people – or children – join them and lay hands on the pastor and intercede for him/her and the morning message. These local church leaders gather because they know they are not worthy to stand before God's people without His cleansing first preparing them. It’s a time of confession, repentance, joyful anticipation, pleading that the Holy Spirit may find a welcome to do what He draws near to do – move the hearts of the worshipers to the cross. During the next hour the population of eternity will be changed and the enemy will suffer a stunning defeat. Praying does that. That’s why this must be a house of prayer.

Don Jacobsen
Worship Focused Prayer

We don’t even know what to ask for until we know who God is. That’s why Scripture is more insistent on Worship-focused prayer than it is on Request-focused prayer. That’s why, when the New Testament church is facing life-threatening persecution the members come together and worship before they ask for anything. In the pattern prayer Jesus left for us He taught us to pray about the kingdom before we even asked for our daily bread.

It’s clear that if we “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” all these [other] things will be added. We don’t have to chase after them, beg, or implore; if we seek Him, He will add them. It’s because our “heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” He knows. (Matt. 6:25-34)

It was none other than Paul himself who admitted, “We do not know what we ought to ask for...” (Rom 8:26) The reason we pray is not to inform God – He knows. The reason we pray is to get on God’s agenda rather than our own. It’s pretty amazing, really: As we venture into His presence He teaches us what to ask for.

There is power in praise that perhaps we have not yet understood. Wisdom, strength to overcome, incentive to walk in God’s story come when we put our own agenda on hold and focus on Him. That’s why 130 years ago Ellen White could write, “If the loving-kindness of God called forth more thanksgiving and praise, we would have far more power in prayer.”

I am convinced that the most difficult prayers for God to answer are not peeling back a large body of water so a couple of million people can hike through on dry land. It’s not bringing the solar system to a screeching halt (Josh 10) – or even backing it up (2 Kings 20). It’s not calling back from the finality of death a man who has been dead for more than half a week (John 11). The Bible record is clear that the greatest challenge to God is to take captive the wayward human heart and bring it in submission to His will. Ah, but worship does that.

As a for instance, try getting into your corporate prayer time by praying deeply through the five verses of Psalm 100. Praise Him for who He is as David immerses us in this magnificent inspired poem. Rejoice in who He is. When our hearts become anchored in who He is, it changes us and it changes what we ask Him for. We don’t even know what we need, but He knows.

Don Jacobsen

The Heartbeat of Jesus

A W Tozer was a pastor in the early part of the 20th century. During his years in ministry he authored more
than 60 books, and there is much in them that is profound. I would have loved to hear him preach. Let me give you just one example and see if you don’t agree.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Powerful to ponder. It echoes what Jesus prayed in His John 17 prayer, speaking to the Father, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know You ...” (v.3) It’s getting deeply acquainted with Him that changes us – to be like Him, and that’s our compelling purpose.

Michael Brady was a Hollywood stunt man, and he was known as the best. But one day in preparing for a dangerous jump from a moving helicopter to a moving train, Michael fell, struck his head and received a massive brain injury. He was air-lifted to a trauma center and the fight began to save his life. Four days later, Michael Brady died.

Because he was a registered organ donor the medical team began to “harvest” his uninjured organs. Next on the list as a heart recipient was Bill Wohl, 20 years Brady’s senior, and a very sick man. It was determined that Brady’s heart and Wohl’s body were a match so the transplant was made. Almost immediately Bill Wohl began to improve. He was soon walking and in a few weeks, jogging. Before a year would pass he would actually run – and finish – a marathon.

One day the phone rang in Bill’s home; it was Michael Brady’s father calling. Haltingly he inquired about Bill’s health, then asked if he could bring his family by Bill’s home to meet him. Bill happily agreed.

A few days later the senior Mr. Brady, his wife, and Michael’s widow arrived. They talked about Michael, about Bill’s dramatic transformation, about how pleased the family was they could have a part in Bill’s new life. Bill struggled for words big enough to express his appreciation for the gift he had received.

As they rose to leave, Mr. Brady took a stethoscope from his jacket pocket, and, hesitantly asked Bill if he could listen to his son’s heartbeat. Bill was happy to oblige and opened his shirt. I suspect no artist could capture the look on Mr. Brady’s face at that moment.

My takeaway from this story is that when God puts His stethoscope on our chests He wants nothing more than to hear the heartbeat of His Son. When God listens to His church pray, His desire is the same. Time spent in His presence is what puts it there.

Don Jacobsen
What is a House of Prayer?

I need to make a confession here. During the sixty or so years I’ve served my church I’ve worn several hats including the privilege of serving for several years as a conference administrator. One of my duties there was meeting with church boards in times of pastoral transition. Leadership is key to the health and growth of a church, and the process of seeking the mind of God for the right fit between pastor and congregation is one we took very seriously.

After asking for God’s leading we would generally begin by addressing the topic of the evening like this: Given the strengths and the needs of this church and the needs of this community, what are the pastoral gifts you sense would be most essential in the person we invite to come here?

The list they compiled was generally pretty predictable: Good preacher, good organizer, works well with youth, strong family, wife plays the piano (really), good money manager, balanced theology, mixes well, hard worker. The list would be longer than that, but these traits were there almost without exception.

As I look back on those board sessions what has begun to trouble me is the things that were not on the list. For instance, not once in the fifty or sixty times I went through that process did a board ever include on their wish list that their new pastor must absolutely, unequivocally be a prayer warrior. That quality never came up. Not once. What pains me now is that I never pressed them to include it. Not once.

If His church is to be identified as a house of prayer, then it is obvious that the leader must have a conspicuous and marginally radical bias to move it in that direction that will not be hijacked.

I know, it can be argued that it is just assumed: Of course the pastor will give strong prayer leadership to the church – that’s what pastors do. But I’ve watched this kingdom business long enough to know that that which is assumed often falls into disrepair. Assumptions often create sloppy practices. If an assumption does not become a raging conviction, over time it can degenerate into a second tier tradition.

I have trouble describing a house of prayer, but I am confident it will include at least these practices among others:

1. There is an organized plan for members consistently to pray a shield of protection around the pastor/s.
2. Each person who holds any office in the church is assigned a member who regularly prays for them.
3. Each school-age youngster is assigned a prayer buddy who prays daily, not only that God will keep them safe, but that He will make them a danger to the devil’s kingdom.

A house of prayer is different than any other kind of church. How would you measure yours?

Don Jacobsen

The Problem with Prayer Requests

Who taught you to pray? If you started young you know that, like everything else we do as toddlers, our prayers focus around having our own needs met. “Now I lay me down to sleep…” You remember that prayer. You may have prayed it. Maybe taught your kids or grands to pray it, too. I was looking it over the other day and discovered that of the 30 words in that iconic prayer, eight of them are either I, me, or my. Every fourth word.

Without getting too enmeshed in etymological parsing here, we need to be reminded that prayer is not about us – it’s about Him. Most of us have to re-learn how to pray so that we are not asking to get our will accomplished; we pray to get His will accomplished. We don’t attempt to convince God of the viability of our requests, we are making ourselves available so that the grand passions of His heart can be fulfilled.

I wish I had learned earlier to pray better. By “better” I am not suggesting that I wish to be more fluent or grandiose or eloquent. In my seven years of pastoral classwork I never had a class on how to pray. In what to pray for. In how to listen to the heart of God and focus my prayers around His passions. I’m a slow learner; maybe that's why it took me so long, and I'm still not where I want to be.

I also learned about prayer by going to prayer meeting. Now I want to be very careful here. If I cause some folks discomfort, it’s unintentional. It was in a little city church in the northwest that I first learned about prayer requests. What shall we pray about this evening? Who has a request? That was often a prelude to a lengthy time of reciting the woes, the sicknesses, the crises of family, friends and members. I will not digress here to reflect on how close some of those requests came to being a spiritual name for gossip.

Here is my concern: To languish long over a list of needs can take our focus off of God. And prayer is about God. Any special requests you’d like to raise before the Lord this morning/tonight, please raise your hand. Often maybe that's all we need to say. But I’ve been in more than one gathering where we spent more time describing the needs than we did asking God to meet them. Well, the time is about gone; we'd better pray...

But note the young church model: Assailed as they were by terminal harassment (Acts 4), they came together and we are immediately immersed in five verses of intense praise and worship before they even got around to mentioning the needs they were facing. And then they asked, not
for relief for themselves, but for courage to proceed with their mission. Not for a comfortable journey but that God's agenda might be accomplished.

Is there a place then for bringing specific needs before the throne? Of course. Job prayed for his children, and for his friends. Paul urges us to “bear one another's burdens.” Scripture is clear. But God can trust us with His best answers when we have first been on our faces seeking His sovereign will.

Don Jacobsen

Change in the Church

Some folks sense their church is changing and it troubles them greatly. Some folks feel their church is not changing and it troubles them greatly. What is your take on change in the church? Let me tell you mine: I believe the church should change – must change. Every time it meets.

Unless our time in His presence leaves us changed – ennobled, stronger, in awe, energized, more deeply in love with Jesus – then it has not accomplished all that He intended. God inhabits the praises of His people. (Ps 22:3) As we praise Him then, as we worship Him, that intimacy with the Most High God transforms us. If there is ever a time when there is a corporate glow on the faces of God's people it is as they rise from their knees from a face-to-face encounter with Him.

In fact, rather than sliding back onto the pew as soon as the last amen of the prayer time dies out, what if the congregation, still kneeling, raised their voices together in an anthem like this one: (I encourage you to sing it right now and envision the picture it paints.)

All hail the power of Jesus' name,  
let angels prostrate fall.  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
and crown Him Lord of all!

How can we come to worship Him and bring any lesser praise?
Often God’s people have been identified as those who don’t. They tend to stick out because they are out of synch with the culture around them. They subscribe to the Scripture counsel, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.” (Rom. 12:2 MSG)

OK, but we can’t stop doing enough bad things to be declared righteous. It has to be an inside job. It’s His presence that changes us; that’s why we sing, “Take away our bent to sinning...” To repent means more than just asking forgiveness for doing the same vile sin again, it means learning to hate sin as God hates it. Time with Him births that hatred.

When Mrs. Potiphar attempted to lure her houseboy, Joseph, into an illicit tryst, his response was reflexive and firm: “How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Gen 39) His God-journey had changed him into a victor. Time spent in the presence of God does that. That’s why I’m an advocate for change in the church – every time it meets. Is that happening where you are?

Don Jacobsen

Bulls Eye

If it sometimes seems as though your church is the devil’s target, you can be sure that your pastor is the bull’s eye. The enemy understands that the larger the tree that topples in the forest, the larger the circle of other trees that are taken down with it.

We’ve been talking here about establishing our churches as Houses of Prayer Everywhere, and it’s up to the leader to make sure that happens. But not alone. Let me suggest a viable scenario. From your Board of Elders, three are chosen. One of them contacts the pastor and tells him/her that they would like to extend an invitation for a get-together. (Preferably not a breakfast meeting – too many distractions.)

The three have an agenda – to release the pastor to be the resident man/woman of God that He intends. I’ve discovered that often a church’s pastoral expectations tend to expand over time. A sample from an actual conversation with a head Deacon: “Pastor, we’re going to paint the mothers’ room, could you pick up the paint sometime this week; I work.” No! The pastor must come daily to ministry fresh from glory. Instead of, Did you get the paint? our question needs to be, Is there any word from the Lord? Our unthinking assignments force them to dig out their Seminary notes rather than seeking afresh the mind of God. To listen and plead and explore and discover and agonize and rejoice and pray and weep over the Word...that’s the task for which God sends pastors to churches.

Let me be candid. This meeting with the pastor is accountability time. Lovingly, the Elders ask questions. Not, How much time do you spend each day in worship and study. Rather, like this, How satisfied are you with the amount of time you are spending each day in worship and study? If it’s less than say, 8 on a scale of 1 – 10, the next question might be something like, “What can
we do to help you with that?” Much of the future spiritual health of the church and the community are tied to that answer.

