

Steve Hawthorne

Seeing “Counter-intuitive” Prayer in CPMs

To better serve CPMs we have to better see them. Proponents of CPMs as a fruitful approach to evangelize will do well by pursuing an ongoing inquiry into the dynamics and operative commonalities of the movements. When observing CPMs we should resist the impulse to find our own traditional practices in play, and therefore authenticated. Instead, we should look carefully, and yet critically with the best biblical and theological reflection, at what is taking place as churches multiply and flourish.

One of the dynamics seen in every CPM which is worthy of great scrutiny is prayer. I’m going to try to elucidate what Garrison calls “counter-intuitive prayer,” particularly that which is prayed, as he says, “by the believers.”¹

I present five observations about prayer as pursued by the inside believers and as exemplified by outside mission workers. All of these have been observed in reports of CPMs or first hand observations of CPMs. Along with those observations I suggest some theoretical “why’s” which might explain the practical ways. As a beginning point of biblical and theological reflection, I also suggest how some of them may have been part of the work of Jesus and His followers as found in the account of the sending of the seventy in Luke 10.

This is a list of what to watch for, not necessarily a list of what to do. Please use this, not as a methodology, but as an outline for further inquiry. We will no doubt find many of our traditions and accepted practices increasingly challenged by what we observe in CPMs.

1) Praying on-site.

Believers in many church planting movements pray in their villages, homes, streets and business settings. They are praying in the very places where they expect God to answer their prayers. It is intentional prayer, not contemplative or devotional in nature. Instead, they are praying on behalf of neighbors, family, friends who are within eyesight as they pray. Such on-site prayer has been called prayerwalking.²

Notice that I describe this prayer in terms of what God is going to do. The impetus for the prayer is not so much a particular set of needs or issues. What drives the prayer is a sense of expectancy of what God desires to do.

I've been alongside leaders of a sustained network of multiplying churches in North India. I was with them as they were training some of their leaders about prayerwalking in settings in which they were anticipating new churches to flourish. Prayerwalking has become an intrinsic part of how the leaders keep the momentum of multiplying churches alive. Reports of responsive friends and family in nearby neighborhoods are not answered by the immediate sending of evangelism teams. One of the early steps, before almost anything else is done in a community, is to send teams of people who quietly prayerwalk throughout the neighborhood. They've learned some different approaches in rural settings since visitors to villages always have a higher and sometimes threatening profile. As the teams prayerwalk, they are asking God to draw many to Himself. After there has been a significant period of low-profile preparatory prayerwalking, leaders then begin to make intentional efforts to make contact with people through existing relationships.

Another network of multiplying churches in Latin America uses a very similar approach. Before any work of evangelism, teams prayerwalk for days or weeks through urban communities asking God to prepare people for the gospel. A final phase of their praying focuses on how they can be in contact with who God has prepared. They ask prayerfully, "Where are you, Cornelius?" with reference to the entire household that was prepared long before apostles arrived in Acts 10.

Why praying on-site helps CPMs

On-site prayer instills a confidence that God is already at work. Even more critical, on-site praying builds a conviction God's work is not limited to holy spaces and places. The jurisdiction of Christ's Lordship extends everywhere. With this mindset, there is much less of an urge to focus attention on assembling in a church building. To the extent that specialized architecture is not required, CPMs can gain momentum without being slowed down by the limits and costs of buildings.

Praying on-site in Luke 10

Luke 10:2 contains Jesus instructions to his followers to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send laborers. They do not pray this before they go. They are to pray this in the settings where they are going. The prayer Jesus gives them is one that assumes that God has already begun imparting life to people, but that there is need for great collaboration to bring forth the harvest He has intended. It's a prayer of expectancy. Further, Luke 10:5 has been construed to be more than a greeting of blessing, but a prayer of blessing. And finally, Jesus instructs them to base themselves in homes, and from there, to pray for people of the city. They are not directed to the synagogue, or told to establish a special holy place for praying. For all that we can see from the account, people are being prayed for, and God is expected to do great things, in the homes of leading people of the community.

2) Praying for people

This seems to go without saying, but the distinction is this: In flourishing CPMs, instead of praying for abstract requests in segregated rooms or times, prayer is offered for people in relational ways. Conventional prayer patterns in western churches often involve complicated systems to report particular issues as prayer requests and bring them in written form to prayer rooms where they can be handled by dedicated prayer experts. I sometimes refer to these patterns as "request management" systems. In CPMs you'll see that prayer concerns are not usually formalized as requests. People are prayed for with a relational immediacy. When it's done best, the prayer touches the entire life story of the person, not just a particular need. Prayer is concerned not just with afterlife, but for fullness of life.