Out of this meeting I suggest two assignments: First, that each Elder agree to provide prayer cover during the month ahead. Serious, consistent, specific. And second, that the group meet again in a month for an accountability discussion built around the same questions. (Multiple staff church – maybe a different group for each pastor. Multi-church district – maybe an elder from each church. Tweak it to make it fit.)

Here’s the deal: Spiritual battles are only won with spiritual weapons and the enemy will do anything...ANYTHING...to keep the pastor/leader unfocused and distracted, doing good stuff, but not eternal stuff. We need their influence to help shape a prayer-saturated church, and we can give them permission to stay on task. When I was a Seminary student – more than 50 years ago – E L Minchen spoke to us at a chapel service. I don’t remember much of what he said, but I remember vividly who he was. He tipped his hand when he read a short quote which admonished that the pastor should come to his/her task each day “fresh from glory.” I've never forgotten it. I want that to be my journey – and my pastor's journey.

Don Jacobsen

Reproducible

More than a hundred years ago Wilbur Chapman, then a young pastor, was called to the stately Wanamaker's Church in Philadelphia. After he preached his first sermon an older member accosted him at the front of the church and said, “I'm afraid you are not going to succeed here, but if you will preach the gospel I will help you all I can.”

Chapman thought to himself, “Oh, oh, here's a guy that's going to be a problem.” The old man looked the pastor straight in the eye and continued, “I am going to pray that you will have the power of the Holy Spirit on you, and two others have agreed to join me.” Chapman felt better.

In the weeks that followed the group of three grew to ten; the ten grew to twenty. Over time the twenty grew to fifty, and finally to two hundred. Before every service when Chapman spoke two hundred men met in an adjacent room to plead that the Holy Spirit might cover their pastor and that God's voice might be heard through him as he preached.

At the same time, in another room the 18 elected elders of the church knelt around him, close enough to touch him, and prayed for a Holy Spirit anointing. Chapman told how...
he would come away from that intense intercession with a profound anticipation that God was going to answer their prayers.

The trajectory of that large church in the center of Philadelphia was dramatically changed. In the first three years of Chapman’s stay; 1,100 new members were added by conversion; more than half of them were men.

Wilbur Chapman would be the first to concede that it was not the result of any clever oratory on his part, but it was God’s response to the earnest entreaty of a group of serious believers. Their stated goal was not to see their church grow, but to see the population of heaven grow. Not to exalt their pastor, but to exalt the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their city.

Question: What is your take-away from this story? Are there any reproducible principles that might apply where you worship? Remember the proverb, “If we keep doing what we’ve been doing we’ll keep getting what we’ve got.”

I love the story in Exodus 17. Israel and the Amalekites were at it again, and the good guys weren’t winning. That is, they weren’t winning unless Moses was up on the mountain raising his hands to touch God with his intercession. But you can only keep your hands raised so long. So Aaron and Hur came alongside Moses and kept his hands raised till dark. Joshua led Israel to victory because of an intercessory prayer team. Now that’s a reproducible principle.

Don Jacobsen

The Secret Sauce

I have a sister-in-law who recently retired after a long and anointed career as a pastor. Before she was a pastor though, for many years she was a hair stylist. Actually, not a whole lot changed about her job description when she closed the shop and entered “full-time ministry;” she had been in full-time ministry all along. Her passion was the same in both roles – to love on people so they could learn to fall in love with Jesus.

Washing and cutting and curling hair was just a front for the opportunity to listen to people’s stories and point them to the One who wanted so desperately to be their Friend. Occasionally a customer would slip out of the chair and be gone without being prayed over – but not often. I love to hear her stories. Let me share one.

On a fresh Wednesday morning a mother and her teenage daughter came into the shop for haircuts. Mom was first while the daughter sat nearby and read. When it was the daughter’s turn the conversation continued easily and they chatted like any two girls might. The stylist asked, “How’s school?” “Got a boyfriend?” “What’s your favorite subject?” “What’s your not-favorite subject?” Not an interrogation, you understand, just friendship questions.
The conversation drifted to her favorite after-school activities and the teen volunteered that since this was Wednesday she could hardly wait till evening when she could go to prayer meeting at her church.

Now in some settings, teenager and prayer meeting in the same sentence is considered an oxymoron. But the girl’s candor and the ease of the comment caught the stylist somewhat by surprise. “Oh, really,” she responded. “What’s your favorite part?”

After only a moment of reflection the teen replied, “I love our prayer meeting. I love to hear people tell the stories of how God answered their prayers – since last Wednesday. It reminds me that He is still working and that He can answer my prayers, too.”

Great story. Here was a church that was doing something right on Wednesday nights. She didn’t brag about the worship band or the number of her friends in the youth group who were there or how cute the youth pastor was. As she moved through her teen years this young believer was discovering that she could trust God. The people around her believed it so she could, too. I love that the stories she heard were from the preceding week, not from 1937. The secret sauce for a healthy prayer meeting is when God’s people come together and radiantly boast about His personal, passionate, present care. We call it worship.

Don Jacobsen

Like the Book Says

I like to think I go to church hungry. Better than anyone else knows, I know my needs. I need to lift my heart to Him in transformational worship. I need to hear His voice. I think I am needier than most and I want to make sure I go hungry to His house.

But it’s an easy step from that attitude to a totally selfish request. There will be others there as well when God’s people gather – whether many or few. What about them?

You can be sure that in virtually every pew in your church there will be a broken heart. A marriage on the edge. Someone struggling with a life-altering temptation. A college student struggling with an addiction. A teen doing major battle with his parents. A lonely senior worried about some physical symptoms and wondering if God has forgotten. A sophomore girl who wonders how to tell her parents that she’s pregnant. A stranger looking for hope.

So my question is, how sensitive is your congregation to the eternal battles that are going on all around you in the family? God wants to use that time and that place to change the population of
eternity. Sins forgiven; marriages healed; new hope; new victory. So we learn to watch and pray. Watch for the one who is obviously engaged in an intense battle. Watch for the evident struggle. Watch for the signs of desperation, fear.

I know of a church that has a larger than usual corps of greeters at the door. As folks enter each is welcomed warmly, then generally asked, “How can we pray for you today?” The greeter leads them discreetly out of the traffic pattern and prays quietly for their need.

The first time that happens you are a bit surprised ... at least I was. But then it begins to sink in that God is at work here in this place and they are expecting that He will show up today and do what only He can do. Is that the expectation where you worship?

Eleanor’s husband of 44-years died and left her alone in a big house. Finances were slender and she wondered, among other things, how she was going to care for the large yard around her house. She didn’t want to feel like a beggar and ask for help so she prayed fervently that God would somehow care for this very practical issue in her life.

Randy was a college student and one evening at vespers he noticed Eleanor sitting alone on the other side of the worship center. Knowing she had lost her husband some weeks before, the question flashed through his mind, I wonder who is caring for her big yard. He felt a nudge in his spirit that he should ask her, so he did. He didn’t understand why she began to cry until she told him her story. He took the job and she paid him weekly with freshly baked bread.

What life-changing work does God want to do in your church next week? Maybe you'll want to ask Him how you can help. Like the Book says: watch and pray.

Don Jacobsen

See You at the Pulpit

Do you know who some of the most powerful pray-ers are in your church? Your youth. Some of the most transformational prayer conferences we’ve ever conducted have been when we had a hundred – or eight hundred – teens together to pray. They tend to take God seriously. They tend to believe His promises. I’m not sure of its source but I think it was among some Christian youth that the phrase was born, “God said it, I believe it; that settles it for me.”

So, are you drawing that prayer energy into the prayer times in your church? A friend of ours tells of a worship time in his congregation when they were focusing their prayers on those who were the victims of human trafficking. They showed a 3-minute documentary and then asked a group of teens to come forward and pray. To hear those kids pray for their peers, for other kids who were the same ages as themselves, to plead for an awakening to the catastrophic harm being done, to beg that God would press back the forces of darkness...before they finished, everyone in
the room was in tears. Don’t underestimate the strength your youth can bring to your intercession time.

Are you familiar with “See You At the Pole”? Several years ago a group of high school kids were distressed to discover that they couldn’t pray at school. So they set a time (which has since become the 4th Wednesday in September) when any who wish can meet at the flag pole in front of any school and pray. The last year for which I can find numbers there were more than two million public school kids who met at their respective flag poles at 7:00 am on that Wednesday to pray – for their parents, for their teachers, for their siblings, their friends, their country, themselves. Now it has become an international event and has spread to places like Canada, Ivory Coast, the Congo, Ghana, Guam, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, Peru, Portugal, Scotland, and South Africa. Teens had the vision, the tenacity, and the conviction to make it work.

And by the way, human trafficking is not the only issue they’re concerned about. Spend some time with them and see what matters they would like to pray about with your congregation. In moving your church toward becoming a House of Prayer, what better way to draw your youth into the process than to give them a serious role? Maybe they’ll want to call it, “See You At the Pulpit.”

Don Jacobsen

You Scratch My Back...

You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. You see that my daughter gets a scholarship to your prestigious university and I’ll see that you get promoted to full professor. You give a significant gift to my political campaign and I’ll see that your company gets a juicy government contract. It’s a shadowy business, but it’s the stuff of the evening news. Fact is, it leaves people everywhere asking, Who can I trust? Is there anyone anywhere that doesn’t have an “angle,” who does a favor or offers a gift without expecting something in return?

The world is watching to see if this Christian thing works. Are there people anywhere who give without strings?
Does the Christian faith have the power to transform normally selfish people into generous givers who ask nothing in return? Can the power of the gospel change a stingy, me-first mind set into a how-can-I-bless-someone-else attitude, asking nothing in return?

Leslie was nearly 7-months into a difficult pregnancy when she slipped and fell in the upstairs bathroom. Word spread quickly via the church hotline, and nearly a dozen of her fellow members arrived at the hospital to pray even before the pastor got there. Some of them sat up all night with Jeff, Leslie’s husband, until Leslie – and the baby – were out of danger. All night. Why would they do that? Because that’s what intercessors do. The thought of “repayment” never entered their minds.

We knew Norman and Sara when they had been married for more than sixty years, although through the last three of those years he had visited her daily at the Alzheimer Unit where she was a resident. When they said their last goodbye Norman was understandably devastated. The guys at the church signed up and took turns sleeping on his meager couch for a month and prayed him through his loss. Their payback? His tearful thanks was all he had to give. It was enough.

Intercessory prayer is one of the most unselfish of all the Christian disciplines. It’s a gift we deliver, often in private, asking nothing in return. It is one of the hallmarks of the prayer-saturated church and the beauty is that when God responds, He alone receives the credit. A church that has become a house of prayer did not do so to get honorable mention in the local newspaper. It is driven rather by members whose hearts have been made new because of the time they have spent in the transformational presence of God.

Don Jacobsen

All Together Now ...

Often when we are traveling, Ruthie and I help to shorten our trips by reading aloud. Sometimes when the traffic is heavy it's difficult to focus. But then there are those long, boring Interstates when we can get a lot of listening done. We've read a bunch of great books through together, some more than once.

A few days ago, about midway between Bristol, VA, and Bristol, TN, she was reading in Psalm 66, when her words struck a nerve. We knew we had read the verse before, but this time it caught us both up short: “Shout for joy to God all the earth...make His praise glorious.” We thought back of some of the “song services” we had endured and how often they had missed the mark. “Make His praise glorious…” How would that sound in a small church? Or large?

Who of us hasn't been singing a familiar song during a worship service and suddenly realized that its message wasn't really registering in our hearts, the needle wasn't moving? Sounds were
coming out of our lips, but praise wasn't issuing out of our spirits. We were getting the words right but the message wasn't getting through.

Then something happens – we catch a new glimpse of Calvary, a new realization of the price paid to cancel our wretched record, a new insight into the depth of His love for us – and the black-and-white morphs to full color.

Not long ago we were worshiping in a congregation of pastors, I'd guess maybe 500 or more. The worship leader led us in a song I didn't know well, but the words of the chorus suddenly began to resonate in my soul:

He was wounded for our transgressions;
He was bruised for our iniquities;
Surely he bore our sorrows,
And by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53)

As those raw words struck me – wounded...bruised...sorrows...stripes – I felt hot tears run down my cheeks. You don't gaze around the room at a time like that, but I sensed that nearly every person there was affected as deeply as I. We could barely finish the song. I vowed I would never again worship Him in bland mode, I would never allow those rich moments to dissipate because of my inattention. If my words were truly a gift I was offering Him I would never again sing them with my heart in neutral.

All together now: Enter His courts with praise...and make His praise glorious.

Don Jacobsen

Rocky

My little buddy, Riley, picked up a rock from his driveway, and swallowed it. It wasn't a big rock, really, maybe the size of a small jagged marble – but he was just a little boy. Not quite three. Three days later when the rock hadn't reappeared they decided an X-ray might be prudent.

Especially since dad is head of the radiology department at our local hospital. Sure enough, there it was, in all its splendor, processing nicely through Riley's GI tract.

But the physician who read the X-ray also detected something they had not anticipated. Close examination revealed a tumor on Riley's left kidney...the size of a softball. A softball...I've seen the pictures. There had been no symptoms, no pain, no reason to suspect a huge malignant tumor in the abdomen of a three-year old. Three
days later the surgeon removed the intruder and the kidney, and Riley began a three-month saga of chemotherapy.

Fast forward six years. Riley is 9 now. (That’s his photo at the top – I call him Rocky.) Healthy. High energy. Fastest feet in his class. Here’s the backstory. The surgeon asked dad how they had discovered the tumor. When he heard the story his comment was, “Riley wouldn’t be alive had it not been for the rock.” So Riley and his family and all of us who know them, looking back, praise God for Riley’s rock.

Our God says, “In all things give thanks.” When the story ends and we see the outcome, then we can smile. But while the story is in progress and we can’t see the end and still we trust Him, that’s when we can praise the Lord...anyway. We call it faith.

That’s why when God’s people come together to worship they follow the admonition to “…enter his gates with thanksgiving... come before Him with joyful songs, for...His faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Ps. 100) The grandest demonstration of trust is to smile even before we know the reason for the rock.

Commenting on the psalms, the oldest hymn book in existence, my friend Mark Batterson reminds us, “…the greatest of psalms came out of the worst circumstances... David is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. David is agonizing over his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. David is a fugitive hiding out in the cave of Adullam... those circumstances produced the profound lyrics we find in Psalm 23, Psalm 51, and Psalm 142.”

Few have suffered as did Job, yet he could say, “Though He slay me yet will I trust Him.” In other words, “I will praise the Lord in all circumstances, even when I don’t understand, because I know His faithfulness continues through all generations.”

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

The Stealth Force

A pastor friend felt impressed to shape some serious intercession circles around a number of people he described as “attending non-members.” I don’t have to define that term; every church has some. There were 21 altogether who had been close to the church for a while but had never made a decision to ask Jesus to be Lord of their lives.

He made a list of the 21 and one afternoon delivered it to a shut-in lady who lived nearby and asked if she would take seriously the assignment to pray for every name on the list. He asked her
to plead intently and often that Jesus would work in their lives and woo them to His side. She was excited to be invited and he was emboldened to take the list to others in his church whom he identified as passionate intercessors.

The mission caught on and many others in the congregation began to build bridges of authentic friendship with the individuals in this select group. The project never went public – no announcements were made, nothing in the newsletter, no poster on the bulletin board – but that stealth force took its work seriously.

Anticipating that God would honor the prayers of His people, the pastor decided to conclude every message with an invitation to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Six months later all of the people on the list of 21 had made a public decision for Christ. The last one to make that decision was a young thirty-something named Ray and through his previously resistant attitude toward the gospel, he represented perhaps the greatest miracle of the entire group.

But here’s the part of the story that brings me to tears every time I hear it. As Ray walked down the aisle, the pastor said to the congregation, “If you have been praying that Ray would make the decision he’s made today, would you stand.” Three-quarters of the congregation stood.

Here’s a church doing what a prayer-saturated church does: creating a place where the lost are found, loved, and intensely prayed for. That’s one of the features of a House of Prayer. The Holy Spirit calls the attention of the Body of Christ to those in whose lives He is at work, then lays on their hearts a personal and corporate assignment to join Him in His work. On a scale of 1 to 10, how’s that working out where you worship?

Don Jacobsen

**Peanut Butter in the Parking Lot**

Christian comedian Mark Lowry says, “God spreads grace like a 4-year old spreads peanut butter – He gets it all over everything.” Including you and me.

But how do you get to peanut butter in the parking lot? Well, wasn’t it just an hour ago we headed for the worship center fresh from a week of hand-to-hand combat with an enemy hell-bent on our destruction. The score has not always gone in our favor. Scarred, guilt-ridden, unworthy, disappointed. Aliens by birth; sinners by choice. We feel desperately unworthy to be there but desperately needing to be there.

We approach the front door half expecting to find it locked. If He treated us as we deserve we would not be allowed to enter. Some of the battles of the week have not gone well. Temptations that by this time should be history are still too much with us. When we reflect on our failures, our stubbornness’s, our compromises, our rebellious hearts, we cry out, “O what a wretched person I am; who shall deliver me...?” We reach for the door – and find it open. Amazing.
In the course of the hour that follows, though, the trajectory of our journey changes. As we worship we have the distinct sense that the Father was standing out in the road all the time, impatient for us to arrive. He looks lovingly past the scars and the guilt and the shame, and His hug is so real it leaves no doubt we are welcome. In fact, He is in the business of fixing all of the damage done by sin. We call it grace—and He spreads it everywhere.

As we begin the recital of our defeats He raises His hand and says, “Wait, I already took care of those. Let’s talk about victory. I know that’s why you’ve come.” So we present our request, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” So in this sacred hour the Son comes up. Hope is reborn. Yesterday’s grief has been neutered. And why not? God has a thing about joy. It’s the most frequently mentioned emotion in Scripture.

A few minutes later the church parking lot is the happiest place in this zip code, because it’s filled with people whose lives are radicalized by his Amazing Grace. Spread all over everything. Kind of like peanut butter in the hands of a 4-year old.

Don Jacobsen

You Just Keep Searching

My friend Andy Nash tells the story of a man he met while he was having the oil changed in his car. Since they both had a family of girls they began swapping stories. In the course of the exchange the man revealed that he at one time also had a third daughter but that he now had only two.

Andy pressed gently to get details. His friend recalled that he and his wife and three daughters, being from New England, were on a first-ever major vacation at the Grand Canyon. One evening they sent their oldest daughter to the store in the car for some provisions—but she didn’t return. In deep distress they notified law enforcement, then launched an all-out search. Other vacationers joined; they found nothing.

The dad began a weeks-long trek, driving every road, walking every trail, exploring every canyon, asking everyone he met. Nothing. But he would not give up.
Stories of what had happened to their precious daughter plagued their days and haunted their nights. So Dad kept searching. Nothing.

Over time reality forced a return to a degree of normalcy, but dad would not give up. He got a job as a long-haul truck driver and requested a route that crossed and crisscrossed the Canyon. For thirty years he drove and searched and watched and inquired and prayed and hoped. Thirty years. Nothing. But you can’t turn it off when someone you care deeply about is lost.

Like the folks in the black Mustang who drove up to Eddie’s Bar after work this evening. Are they lost? Don’t know for sure, but there’s a strong possibility. Are they on your prayer list? Like the fella whose picture is on the evening news. He robbed a home and badly beat up the elderly couple who live there. The reporter said he had found only about $40; the older couple are still in the hospital. Is the robber a lost man? Don’t know for sure, but there’s a strong possibility. Is he on your prayer list?

How about the junior high sports coach who sexually assaulted a bunch of young boys in the school locker room over a two-year period? Is he a lost man? Don’t know for sure, but there’s a strong possibility. And how’s his wife doing? Are they on your prayer list? And how about those five boys?

Because you and your church love Jesus, you also love the people in those real-life vignettes. And when you love someone you never give up, never let go, never stop searching because you can’t turn it off when someone you care deeply about is lost. That’s part of what it means to be a praying church.

**Don Jacobsen**

**A Holy Addiction**

A holy addiction develops in the prayer-saturated church. Once you have been to God’s house and met Him there you are never again content to be a part of a passive audience. You have discovered that prayer is not a spectator sport and if it isn’t real and genuine and moving, something is missing.

At one time I had the sense – and maybe you have, too – that the pastor, the elders, musicians and worship leaders were the main actors, God was the One just off stage whispering to them what to do next, and the congregation was the audience. Kind of like a theater production. But the reverse is actually true. Those in the congregation are the actors, the pastor and worship leaders are coaching everyone what to do next, but the audience is God. That changes how you do church.

Let me tell you a story. Long ago in a land far, far away we were visiting in a medium-size Adventist church – maybe 300 or so. We knew the pastor hardly at all, and not much of anyone
else, either. We recognized most of the music – the music, not the words. We didn't understand the language being spoken from the pulpit either, yet somehow we felt engaged as if those leading out were intent on helping all of us be aware that we were in God’s presence.

I understood when they welcomed the visitors because they said that not only in Mandarin but also in English. We could follow the children’s story, too, by the rapt attention on the kids’ faces. And the offering – you can give an offering in any language.

So far I was feeling pretty comfortable with where all this was headed. Even without a translator the service felt familiar. But then the mood shifted. The pastor stood and announced that it was time for everyone to kneel – that he was going to pray. In most English-speaking churches we’d likely call it the pastoral prayer. But what caught my attention was that he then left the platform and came down on the main floor. Turning his back to the congregation he knelt with us, facing not us, but the front of the church.

I understood only two words of his prayer – Hallelujah and amen – but that took nothing away from what happened. He led us into a deep sense of the presence of God. I found myself saying Amen, even though I hadn't understood his words. Many kneeling around me were in tears – and so was I. So was the pastor. Maybe God was, too. He drew near. That’s all I can say...God drew near. I was reluctant to get up from my knees. I got what I came for – the privilege of worshiping at the feet of Almighty God. It’s a holy addiction I need to nurture.

Don Jacobsen

Tattoos & Sawdust

A while back Ruthie and I were visiting in a Sabbath School and the subject of tattoos came up. I'm not sure why, but in many classes, if a teacher permits, the discussion can take any detour a class member chooses. You’ve been there, too. Anyway, the gentleman who brought up the subject went into a fervent rant about how ugly tattoos are, how they desecrate the body God created, how under no conditions should they ever be permitted on any one at any time. He was certain he knew that a “tat” was a clear disclosure of a disturbed, warped character. Others joined in though they were not as ardent as he.

As the tattoo police began to describe the various kinds of disciplinary options open to the church, a demure little gray haired lady, probably in her 60's, sitting near the front of the class stopped the conversation in mid-flight by admitting that she had a tattoo, though she would not say where. It got really quiet. Finally, she spoke again to clarify that it had been a long time ago when she was young and...
not thinking as clearly as she would later. She had tried to have it removed but it had created a substantial debris field – which she elected not to display.

The teacher changed the subject. He shouldn’t have. It was a classic teaching moment to have the class process how it relates to people who have beliefs or practices different from their own. Let me be clear - I am not a tattoo fan. I don't have one; I plan not ever to have one. That doesn't make me spiritual, but if I am critical of one who does, it identifies me as judgmental and if I understand correctly, that is more problematic to God than tattoos.

I love people with tattoos, and if I don't, I need to fall on my face in repentance until I do. Do people with tattoos have some kind of deep-seated need which they are trying to cover with ink? I have no idea. Jesus never asked me to answer that question, or even to consider it. He asked only that I love them, accept them, befriend them, treat them as the brothers/sisters they are since He and they and I all have the same Father.

This is the type of real-world lab that helps a praying church set prayer agendas for itself. The teacher might have read a sentence from the most famous sermon ever preached that asks, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matt 7:3) and then called the class to a time of deep contrition and cleansing. Now that’s Sabbath School in a praying church.

Don Jacobsen

Pray Big

Permit me to attempt an improvement on a famous quote. It was D. L. Moody, legendary evangelist of the late nineteenth century, who said, “If God is your partner, make your plans big.” Here is my update: “If you believe God is listening, make your prayers big.”