One report of a surging CPM in Southeast Asia told of one feature of the gatherings. One part of almost every gathering is that participants pray for everyone who comes to the gathering. Leaders are prayed for as well as newcomers. The prayers touch the entire range of human need and hope. Many CPMs feature prayer for people who have yet to follow Christ. The prayers are prayed right in their homes or work places.

Why praying for people helps CPMs

Prayers reveal God's good intentions and purposes for people, families and entire communities. In this sense, the prayer conveys a large part of the gospel: that God cares for you and your family, and intends for good things for you. Prayer rarely tells the complete gospel message, but it certainly authenticates any proclamation of the gospel.

Praying for people in Luke 10

Having prayed for the healing of people in the household or community, then, Jesus instructed, "Say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10:9). I love the last two words. It's far more than a general message of the coming kingdom. In connection with prayer for particular people, the prayer and its answer are explained in terms of God doing even better things in the soon-coming future. All the power and beauty of God's governing love in Christ is coming swiftly "to you."

3) Praying by every person

In CPMs that continue to grow, everyone is taught and encouraged to pray. Prayer is not a specialized procedure performed by anointed experts. New believers are taught and expected to pray. Even those who have yet to follow Christ are encouraged to pray in the name of Jesus. Heads of households can lead in, or authorize prayer to be offered in the name of Jesus for anyone in their community or household.

In one growing CPM in Southeast Asia leaders teach everyone to pray in the name of Jesus for themselves and for others. It's considered to be a matter of spiritual safety. The outside workers and senior leaders actually decline to pray for sick or demonized people. Instead, such occasions are used as opportunities to establish the sufficiency of the local leaders and the heads of households to pray for those in their care.

It's important to note that the practices of different CPMs vary at this point. In some movements there are seasoned leaders who itinerant to preach and to pray. They are willing to pray for what appears to be the difficult cases. They are sometimes regarded as having a special anointing or power in their praying.

Why praying by every person helps CPMs

Encouraging every person to pray helps CPMs keep growing, in part because the growth is not limited by the scarcity of trained or specialized figures. The leader is not seen as the primary mediator. What's being formed is a priesthood of all believers. Christ Himself is recognized as present in every gathering, and very much the leader and head of the movement.

It's well-known that CPMs do well with clearly defined leadership, but on the other hand, they grow best without multitiered hierarchies of leadership. By encouraging parents and heads of households and clans to exert leadership in matters of prayer, CPMs tend to follow accepted dynamics of social structure.

Praying by every person in Luke 10

What's the Luke 10 point of reference? It has been assumed by

some that the specialized calling and role of an apostle is necessary to accomplish this. But a closer shows that this is not really required by Luke 10 at all. The 70 returned at an appointed time. Their role was temporary. I know there are other opinions, but I'm convinced that Jesus was training the movement to multiply well beyond an initial core of leaders. Variant manuscripts may keep us guessing about the exact number. Some texts say 70. Others say 72. But they were 70 "others" (10:1). These were not named apostles, although they were sent out in a very similar way as the twelve. They were not invested with rare or specialized spiritual powers. Instead they were told that they were going out as "lambs in the midst of wolves" (10:3). This is not exactly what we'd expect if they were being armed with superior firepower. The 70 returned utterly surprised that demons were cast out of people as they prayed (10:17). Jesus refers to them "babes" rather than describing them as heavy-hitting spiritual gladiators (10:21).

4) Praying with scripture

In the CPMs I've observed, the scriptures are central to the gatherings, the discipleship, the worship and the structure of the churches. In the early days of one movement in west Africa gatherings were held in the home of the outside worker. The outside worker knew that it was disadvantageous to be gathering in his home, but since the tribe was semi-nomadic, there were very few other options. To reduce the dependency on his home and presence, the worker never preached or taught. What he did do was to read the gospel accounts aloud, announce that Jesus wanted to do the same kinds of things in their midst, and then help the people pray in Jesus name. He would ask the gathered group who of their tribe Jesus might want to touch, heal, confront, or bless in the same way as they had read in the gospel account. Names would be mentioned or hands raised. Then the outside worker would ask all of those attending to repeat after him a prayer line by line. Then he would urge one or two of them to pray further in the name of Jesus. When he began, none of the people were committed followers of Christ. As he continued to meet eventually, a church was born which had as it's core the reading of scriptures and dynamic of relevant prayers being prayed for those attending, or for those who were members of the community.