I'm convinced God loves it when we pray big. You have noticed too, I'm sure, that if we're not careful we can get stuck on bland. Two very common requests that show up in the in-box in heaven are, “Dear God, please bless...” and “Dear God, please be with....” Bless...and be with... Wasn't He planning to do that already? “Dear God, please bless our children today...” “Dear God, please be with our pastor today...” He does. Even if we don't ask, He does. That's His nature.

But let me put forth an observation and then a for instance: I am convinced that God is honored when our prayers are audacious and specific. Bold and focused. Big and precise. I mean, if God answered the prayers your church prayed last week would you know it? Would it have changed your community?

OK, let me try and illustrate: Sometimes during the morning prayer time we hear something like this: “Dear God, please bless the lost all around us...” Noble prayer. On target. But what if, instead, the prayer sounded something like this, “Dear God, our hearts ache with Yours over
those in our community who don’t know Jesus yet. So as we’re at work this week, or at the Post Office or the gas station or the grocery store, show us how we can be there on Your errand. May there be something so attractive, so thoughtful, so patient, that those we meet will want to know why. Help us remember we’re not just there to buy Kleenex and kale, but also to love the cashier and the elderly lady who can’t find the light bulbs.

“Please, God, nurture within us the ability to see every person we meet through Your eyes, as a candidate for immortal honors. Show us how to be gentle but courageous in letting Your love show. Sculpt servants’ hearts within us. We invite You to use every contact we make this week as an event with eternal consequences.”

Be assured I’m not attempting to script the morning prayer at your church next week. My purpose is to illustrate what a bold and focused prayer might sound like. Our purpose is not to get God to run our errands, but to come in line with His purposes so we can be available to run His. His plans are bold and specific, audacious and precise. I want to pray big and join Him.

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

When God’s People Pray

I have read often and in awe the inspired statement that says, “God can do some things if we pray that He cannot do if we don’t pray.” I am still a bit baffled by it, though I believe it. Let me tell you a short story and then you tell me if you think it might validate that dramatic sentence.

Recently Ruthie and I attended a major convocation of worshipers. The first part of the service we were blessed. Good music, passionate prayer, even a meaningful offering appeal. But when the preaching began we both immediately sensed that God had elected to draw near to a degree that we do not always sense, even when we are in His house.

We knew the preacher well; we have heard him speak often and we have always been blessed. Always. But there was something unusual this day. There was a power in his message, the Scriptures he referenced came through with unusual clarity. He told a story we had heard him tell before, but this was different. There was a forcefulness, a conviction, an authority that was profound.

Halfway through I glanced at my wife and discovered we were both in tears. So was the lady sitting to my right. There were reverent amens from across the large auditorium, even
appropriate applause on occasion. God was up to something and we were moved by it. Had I looked up I would not have been surprised to see tongues of fire.

As the message concluded, the speaker made a very specific appeal. Scores streamed to the front indicating they had made decisions of great consequence. They were met by individuals who had been prepared to welcome them and ask, “How can I pray for you today?” I have no question but that the population of eternity was expanded there at the front of the auditorium. I walked by nearly an hour later and many were still there being ministered to.

But here’s the part of the story I believe God wanted me to know because He wanted you to know. I learned that one of the pastors from that field and his wife became convicted that God wanted to do something out of the ordinary that morning. So in obedience they spent all night Friday night in earnest prayer that God would pour out His Spirit on that place without measure. That He would anoint the preaching. That He would confirm His Word in people’s hearts. That addictions would be broken, that marriages would be healed, that prodigals would come home, that a revival would be conceived.

So here’s my question: Would the preaching have been powerful had they not thus prayed? Would the music have been winsome and the offering appeal persuasive? Without a doubt. But something happens when God’s people pray. In fact, God can do some things if we pray that He cannot do if we don’t pray. I believe that.

Don Jacobsen

The Tyranny of the Church Bulletin

A while back we were visiting a church in the Midwest. We had a weekend free and it was wonderful to just participate as worshipers. We were blessed. We were moved. Great music. Powerful message. The morning was obviously well planned and graceful. Till it came time to end the sermon.

I neglected to mention that the service was being televised. That meant there were time constraints. Everything that happened had to pirouette around the countdown clock on the front pew. As the clock approached 30 seconds to go the pastor was just coming to the good part. He had been building toward a strong conclusion and a passionate appeal but he ran out of clock. Not many options open to him. So he quit. He just quit. His final line as he looked into the camera was something like, “Tune in next week...”

There was a palpable sense that all the air was rushing out of the tire. Someone had the benediction and we left. But it set me thinking about some of the constraints our traditions put on the work of the Holy Spirit. Like some hardliner in the congregation, “Pastor, at this church we are through with the service by noon. If we aren’t, the devil takes over, you know.” Or this one,
“I’ve got a roast in the oven and if we don’t get home on time it will be charcoal.” I was once told (true story) by one of the elders just before we went on the platform, “You can preach as long as you want to here, but we go home at noon.” I wasn’t sure whether he was joking or not.

And then there’s the church bulletin. In some places you do not deviate from the bulletin. “We’ve been using that in our worship service since anyone can remember, and we prefer if you don’t deviate from that structure.” You don’t often hear it spoken in those words but there are places where it is expected that the bulletin will be the blueprint for the morning service.

But what if the Holy Spirit elected to do something out of the ordinary? What if the worship leader sensed a move of the Spirit and decided to have an unscheduled time of intercession? What if a deacon handed a note to the pastor to say that there is a family in our service who just lost a child in death over night? What if a prodigal wandered in, smelling of alcohol, just after the offering?

My appeal is not for an unplanned service. My appeal is that we hone our sensitivities to be alert to those times when the Holy Spirit may choose to move in ways we had not anticipated. I hunch that the service on the Day of Pentecost may have run past noon.

Don Jacobsen

Band of Brothers

A praying church is a safe church. A church that is serious about interceding for those who belong there is warm, attractive, almost irresistible. It’s interesting to note that the New Testament urges us more frequently to pray for other believers than it does to pray for the lost. The reason for that I think is because a healthy, welcoming church is the tool God most often uses to reach the lost. And also to heal and equip those He wants to commission.

You perhaps have detected, too, that it feels different just to walk into a prayer-saturated church? It’s not easy to define but it’s unmistakable. It’s not like any place else. Let me tell why I think that’s true. It’s because those who make up the membership of that church have decided that criticism is the devil’s substitute for intercessory prayer.
Have you seen the YouTube video, “Battle at Kruger”? It's an amateur 8-minute video and although it's hard to watch it has been viewed more than 77 million times. Three water buffalo – a female, a bull, and a calf – approach a watering hole in Kruger Park, South Africa. Four lions pounce on the calf with the intention of making a meal. The male and female buffalo try to rescue the calf but they are no match.

Enter the herd. At least a hundred buffalo hear the commotion and appear on the set. They form a circle around the little buffalo and one at a time the brawny males charge the four lions. You can watch the melee as a bull hooks a lion with its horns and throws it ten feet in the air. The other three are still attacking the calf till a second bull gores a second lion and chases him off. The herd tramples a third.

Finally, the calf twists away from the lions and runs to the protection of the herd. Some of the largest bulls attack together and send the pride of lions scrambling into the bush. The calf walks away with hardly a limp.

The parallel is too obvious to need comment. A bit like a story I heard long ago from World War II. A battalion of GIs was notoriously irascible and constantly fighting each other. Then they were sent into battle in Europe. Suddenly they became each other's guardian. Any one of them would give his life for any other. They discovered that when they faced a common enemy and shared a common cause they became a band of brothers. Sort of like God's church.

Don Jacobsen

Distance Doesn’t Count

As I’m writing this today the state of West Virginia is under siege. Unrelenting flood waters have attacked the state, killing at least 23 thus far and destroying uncounted homes, businesses, schools and churches. It's gut-wrenching to watch the videos coming out of that place of beautiful mountains and verdant valleys.

Your church has been earnestly praying for the people of West Virginia, right? “But brother Don, we don’t even know them. We don't know exactly what the needs are. And what can our prayers from such a long distance do about flood waters way over in West Virginia?” Oh, you mean our God is limited by geography? Let me tell you a story.

Ruthie and some of her passionate friends (Alcyon Fleck, May Chung, and Edna Craik) heard about the desperate conditions in some of the orphanages in Romania. So they collected a huge array of clothing and supplies and some funds and left Oregon on a mission of mercy. The airlines transported the boxes of goods at no additional cost and they were met at the airport by church members who were eager to be part of their mission. They would soon come to respect the deep spiritual commitment of Romania's Christians.
One night in Bucharest there was a banging on the door of their hotel room. Before they could respond they heard a key being inserted into the lock. Ruthie and her two roommates rushed to try and hold the door shut, but not before it swung open far enough for them to see three burly, unsavory-looking characters who were trying to force their way into the room. Instantly they prayed and pushed, and incredibly they were able to push the men back, close the door and lock it. They called the front desk, but by the time help arrived the men were long gone.

When the ladies returned to Oregon they recounted God’s providences on the trip, including this one in the hotel. Ruthie’s prayer partner, Ginny Allen, stopped her in mid-story. “When was that?” Ginny inquired. They compared times and time zones and then Ginny said, “Wait, I remember that. I was awakened in the middle of the night with the strong sense that I needed to pray for your safety. So I rolled out of bed and pleaded that wherever you and the others were God would send His angels to protect you. And He did!”

It’s 5,931 miles from Bucharest to Portland. Obviously God is not constrained by space. After all, He created it. So no matter how far your church is from West Virginia - or anywhere else there’s a need - you can trust that God is able and eager to respond to your prayers, even

Don Jacobsen

Safe Places

If there is any place in the world that is a safe place to fail it should be in a healthy, Christian church. And our kids should know that. The members of the church must learn to relate to their kids the same way their Savior relates to them... “There is nothing you can do that will make us stop loving you. We may not be crazy about what you’re doing right now, but it doesn’t change how we feel about you. We may not appreciate what you’re doing, but we’re glad you’re in here anyway.”

Every youngster in our churches has the right to grow up knowing, “I didn’t always make all the right choices and I know I sometimes disappointed them, but one thing I always knew - they loved me there. No matter how bad it got, I knew I could always go back.”

Some kids are easier to love than others. Most kids are easier to love at some times in their lives than at other times. I’m convinced God often gifts churches with irascible kids and says, “You say you love Me ... OK, here’s your chance to demonstrate it. And remember, you love Me the same amount as you love the one you love the least.”
So let me attempt to draft the kind of prayer our kids need to hear their church pray. It might go something like this: “Dear Lord, if there is any influence in our homes or in our church that is leading our kids in the wrong direction, please show us what it is. If there is something we are neglecting in our training of them, please bring it to our attention. If there is anything in us that is making it difficult for them to fall deeply in love with Jesus, make us aware of it.

“If the example we are setting of what a joyous Christian is in any way makes our faith unattractive to our children, dear God, we plead with you to forgive us and purge it from our hearts. And please, Lord, rescue us from the pride that wants our children to obey so their bad choices don’t make us look like bad parents. If there is anything they are doing or they are becoming that we should know about, please show us what it is, and give us Godly wisdom as we help them through it. May this prayer-saturated church we are seeking to establish reach out with effectiveness into our community, but please may it begin in here...for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”

Don Jacobsen

Glory for Me

You might not believe this, but it was in the late 40’s, I was a teen, just getting a taste of church, and they asked me to go “Harvest Ingathering.” They piled Mrs. Baker and her wheezy pump organ on the back of a flatbed truck and we headed out for a quiet neighborhood in Yakima, Washington, with the promise of hot chocolate when we got back. Mrs. Baker pumped for all she was worth, and we sang our hearts out - all 20 or more of us. When they heard me sing they quickly promoted me to door-to-door solicitor (we were raising money for missions), but not before there was seared into my memory bank the words, “When by His grace I shall look on His face, that will be glory, glory for me.” It was the song on which we sounded the least dissonant.

It wasn’t until years later that I began to discover the heresy in that song. Glory for me? No! Glory for Him. Joy for me? Yes! Indescribable. Thrill for me? Absolutely. Beyond measure. Excitement for me? Off the chart. Gratitude? Beyond words. But not glory for me. That all goes to Him. It isn’t something I did that got me there. It’s what He did. No one is going to rush up to me and say, “Good job, Don, you made it.” No, it’s totally about Him.

Everything is about Him. Prayer is about Him. It’s not about getting my needs met, it’s about participating with Him in His universe-wide project to accomplish His will. Church is about Him. It’s not so I can sit in judgment on the speaker or the music, or the length of Mrs. Edward’s skirt. It’s about Him. So I can praise Him in the midst of His family. So He can speak to me and change me with the ennobling influence of His presence. We sing some gospel songs (they describe our journey) but mainly we sing praise to Him. God inhabits the praises of His people and we want to meet Him here.
The second coming is about Him. It's not just to rescue me from a ravaged planet, it's because His heart aches to get all the family back together. He hurts when we hurt. Multiply that by the anguish and despair in most of the 7.2 billion hearts beating daily on planet earth. Tithing is about Him. He doesn't need my money, but He is keenly committed to seeing unselfish traits develop in his children, and sacrificial giving starves covetousness to death. Healthy living is about Him. It's not about what I like that I have to give up, it's so I can exhibit the radiant good health that will allow me to bring Him glory. Go through the list; it's all about Him. So, instead of, “That will be glory for me,” how about we change the song to “...Down at the cross was the blood applied, Glory to His Name!”

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

Before We Speak

He often answers before we ask. Have you noticed that? He longs to give us things we never even think to ask for. His desire to give is far greater than our capacity to receive. He wants to meet needs we don’t even know we have. What a God.

It seems to me this raises the question, though, if the above statements are true, of why we pray. I seem to get along pretty well with very little knee-time. In my church it often seems quite routine and I seldom see tongues of fire. So maybe I should just set Him free to do what He wants to do without bothering Him with my instructions.

But I’m convinced that one of the things that happens when we pray is that by doing so we thereby acknowledge that we know we’re not going anywhere on our own. And neither is the church. It’s not willpower. It’s not organization. It’s not talent. It’s not even right theology. It’s Him.

Only the church that is prayer-saturated can possibly fulfill God’s design for that church. We are so in over our heads. We are so out-classed by a cruel enemy. We are so inert in this battle if we use only our own weapons.

We do hit-and-run prayers and wonder at our incremental growth. We treat prayer like a drive-through window and are surprised that our best efforts result in a malnourished congregation. We struggle to get beyond the “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayers and wonder that we can’t stay awake through the sermon.
My plea today is that we get honest with God and admit that Jesus was absolutely correct when He told us that without Him we can do nothing. God, we’re not here to ask favors of a Stranger; we don’t seek Your hand, we seek Your face. We don’t ask for Your gifts, but we do want to know Your heart. And we want to know our own hearts because that drives us to our knees before You. Dear God, please deliver us from the idolatry of anemic prayer. Of spasmodic prayer. Of prayer that is not fervent. Of prayer that is not high priority.

Teach us, God; do whatever it takes ... humble us ... embarrass us ... shake us. But teach us. The task is too great, our own resources too slender. Bring us to repentance from our attitude of let’s-suck-it-up-and-do-this. We can’t.

Don Jacobsen

Jesus & Me

Jesus and I are prayer partners. He intercedes for me. When the “accuser of the brethren” stands before the Father to accuse me, (and by the way, Satan can make an air-tight case against me without even exaggerating), Jesus steps to my defense and says, “My blood, Father, my blood. Those sins have already been forgiven. Look; They’re no longer on the book!” The universe looks on in bewildered astonishment.

I’m not sure I understand all that “intercede” means, but one meaning for intercessor is a person who stands between two who are estranged and brings them together. That’s my goal, and that’s Jesus’ goal for me. So we have a common prayer project - me. Jesus and I are prayer partners.

But intercessor is bigger even than that. The Bible says that Jesus is interceding for me. I want to talk to Him about that. I want to ask Him to reveal what He is saying to the Father about me. I am not afraid about what He might say because He is on my side. Maybe He is strategizing bringing resources to my aid when I am tempted. Maybe He is rejoicing that a decision I made brought Him glory. I only know He has my back.

The Holy Spirit is part of the process, too. Have you winced on occasion when reading Paul’s statement in Romans 8 about our flawed praying, something about “groanings that cannot be uttered?” I’ve often stumbled over that passage. Until I found Dr. Jack Blanco’s sterling paraphrase in the Clear Word. Listen: “We don’t even know how we should pray or what we really need, and when we think we do, we don’t know how to say it right. The Holy Spirit takes our deepest emotions and longings and puts them into the beautiful language of heaven, pleading with God for us as if we were right there.” Wow.

My takeaway in all this is that all of heaven is involved in my redemption. And then He deputizes me as His instrument on behalf of others. He invites me to become part of the army “standing
between” heaven’s invitation and the deceptions of the destroyer. It is a solemn and joyous assignment. It is part of what the Sabbath morning prayer time must include. This is not a make-believe war. The outcome is eternal. The enemy is a predator and we are no match. But as the song says, “Reinforcements now appearing ...” Jesus intercedes for every neighbor of ours; every teen tempted with porn, every business tycoon enticed by greed, every druggy, every harried single mom, every time our kids make a bad choice, every broken heart. Jesus intercedes - and you and I are invited to join Him. Prayer partners. Amazing.

Don Jacobsen

Us and Our Memes

Do you know what a meme is? (pronounced meem)
Thanks to the Internet it’s becoming more common in our vocabulary, and one definition is “a practice that becomes common and no one is sure where it came from.” Kind of like a tradition. Shaking hands as a greeting might be an example. It is thought that you approached someone and extended your right hand to assure them you were friendly and didn’t have a sword in it. Is that where it started? You may have never thought to ask.

Another meme is that church begins at 11:00 am. We’ve gone to church all over the world and it’s true most everywhere. Did you ever ask why? Do you know of anything else that begins at 11:00 am? Well, in our agrarian society it gave the farmers time to get the cows milked, get cleaned up and get to church. Not a high percentage of American Christians milk cows anymore before coming to church, but we’ve left the time pretty much unchanged. That’s a meme.

I was reading recently about a Sunday School in New England that begins at 9:42 each Sunday morning. One day a visitor asked why the unusual starting time. Some of the old-timers began to reflect that when the church was founded the street car stopped outside the church at 9:40 on Sunday morning; that gave them two minutes to get inside and begin the service. There has not been a streetcar near the church in a hundred years but the starting time is still 9:42. That’s a meme.
Any memes in your church? Like the deacons taking up the offering, for instance. It’s not a bad idea, it’s just not a biblical idea, but I assure you that if you change it some will be offended. That qualifies as a meme. How about having the deaconesses remove the cloth that covers the elements at the Communion service. That’s not a bad idea either, it’s just not a biblical idea. In some churches that is the only assignment given to the deaconesses. Meme?

Where I’m going with this is to challenge us to prayerfully rethink what we do in church to make sure it has spiritual significance and is not simply a deeply ingrained (aka boring) tradition. May I put the “closing song” on that list. Would a time of quiet reflection on the message just preached be more effective? At least on occasion?

And then there’s the “Morning Prayer.” Does it come from a passionate heart, from a pastoral sensitivity? Does it lead the worshipers into a sense of the presence of God? Is it filled with praise and adoration and worship and thanksgiving? Have the elders met together to pray about what to pray about? Is there forgiveness in it? Intercession for the lost? Pleading for the sins of our nation? And our congregation? Every prayer ought to change your church. Otherwise it qualifies as a meme.

Don Jacobsen

Missing in Action: One Cloud

A strange thing happened on the way to the party. The cloud went away. The cloud went away and apparently no one noticed.

Following God’s blueprint, the Israelites had built a portable church as they trekked across the desert toward the promised land. Its most unique feature was the cloud that hovered over it by day, which became a pillar-like fire in the sky at night. It was the symbol of the very presence of God.

Other nations had armies. Other nations had chariots. Other nations had swords and spears and horses. But no other nation had the cloud. No other nation had the presence. What made Israel unique was the presence. When it moved, they moved. When it stopped, they stopped. It was evident to them and to the world that the presence of God was with them. I think they took great comfort in the cloud.

Then one day it wasn’t there. I mean, it was gone. They still killed the lambs. They still had the ceremonies. They still went through the order of service. They still had the opening and closing song. But the presence was not there. No cloud. I wonder who noticed it first. I wonder if anyone sounded an alarm. We don’t have any of those details, but we do have this one: Jeremiah (2:6) will describe the event in these words: “...” They did not ask, “Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness ...?”
The presence was gone and no one asked Why? As tragic as it was to lose the presence, the greater tragedy was not to notice it was gone.

Fast forward to Corinth. Not everything that happened in Corinth fit the ideal New Testament template, but the church was asking the right question. The topic was what was going on in the church and they wanted to make sure that, when a guest attended their worship service, “he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'” (I Corinthians 14:25).

Our quest, too. Spirit-filled, transformed people. Powerful, Spirit-filled preaching. Passionate, Spirit-filled praying. Meaningful, Spirit-filled music. Earnest, Spirit-filled calls to confession and repentance. Basking in His forgiveness; renewed by hope. The distinct sense that we didn’t just come to do church, but that we met with Him, to be changed by Him. And all who worship there will confess, “God is really among you.” Oh, God, please make it so among us. Amen.

Don Jacobsen

Nothing Like a Church

There is nothing like a church. There are 6,277 local Seventh-day Adventist congregations in North America. Each is different from the other. Each is unique. Most all of them could say, “In our church we never …” or “In our church we always …” But each is part of the unique entity we call “the church.”

The church is the only organization in history which Scripture records as having been established by God. The church is the only organization God claims to have put in place specifically for the purpose of assaulting the kingdom of evil. The church is the only organization to which God assigns the task of telling His story to the world. (To the analytically inclined it could be argued that we should include publishing and Christian media and Christian schools, etc. I would reason that those are simply some of the means the church chooses to accomplish its assignment.)

Here is the reason I make these assertions: Virtually every organization, over time, tends to stray off message. Entropy sets in. Call it malaise, call it torpor, call it losing focus. Call it Laodicea. Call it what you wish but the church is not immune. Budget decisions are often made for the comfort of the club members. The language we speak to each other in Sabbath School class is often primarily understood by other insiders. Guests may come and go without ever hearing the genuine words, “We are so happy you came to worship with us today! How can we pray for you this week? Do you have plans for lunch?”
The first Christian church was launched on its mission in a prayer meeting. That mission is renewed and kept at the head of the priorities list when the church prays ... when the church kneels and acknowledges that it is surrounded by multitudes who have no hope. That man you passed on your way to church who was mowing his lawn. Those kids washing the family car in the driveway. That young mom on her way to the Laundromat. Many of them, unless there is a supernatural intervention in their lives, will not spend eternity with Jesus.

And those guys with their own little sub-culture, sleeping under the bridge. That single mom who cleans houses for others but sleeps in a shelter. That thirty-something who heads for the pub straight from work. That teen dabbling with drugs ... Like no other, the burning compassion for those who need Him is kept alive in the collective heart of the church on its collective knees.

Don Jacobsen

Strange Story

My friend, Skip Bell, reminds us that we don’t venture far into a serious trek through the Old Testament before we encounter some rough neighborhoods. There are stories we don’t understand, stories we don’t like, stories that leave us shaking our heads. Just when we thought we had God figured out we come across a narrative that shocks us. It’s not that we don’t believe it, it’s just because it’s, well, strange.

Here’s a classic. God and Abraham are in full challenge-and-response mode. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are so vile God’s intent is to completely eradicate them. But Lot, Abraham’s nephew, lives there and the news of impending calamity sends Abraham into full intercessory alert. (Genesis 18-19)

His argument with God is that there are so many righteous in the city, surely God isn’t going to destroy them, too. God, please, if there are fifty, he pleads, won’t you spare the city for their sakes? God says, Okay; for fifty. Emboldened now, Abraham pleads, How about forty-five? God grants that request, too. Forty? God says, Okay, for forty. Six times Abraham thinks of his nephew, Lot, and six times he presses the boundaries of God’s mercy. This is intercession in capital letters.