Why praying with scripture helps CPMs

Some CPMs are stymied or slowed when there is oratory by someone regarded as an ordained leader in church-like buildings. To be sure, there are many CPMs which continue to grow with lengthy messages by revered leaders. But overall, the best discipling of new followers takes place when the focal point is obeying Christ instead of knowing things about Christianity. Centralizing the reading of the scriptures helps demote

would-be sermonizers. Praying from what has been read invites the best kind of discussions and questions about how the scripture might be relevant to the community. In one CPM in rural India, the only ones with literacy in the communities were often youth or even children. Keeping the scriptures central may be easier in orality cultures. In orality cultures it is likely that what is remembered is mainly what is perceived as relevant. As connections are found between the events or statements of scripture with people of the community, the scriptures increase in popularity as revealing what Jesus is all about and what He might do as people pray in His name.

Praying with scripture in Luke 10

I don't see where prayer is directly connected with the reading of scripture in Luke 10. Copies of scripture were rare and literacy was low. We do see the prayer of the upper room in the early chapters of Acts heavily laced with scriptures. The movements which multiplied through the households of Jerusalem were focused on prayer and the word of God.

5) Praying with thanks

Watch for what gets celebrated in CPM worship. There may be a gladness for what God has done for individuals. But celebration breaks out when it's seen what God is doing for all those gathered, or all those in a community.

CPMs multiply with explosive power when gatherings become authentic encounters with God. The easiest way for people to relate to God together is as they thank Him together with heartfelt gratitude. Only people who pray together find that they have a God to praise together.

One CPM in SE Asia kept growing in part by keeping its gatherings limited to the reading of scriptures, praying for others in the community, and expressions of thanksgiving to God. Outside workers helped that same movement to learn how they could use local instruments and musical styles to celebrate Christ in their homes. But it wasn't the inviting local music alone that attracted many to the gatherings. The meetings became far more numerous than the number of talented musicians. What remained attractive is that every gathering focused on telling stories about what God was doing in their community. God was spoken of as if He was present.

Why praying with thanks helps CPMs

Churches multiply rapidly when there is a continuing sense of awe that God is at work in the community. If prayer is done with steady thanks, it becomes ever more clear that God has already been doing good and

great things, many of them not even prayed for. Instead of an aggregate of quiet, personal, contemplative, individualized experiences with God, the result is a movement of people who have a public and communal relationship together with their God. The experience is more "We are grateful!" instead of, "I should be more grateful." With such experiences of recently inspired gratitude, it's much more likely that newcomers will come and say something like, "God is certainly among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Praying with thanks in Luke 10

In Luke we find the 70 returning with joy, but even better, we see Jesus, as joyous as we ever find Him in scripture, exulting with wide open expression of praise (10:21-24). Jesus was giving God explicit thanks for what He was accomplishing with all the answered prayer. The sense of awe in seeing Jesus Himself thrilled with grateful joy must have been unforgettable. That sense of awe, that God is at work right now, hastening what He's been desiring for ages, is what can empower CPMs with a sense of destiny and joy.

God at work is why movements move

David Garrison is correct in describing the prayer by believers in CPMs as "counter-intuitive." They seem counter-intuitive because they vary from the traditions of western churches (and the many supposedly non-western churches which have learned their patterns of prayer from western churches). As outside workers watch for these and other features of CPMs growing by prayer, they would do well to scrutinize their own practices and assumptions about prayer. Among the practices we might expect to be challenged while serving CPMs: specialized prayer rooms and buildings, specialized prayer vocabulary, procedures which appear to convey power to or through the one who prays, and the recognition of a more powerful intercessory elite. What fills the void of formulaic and institutional prayer patterns is a simple joy to be seeing God at work. May God give us eyes to see as Jesus described, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see!" (10:23).

End Notes

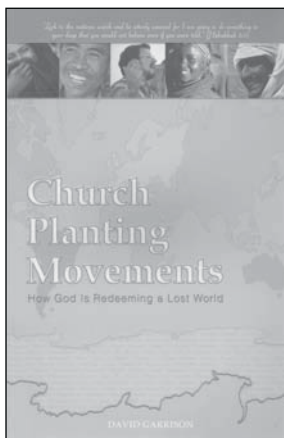
¹ p175 Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World by David Garrison

² The word prayerwalking was first defined by Graham Kendrick and me in Prayerwalking: Praying On-Site with Insight, Charisma House, 1993. I prefer to see the word unhyphenated so it functions as a noun or verb. I also think it helps to restrict the term to intercessory prayer rather than devotional or contemplative prayer. On-site prayer is further discussed

effectively by Dan Crawford and Calvin Miller in Prayer Walking: A Journey of Faith, AMG 2003, and by Randy Sprinkle in Follow Me: Lessons for Becoming a Prayerwalker, 2001 New Hope Publishers.

Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World

by David Garrison



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