Abraham has talked the number down to ten. Surely, he muses, there will be ten righteous there. Among them, though barely, will be Lot and his family. Abraham breathes a sigh of relief. Lot will be delivered. Mission accomplished. But the drama is not over. Lot refuses to leave. He doesn’t see this intercession for what it is.

Undaunted, God sends two angels, and they have to get physical with Lot to get him out of town. But here’s the point: Unbeknown to Lot, his life is spared because of the tenacious intercession of an old man. God is honored when His people become aggressive intercessors. I love Peterson’s
paraphrase in The Message: “And that's the story: When God destroyed the cities of the Plain, He was mindful of Abraham and first got Lot out of there.” You saw it, right ...? “God was mindful of Abraham.” It's not hard for me to believe that intercessors are some of God's favorite people.

Let's update the story a few millennia. A man we'll call Burt sits at his desk; it's nearly quitting time. He gets to thinking about the cute girl he met in the lunch room yesterday – and the strange fact that she gave him her number. Maybe he'll give her a call and stop by her house for just a few minutes – what harm can come from that?

But then he feels a check in his spirit. “I can't do that – I'd be betraying my wife, my kids, my God, my church.” So he repents of toying with the temptation, gets in his car and heads for home.

What Burt doesn't know is that just then someone who had his name on a prayer list – maybe an old man – raised his name to God in earnest intercession. The old man knew nothing of Burt's battle, and Burt knew nothing of the old man's list. Strange story? Not.

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

Run to the Roar

Although the calendar challenges the notion, I like to think I'm still young at heart. That may explain why I find fascination in the life story of young David. It's true, as he matures things get dicey, but when we trek around the hills with him in his teens it's a surprise-a-minute. Let me skip over the bear fight and the lion fight and some of the other placid stuff and get to the story that makes every teen's pulse quicken.

Here’s the picture – 10,000 Philistine soldiers arrayed on one side of the valley; 10,000 Israelites on the other. It might have been parity except for the 9' behemoth named Goliath. Every day for six weeks he stands in the valley between and taunts Israel's legions. His biceps, his voice, and his ego are a matched set.

Young David arrives on the scene, fresh from taking care of the lambs on his dad's farm. He is embarrassed at the deadlock and offers to dispatch the bully in the valley. Interesting odds: Goliath's armor weighs as much as David weighs. But David is on a mission. His mantra is: (If we win), “… the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.” (1 Sam. 17:46)
So he fingers his slingshot, picks up five little rocks (Goliath had four brothers), and then this, “David ran toward the battle line ...” (v. 48) He ran to the emergency. He had no doubt about God’s ability to bring victory in the valley. And He did.

I like to picture my church in that narrative. Running to the hard places. The campuses of today's universities, the tragedy of today's inner-cities, the hedonism of today's entertainment icons, the slick farce of television's marketing of stuff nobody needs, the clever deception of big-pharma that says, “Don’t change your way of living, just take this new pill.” Pick a fight. (I didn’t say Start one.) Choose a valley and run to the fray. Make your presence felt. The cause? So that “the whole world will know there's a God.”

A squadron of sanctified ambulance chasers, that’s what we are. Rushing to the wrecks sin causes. Fortified and guided by time on our knees, then showing up at the pub, the crime scene, the divorce court, the hospital ER. Probably not to throw rocks, but to intercede. On the edge of every tragedy stands someone who needs us to pray. In Oregon a neighborhood bank was robbed. Twice. The kids from the church school went to the bank, made a circle around it, and prayed. That’s running to the roar. If you haven’t already, try it.

Don Jacobsen

**Talkin’ Trash**

Yesterday Ruthie was taking the trash to the compactor at the apartment complex where we’re staying. Enroute she met a young woman and as they walked they chatted for a minute – just girl talk. Ruthie turned to walk away and continue her errand, but she felt a check in her spirit. So she turned and walked back to her new acquaintance, and, out of the blue asked, “Are you a Christian?”

The lady thought a moment, then admitted, “Well, I am, but I’m not living like it right now.” Ruthie replied, “Well you know God still loves you, right?” The lady admitted she wasn’t sure, but by now there were big tears in her eyes. They spoke for a few minutes more and Ruthie prayed for her there by the dumpster. When she said Amen, the new friend was in full meltdown. She was obviously sensing that God was pursuing her and had sent her help in the unlikeliest of places.

Before they parted, Ruthie added, “At our church we have a prayer service on Wednesday evening and we would be so happy to have you come so we can pray for you.” Without hesitating the lady replied, “I will. Tell me where your church is.” When Ruthie pointed out the directions, the lady replied, “Oh, I know where that is. I’ll be there.” Will she? We don’t know for sure, but I think so.
I couldn’t help but reflect on what had just happened. A young woman, not near a well but near a dumpster, struggling through her life outside the will of God. A providential meeting with someone who cared about her and was willing to engage in conversation. Appropriate questions. Caring answers. Assurance of her value in the eyes of God. An invitation. I just believe God loves to do that.

But also, just down the street, a praying church. When she arrives on Wednesday she will be greeted warmly and genuinely. As the Spirit leads she will likely be invited to come to the front where some prayer warriors will gather and intercede fervently (biblical word) for her. They will pray that God will strengthen her, that He will help her understand His strong plan for her life. They will ask that He give her the desires of her heart. That the providential encounter will change the population of eternity. I just believe God loves to do that, too.

Don Jacobsen

Knee-driven Givers

Prayer is not a stand-alone. Like love, “pray” is a verb. An action word. Prayer is the prelude to doing something. Prayer, well-conceived, leads us to go on God’s errands. In God’s economy, prayer is the means to an end. And we don’t always know the end.

Our good friend Janet Lui was shopping on a very hot afternoon on Market Street in San Francisco recently. She had just a couple of things yet to pick up at Macy’s, but as she approached the store she noticed a homeless man sitting on the curb. She remembers thinking he had to be one of the most dejected and hopeless appearing people she had ever seen. As she walked by she heard him mumble something about, “Please buy me an ice cream.” Shopping for ice cream really wasn’t on her agenda. Besides, they don’t sell ice cream on the sidewalk in front of Macy’s.

But there was a hotdog cart. “Come on,” she thought, “they don’t sell ice cream off of hotdog carts.” But just on the off-chance this one did, she approached. No, they didn’t sell ice cream; but they did sell frozen fruit bars. Hmm, maybe that would help cool off the old man on the
curb. What flavor might he like? The hotdog man said he sold mango and strawberry. She opted for strawberry.

She paid for the bar and went back to where the man was still sitting, now looking more despondent than ever. She smiled at the man and handed him the strawberry bar. “Oh, thank you,” he said, “you even got my favorite flavor.” Then, “God bless you!” “God bless me?” I thought. “I should be giving you my blessing. Janet turned and hurried back to her shopping errand.

She navigated the crowds toward home, then supper and bedtime. But a few minutes into her evening prayers, as she was reflecting on the events of the day she was sure she heard the voice of God whisper to her soul, “Thank you for the ice cream.” “But God ...” she responded. “If you've done it for the least of these” the whisper continued, “you've done it for Me, remember?” She remembered.

Knee-time shapes us into givers. We are in training to hear the heart of God and to respond at the impulse of His will. Prayer makes us available. Imagine a whole church full of knee-driven givers! How it would change our world. And us.

Don Jacobsen

He Does That!

You probably have heard the story of the little girl who went to the parade with her mom and daddy. The crowd was pressed together along the curb and the tall people ahead of her made it impossible for her to see, so her daddy lifted her onto his shoulders. She patted him on the head and said, “Thank you, daddy, now I can look farther than my eyes can see.”

So can the church - on its knees. Kneeling in the presence of the Great Promiser, our hearts can look farther than our eyes can see. Our hearts can see the parking lot filled. Our hearts can see people having trouble finding a seat. Our hearts can see marriages being healed. Our hearts can see addictions being broken. Our hearts can see men and women, boys and girls, moving to the front of the church in surrender. Our hearts can see the population of eternity growing. Every time the church meets. Every time.

When a church collectively cries out for a fresh anointing for its pastor, He does that. When we come into His presence expecting Him not only to show up, but knowing that there will be miracles as we watch, He does that. If we believe His promise that profound transformation is the new normal, He does that. If we irrepressibly believe His promise to build Christlikeness into a people awaiting His return, He does that.

I recently came across a sentence written by a friend, and it haunts me. We are so readily enraptured by the intoxicating tyranny of the familiar. God wants to do more. He is impatient...
with our patience with church-as-usual. Here’s the stem-winder sentence I can’t shake: “I despaired at the thought that my life might slip by without seeing God show Himself mightily on our behalf.”

Oh, God, I ponder that and it terrifies me. I read the promises. I know what can be. I know what will be one day, yet even in His Sovereignty, our God waits. He is desperate to do in His church what He is desperate to do through His church. What if we were to let life slip by and forbid by our casual unbelief God doing what He wants to do?

The world languishes for miracles because the church languishes for miracles. But it doesn’t need to be thus. He is the Life-giver. For people and for churches. He does that. And He wants to do that where you are.

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

The Story Shop

A friend texted me today and briefly told me about how God had taken two seemingly benign contacts she had just had with strangers and turned them into God moments. She’s the kind of church member who loves to go on God’s errands so her stories didn’t surprise me.

But I think my response may have surprised her. I said, “Be sure to come to prayer meeting Wednesday night prepared to tell those stories.” Her response suggested that she may have been thinking, “But these weren’t earthquake-size stories.” If the conversation had continued I might have said something like, “Any time God is involved we’re in earthquake territory.” When the God of the universe shows up and does His celestial choreography, let’s be on high alert for the drama only He can create.” Because He desires that His story be told.

In fact, His church should be known as a veritable story shop, a story factory. Every time He sets up a rendezvous between a needy heart and one of His grace-filled children, watch for the walls to move. And then tell that story. That’s how He is glorified. “Let the redeemed of the Lord tell His story,” Scripture admonishes.

The Christian meets no one by accident. We stride out into God’s world and make ourselves available for His purposes. Some of the meetings He plans are graceful and predictable; some are off the chart unique.

My pastor friend, Virgil Covel, was headed for the office one morning a few weeks ago when he was broadsided by a truck. The crash totaled his car, and nearly totaled Virgil. Then the truck
drove off. Victim of a hit-and-run, suffering a concussion and sitting in a car that wouldn’t run
Virgil wondered what to do next. As he was gathering his thoughts he was surprised to look up
and see the same truck pull up behind him.

Standing by the vehicles the young driver apologized, then added, “I’m really in trouble; I’ll never
be forgiven for this.” “Your dad?” Virgil queried. “No, I mean God. I wrecked a man’s car, I could
have killed him, and I don’t even have a driver’s license.” After pushing the car to a safe place the
two headed for town in the truck. Virgil sensed that he was talking to a young man who had
some empty spiritual spaces in his life so he suggested they stop and have breakfast. Before the
morning was over Virgil led the young truck driver to the cross where he found forgiveness.

Later, when they got the paper work taken care of the young driver dropped Virgil off at his
office. As he turned to leave, he put out his hand and said, “I hope you don’t misunderstand what
I’m about to say, but I’m glad I hit you.” “Me, too,” Virgil replied.

Don Jacobsen

This is Church!

If you’ve ever stood near the door of a school that opens onto the playground just after the
recess bell rings you’ll be able to visualize the picture I want to paint. Here’s the picture: You’re
standing in the parking lot just after the worship service dismisses and the benediction
concludes. In nano-seconds the pews empty and the saints are headed for home. The lofty
strains of the organ still echo in the worship center; but the only human sounds are the deacons
picking up crumpled bulletins.

Let me describe an alternate reality. As the organ – or the worship band – concludes, some of the
folks begin to move to the aisles. But the congregation has been coached to recognize that
church isn’t over. Much pastoring will happen in the next few minutes. Members who have tuned
their hearts to the prompting of the Spirit will be on the lookout for a guest, a stranger, a
member who appears reticent to leave, hungry for a celestial touch, uncertain about the week
ahead.

Many came looking for hope; many found it ... in the welcome, in the Word, in the warmth. Now they don’t
want to leave it behind. They are open to the touch of a caring hand. They might welcome a simple question like,
“We are so glad you were here today; how can we pray for you this week?” Or, “We’re so happy to have you worship
with us this morning; what one thing would you like to ask God to do for you this week?”
You've watched the human drama long enough to know that in every pew sits a broken heart. We come with our carefully ironed shirts, our carefully ironed smiles. If it's church-as-usual we can leave and no one knows, nothing has changed. But instead of leaving with only an assembly line handshake at the door, God intercepts and sends someone. This is a prayer-saturated church, a place of miracles. A place where no one leaves hungry. A place where the members are driven by God's mandate: Bear one another's burdens.

Twenty minutes later the parking lot is only half empty. Small knots of people are still scattered about the building. Some are praying. Some are chatting. Some are embracing. And some are picking up crumpled bulletins. This is church.

Don Jacobsen

Cacophony

It's not a word I use very often, do you? Cacophony. In fact, almost never. It sounds strident and raucous. Almost rude; or angry.

But if I softened it and said there was a “gentle cacophony” would that make it more acceptable? What about if I said, “After we recounts how God had sent angels to protect us through the storm there was a gentle cacophony of praise that rose up spontaneously from the congregation ...” that draws a powerful picture, doesn't it?

Hurricane Matthew visited us a few days ago. It was savage. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand people were evacuated from our area. Estimates are that more than 10,000 trees were ripped out of the ground. Hundreds of thousands just in our state were without electric power or water for more than a week. Thousands would return to their homes to find that their refrigerators reeked of the county landfill.

I know, most people don't like to hear the story of other people's storms, but this isn't a story about storms, this is a story about God.

A week later we came together in our worship center to rejoice. It was the largest attendance anyone could remember. The worship leader said we should take three minutes to find five people we didn't know, give them a hug, and tell them, “I’m so thankful you made it through the storm!” Meltdown.

There had been no deaths in our church family. In fact, only minor damage. A few shingles here, some water there, a tree down – or several – over there. One after another arose and told their story of God's nearness, gestures of inordinate caring such as a neighbor who took in nine strangers, powerline workers who drove a thousand miles to get here, slept in tents in an open field and worked obscene hours to restore our power.
One lady said, “I learned so much. I learned that the things I thought were treasures were really only stuff.” One mom told how, as the storm howled and her family prayed, her three-year old said, “Mommy, we need to send blankets to Haiti.”

And then some hard questions: If some of our church family hadn’t survived, could we still praise God for His faithfulness? His providence? If our church building had been destroyed and we had to worship in the flooded parking lot that morning would we still have been praising God for His faithfulness? I know this group of worshipers well and it is my sense that, with their arms around each other, there would still have arisen from their huddle a gentle cacophony of praise.

Don Jacobsen

Dust Bunnies in the Baptistry

A pastor friend of ours was dolefully reflecting on the glacial growth of his church. The only thing he could find regularly in the church baptistry were dust bunnies. As he pled with God to help him understand what needed to change he seemed to hear the Lord say, “Your people eat each other alive - I can’t trust you with new members. Your people have become carnivores (he was sure that was the word the Lord used). It’s cold in here. You have to be strong just to survive as a member.”

“But Lord, what can I do to change that atmosphere?” the pastor asked. “Well, it permeates the whole church” he seemed to hear back; “let the Board attack it.” And they did. At its next meeting the Board members confronted the sinful ambience that had developed in their congregation and threw themselves in repentance on the mercy of God. And He did not disappoint them.

After a significant period of deep heart-searching it was plain that the issue was serious enough to bring it to the church as a body. They took an action that they would no longer countenance any word of criticism, that if anyone spoke negatively of another - member, pastor, guest, conference leadership - that anyone hearing the criticism was authorized to simply turn and walk away. They declared a church-wide moratorium on criticism.

And it worked. Not overnight, for sure, but within a few months the climate changed. The Son began to shine. The grumble factor faded and joy replaced it. Not long after, a lady who had not previously attended appeared at the door on a Sabbath morning. Friendly greeters asked her if she was new to the area. No, she had just been reading her Bible and had come across some questions she couldn’t answer. It seemed to her as if she had been attending church on the wrong day. When she inquired of her pastor he told her that if she felt strongly about the issue she should perhaps contact the Seventh-day Adventist church.
A few weeks later they were scheduling a date for her baptism. And she’s not the only one. Members were learning that their church was a safe place to bring friends, that they would be hugely welcomed. Meanwhile that new lady ... she’s an assistant Sabbath School teacher now. And you have a difficult time finding any dust bunnies in the baptistry.

Don Jacobsen

Awash in Grace

The more I meander around through the environs of the early church the more I stand in awe. Just to join up with that troop was truly transformational. You’ve read this in Acts 4, “And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.” Please read that sentence carefully; the implications of it are astonishing.

Now I’m not making a case here for some kind of warped socialism. The New Testament is also clear that if (a capable believer) doesn’t work, he shouldn’t eat. (See 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12) The last thing God wants His church to be is a bus full of freeloaders hitchhikers. I’m simply exploring some of the things that happen when "grace [is] so powerfully at work ... " When we are ourselves bathed in grace it changes how we feel. About everything and everybody. No one who carries a load escapes our notice. That’s why a healthy church is such a sweet place.

Over time my errands cease to be the most important ones. What can I pick up for Mrs. Ellis on my way to the store? As I look for ways to be thoughtful, God brings ideas to my mind. When I spot a friend with a look of concern on his face, I may raise my heart in a simple, silent prayer – or even pose a gentle, non-intrusive question.

Here’s the deal. We’re born crying to have our needs met. Hungry, wet, cold, bored, sleepy, nobody is going to be happy till I’m happy. With some of us that doesn’t go away easily. Until we are stoked with grace. But grace changes everything. "God’s grace is so powerfully at work in" us that everything we see looks different.
People are no longer obstacles in my way, or objects of judgment, they are folks God has given me to bless. When God shows me how much He loves me by the way He immerses me in grace, the greater my capacity to pass it along and demonstrate to others how much He loves them. When I’m awash in grace I’m a messenger, a carrier. When I catch it, I can’t wait to hand it off. When it becomes real to me I can’t wait till I can help others rejoice in it, too.

Grace: His mercy I desperately need but don’t deserve. Amazing grace. Changed the church; changes the church. In fact, "God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them." None.

Don Jacobsen

Then the Target Moved

When we launched this blog just over a year ago I announced that it was not going to be about prayer, it would not be about praying. It was going to focus on helping your church develop into a House of Prayer. There are innumerable resources on prayer. Books, blogs, songs, sermons. But, in spite of the fact that the Founder of the church told us how He wanted it to be identified, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all people," (Matt. 21:13), there is very little "how to" resourcing available. In my faith community there are virtually no books on the topic of becoming a praying church.

I’ve been a pastor since the mid-50’s but I am admittedly a slow learner. So for the last year or so I’ve struggled to learn all I could about how that radical transition might happen in a local congregation. I’ve slogged around in the template left for us by the early church. In many ways they got it right. When we do it His way, the outcome will reek with excellence and effectiveness. Any other way, not so much. I’ve sought to isolate some of those inspired principles and they appear in early blogs in this series. It’s been a voraciously inspiring journey.

But one of the most rewarding elements of my search has been to watch what’s happening in those churches where there is an irrevocable commitment to move away from the comfort of the "club," which is designed primarily for the benefit of the members, and commit to the down-and-dirty mission of being agents of redemption to a horribly broken world.

At the risk of being accused of prescribing a formula, I’d like to describe what I’m seeing in the part of the church world I’m watching. As a Movement we were born a century and a half ago into a basically Christian culture. We found Christian people and said to them, "You need more information; we can help you with that." We called it evangelism; to be more accurate we probably should have called it education.

But the target moved. A high percentage of the world we want to speak to today doesn't even understand the language we speak. They don't know Genesis from revolution. Information isn't
going to solve the profound brokenness they bring. Only the supernatural, miraculous, unearthly, transformational power from the throne can undo the damage sin has done. And God has declared that that comes down only in response to serious intercession by His people.

Jesus knew that. That’s why He described how He wanted His house to function.

We’ve got to get more specific next time.

Don Jacobsen

Is That Rain I Hear?

I want to encourage you to read last week’s Blog (“Then the Target Moved”) before you read this one; it will make more sense. Done? Thank you. Nine out of every ten churches in America are stagnant or are growing more slowly than the community they serve. You might want to put together a couple of growth charts (your church and your community) to see whether your church is part of what is being called the Great Evangelical Recession.

But God has a Movement poised to step into the gap, right? Well... Take out the growth in our minority churches and the new church plants and the result is enough to make us lie awake at night. But what is, is not what has to be.

I love the story of Nehemiah. God’s chosen were in trouble. They were not fulfilling the celestial purpose to which He had called them. Even the protective wall of the city was in ruins and the gates were in ashes. But one of God’s servants caught a vision. He rushed out and began to rebuild, right? No. He organized a bunch of committees, did some demographic studies, raised enough money to fund the project. Right? Listen: "When I heard these things, I sat down..." He got it right. "For some days," he continues, "I prayed..." He also mourned. And he fasted. But He began where every God-victory begins. And that's where ours will begin as well.

I see some early indicators. I see a medium-sized church in a large eastern city in the US. Scarcely any baptisms for the previous two years. In desperation, the pastor falls on his knees and acknowledges, "God, this is not why we’re here. There are vast numbers of people who drive by our church every day who have no hope, and without a supernatural intervention in their lives will not spend eternity with Jesus. Help us know how to reach them; please God. They’re lost and we’re comfortable. God, you have to help us change that. Please."

And the change has begun. The pastor sat down ... or more accurately, fell to his knees and sought repentance. And wisdom. And strength. Prayer has become the bedrock of every ministry, every planning session. Not just polite prayers, but bold, aggressive intercession.

It’s hard to get folks together in a big city, so he meets every morning at 6:00 by phone with those members who want to plead for their church and their community. You sign on and an
operator calls your number every morning at 5:55. It rings till you answer. Each Tuesday evening he meets with his leaders for 30 minutes - by phone - to pray. Not 25 minutes of discussion and 5 minutes of prayer, but 5 minutes of discussion and half an hour of prayer.

The pastor prays regularly through the Church Directory. He urges his people to pray for him; he feels he can do no less than to pray as faithfully for them. Pray-ers meet at 8:30 Sabbath morning to plead with God for the Sabbath School, the music, and especially the sermon. They pray walk the departments, the greeters' stations, the choir area, the baptism. This is not church-as-habit, this is church moving toward healthy. This is fervent worship, passionate prayer-soaked preaching, with the anticipation that in His presence there are going to be miracles and the population of eternity is going to change.

Baptisms in the past 24-months: 90. Not Pentecost, but it appears the drought is over I think that's rain I hear.

Don Jacobsen

Houses Of Prayer Everywhere
Visit Hope-Heals.org

Wafting

A long time ago I heard about a village in the south of France where expensive perfumes were made. It was the major industry in this little rural hamlet and many of the residents worked there. A unique phenomenon developed and I fell in love with the story. It goes like this ...

All through the day the workers combined the ingredients for the perfumes, tweaking for subtle fragrance changes. They extracted raw materials, mixed them per precise formulas, stored them in large containers for future use, filled the bottles, and boxed them for shipping. With that much exposure to the intense aromas, by the end of the day the workers were understandably saturated with the residuals. It was on their shoes, on their clothing, in their hair, on their skin, in the very air they breathed.

At 6:00pm each day the big chime rang out from the church tower indicating the end of the work day. The workers filed out through the little factory doors and headed down the lanes toward their homes. But so pervasive were the smells and so saturated were the workers, their very presence permeated the ambience in the village and made it a sweeter place. Because they had been exposed to the sweet source of the fragrance they, collectively, changed the very atmosphere of their town.
I’ll bet you like the story, too; it has parallels draped all over it. Because they had absorbed the essence of the magnificent aroma, their collective presence wafted over the town where they live and changed the very atmosphere. Sounds like church to me.

I like to envision that as the congregation spills out from the worship center each Sabbath about noon, a tangible sweet aroma wafts out over the parking lot and precedes them into town, changing the very atmosphere of the place in the ensuing week. Listen: "God ... helps us spread the knowledge about Christ everywhere, and this knowledge is like the smell of perfume. In fact, God thinks of us as a perfume that brings Christ to everyone. For people who are being saved, this perfume has a sweet smell and leads them to a better life." (2 Cor 2:14-16, CEV)

Several months ago, a friend of mine was attending a planning session of the National Prayer Committee in Florida. It had been a powerful, spiritually intimate time. During the break the key speaker approached my friend and said, "You know, you smell like Jesus." When the meeting reconvened he repeated what he had said to her, then added to the whole group, "But as I worship with you here, I discover you all smell like Jesus." I can think of few compliments any more significant than that one. Because "... God thinks of us as a perfume that brings Christ to everyone."

So, let’s gather in His presence, soak up the fragrance of His holiness, then collectively waft over the communities we serve and ask that He might be honored.

Don Jacobsen

Dial Your Kids in Early

Being involved in a local church school again after a lot of years, I have been intrigued to hear the questions parents ask. About cost of course, but also about issues that never came up when I was a young pastor.

"Do you participate in Little League baseball for our son?" Or "What activities do you sponsor here that will help keep my teenager occupied after school?"

Now I believe in keeping our kids active. They live longer; they live happier. And they have less time to get into trouble. But what if we were to blow the doors off when the conversation drifts in that direction? What if we were to answer something like this:

"Well, we have a strong health education program here that helps keep our students physically and mentally fit, but more than that, each school year they are involved in some major project to help change their world? Our younger kids may go and sing to shut-ins, or rake their grass, walk their pets, or run errands. Even go shopping."
“As they move through the grades the projects get more demanding. They may paint someone's house or put on a new roof. Or install a new toilet. Oh, and the roof project ... they’ll measure the house, figure the pitch of the roof, calculate the amount of shingles, estimate the costs, present a budget, study safety measures for being on a roof, find out where to borrow ladders, and then clean up afterward. It’s hard work but it’s lots more rewarding than winning a football game. They may not have a plaque in the school’s trophy case, but they’ve got a neighbor down the street who knows that next time it rains he’s not going to have water dripping off the light fixture in his kitchen.”

I know, it will take some copious parental involvement, but it seems to me like that’s part of the blueprint.

“And before they move on from this school they must have participated in at least one "mission trip," where they go to some strange place, sleep on the floor, build a school building, plant a garden, dig a well, or in some other way change someone’s world. And they come back tougher, and grateful, feeling less entitled and less inclined to lesser goals. And more ready to live lives that continue to change their world. We think that's more valuable to them than T-ball."

A church seriously dedicated to discipleship has to discover ways to dial its kids in early.

(Administrator’s note: Do you have expansion space on your campus? You may need it.)

Don Jacobsen

The Legacy of Johnny Barnes

Did you ever meet Johnny Barnes? He died a few months ago where he lived all his life, on the beautiful island of Bermuda. We met him just a few months before his death.

A retired bus driver, Johnny Barnes left his mark on the world. By waving. By throwing kisses. By shouting, “God loves you...” into traffic. Let me tell you why his story blesses me. One morning years ago, Johnny woke up and decided the world needed more love. A devout Christian and a Seventh-day Adventist, he began getting out of bed at 2:30 every morning and walking to the busiest traffic circle on the island. He stood in the center of the round-a-bout and started waving and blowing kisses to everyone who passed. (You can Google Johnny Barnes Bermuda and see him at work.)

Johnny’s good morning greeting caught on and soon nearly everyone who was headed into town looked forward to his wave and his smile. Sunshine or rain, he was there - every
morning of every business day - for thirty years. If he ever missed, which was seldom, motorists
would call the radio station or the police asking, "Where's Johnny." He became the happy face of
Bermuda.

One sunny morning (most of them are), a young lady and her husband rounded the traffic circle
headed for the hospital where she would deliver her first baby. This being her first she was more
than a little anxious, but she figured his smile and his wave would bring her some reassurance.
However, as they passed his post he was looking the other direction and she missed his smile
completely. Needing the reassurance she knew it would bring, she asked her husband to please
go around the circle again so she could catch his eye. He did and she did, so she said to her
husband, "Go ahead; I think everything's going to be ok."

What if, every morning, every one of us burst out into our world wearing our happy face?
Throwing a kiss to everyone we passed. Waving a greeting to everyone we meet. Assuring those
whose lives we touch that God loves them. What if we became the happy face of our
communities? At the grocery store; at the Post Office. Over the backyard fence. What if the
radiance of our trust in God led people to say, "You

Don Jacobsen

Un-Cocooning

Do you know about cocooning? It's been around a long time but our
culture just recently gave it a name. Here's how it works: You roll out
of bed in the morning and rush off to work. You come home, let
yourself in, then lock all three locks on the apartment door. You turn
on the TV, make yourself a snack that's just short of lethal and settle
in for a long evening of empty. Four hours of inane drivel on TV will
be your only contact with civilization again this night. Sort of like the
caterpillar that lashes itself to a branch and disappears from view.
Only you don't even have a butterfly to show for it. Next morning the cycle begins over.

Hardly a formula for leaving a grand legacy. Not a good template for a prospective world-
changer. But Brother Don, I'm so tired when I get home from work. I deserve the evening off.
Really? I hadn't read that far in the book yet. Could I gently suggest some non-taxing options
that may even help you sleep better? Like spending the first potentially reclusive hour making
some quick phone calls to the folks who were missing from your Sabbath School class at church
last week? Or maybe some of the "missing in action" who haven't been there at all for a while.
Shut-ins ... those who, because of age, illness, or distance don't get to worship often. A quick call
might be the most exciting thing that happened to them all day. Not to check up on 'em, you
understand. Just to communicate that they are loved and missed.
Another suggestion: You might spend a while working at praying through your church’s membership list. You don’t need a lot of details to be an intercessor. And for your pastor. Or – a whole different direction – maybe you could spend an hour studying Spanish so you can visit with the new family that just moved in down the hall. (And better prepared next time your church plans a mission trip to Honduras.) Or that nearby mom who comes home to a couple of high-octane kids. How about offering her a free hour of babysitting so she can have a few minutes to herself. That may change your whole mood because people who spend time with young kids live longer than those who don’t.

A butterfly is a thing of beauty but so is a re-energized believer who converts a potentially wasted evening into an event that may change the population of eternity.

Don Jacobsen

Lighthouses

The most readily observable outward characteristic of the Christian is joy.

The reason is obvious. Scripture says, "In Your presence is fullness of joy." And the more time we spend with Him the more of it we absorb. The more we absorb, the more we radiate. That’s why the worship time in a praying church is the most joyous hour of the week.

I suspect you may have been in the other kind, too. Weak and wearisome. Restless and boring. Repetitious, even mindless. Is that too strong? Well, how often have you sung a praise hymn at the worship service in your church and the powerful words didn’t even register in your soul?

When Ruthie and I were dating, we were both busy, but we couldn’t wait for our phone visits. I’d call her and find myself already smiling while the phone was still ringing. We were separated only by distance and when that’s true with someone you love it energizes everything. That’s a feeble parallel to being in the presence of God, but it’s why a praying, worshiping church is one of the most joyous places on earth. Worship is a learned skill and the more we grasp the beauty of God the more we love to be in His presence. And it shows.

If you’ve ever taken a tour of lighthouses in America, you know something about their history. Here’s something I didn’t know. The first lighthouse of record was built around 280 BC, and it consisted of a fire built on top of a 450 ft tower in Alexandria harbor, Egypt. Not much changed
for two thousand years, until the 1800’s. Glass lanterns and crude mirrors increased their efficiency in the late 1600’s, but as shipping increased so did shipwrecks.

Enter Augustin Fresnel, a frail French architect in the early 1800’s. Instead of studying the lighthouse, Fresnel decided to study the light itself. How it changes when it passes through a lens, how it bends, for instance. It was his study, not of the lighthouse structure, but of the light that allowed him to shape it into a far-reaching beam that would save countless shipwrecks worldwide. His invention is called the Fresnel lens and it’s still in use today, even in the headlights of your car.

One author says, "We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God." It's called worship. So, as we study the Light, we can see better. We can see Him better. The better we can see Him, the greater our joy. And it shows. A joyous church is the gestation place of a transformational journey. That’s how it works. On a scale of 1 - 10, how effective is your church as a Lighthouse?

Don Jacobsen

Missing Church

I miss church when I miss church.

I mean, it's a habit I've established over a lot of years, and I'm not happy when something happens that breaks the pattern. I feel like I've missed a meal, or like I made an appointment and then didn't keep it. Like I was starting out on a week-long trip but didn't put gas in the car.

I've learned that if I've had a hard week, there will likely be someone there who has seen God work in a wondrous way and I can soak up some of their spiritual energy. Or maybe my week has gone well but someone else has struggled. My testimony may encourage them. It works both ways. If I had missed it, one of us might have missed what we needed. Either way I miss something if I miss church.

Then there's the music. I love to join the congregation, especially if it's a grand praise anthem. When the five parts - soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and nondescript - raise their united voices I have the sense the angels love to join
in. If I miss church I miss the honor of bringing Him that adoration. "O, Come Let Us Adore Him..."
It doesn't get any bigger than that.

But the morning prayer time, that's when I get the sense that I have been swept into His presence. Someone at the front is speaking on my behalf but my heart is in echo-mode. We praise God for who He is, for what He's done. We use words here we don't use any other time in the week nor for anyone else. We try to grasp His greatness, understand His heart so we resonate with His passions, His will. We do not seek to send Him on our errands, we plead that He will make us available so we can go on His.

We plead for the lost, the least, and the last and ask that He will help us know how we, as heart-driven under-shepherds, can help love them home. This conversation with the King can never run too long for me; He and I have so much to discuss ... and I need help in learning to listen. But think with me of what I would have missed had I not been there.

By this time I'm ready to hear from His Word and I have intentionally come to church hungry. I am encouraged to know that the pastor has walked all week by the side of the One who wrote the very Book. It's not so much a Book that tells me what to do as it is a Book that tells me what's already been done. What if I had not been there to peer into the heart of God and have the trajectory of my life changed? I'd have missed so much that I cannot afford to miss if I had chosen to miss church.

Don Jacobsen

The Bannister Story

When I was in college the sporting world was a-buzz with the name Roger Bannister. Bannister was a medical student in the UK, but his passion was running. At 6'2" and 154 pounds he seemed to have the physical equipment for it, but more than that, he had the resolve.

Bannister's obsession was to run a mile in less than four minutes. Though runners had chased that goal for decades, the current world record was just over four minutes, set nine years earlier. Pundits assured the world that no one would ever run a sub-four-minute mile because the human body was not capable of sustaining that level of physical exertion for that period of time. Bannister believed they were wrong and set out to prove it.

Late on a cloudy afternoon, May 6, 1954, 25-year old Bannister and five other athletes readied at the starting blocks on the track at Oxford University. Three minutes and 59.4 seconds later, Roger Bannister collapsed, fully spent, into the arms of his handlers, the first person ever to run a mile in less than four minutes. The sports world went crazy. Later that summer he would race again and shave three seconds off his record.
Roger Bannister died March 8, 2018, at the age of 88. He had become a famed neurologist, but also the victim of advanced Parkinson’s disease complicated by disabling injuries received in an automobile accident. However, that is not the end of the Bannister story.

When the athletic world discovered that the human body could run a mile in less than four minutes others began to attack that summit. Since then more than 17 seconds have been shaved off the record which now stands at 3:43:14. But here is the astonishing fact: a total of 4,518 runners have broken the four-minute mile since Bannister’s record, including more than a dozen high school students.

Here is my take-away: Many victories are never claimed if we can’t bring ourselves to believe they’re achievable. What might happen if we trusted the Coach and His promise that “nothing is impossible”? Might He provide the infusion of Holy Spirit power to achieve a world-changing victory? Might His goal be that your church makes a significant impact on your city? Might His goal be standing-room only when your congregation gathers? Might His goal be that your church become a force for the changing of lives … scores, hundreds. Weekly. Daily.

What do you believe is possible for your church? Are you satisfied it matches His goal?

Don Jacobsen