

Mobilizing Prayer Advocacy

I started putting together a puzzle at work—a little space was cleared by the copy machine, a place where one might have a few idle moments as equipment warms up or a printing task is completed. A piece here, another there, and three weeks later, only the frame and one distinctive line of the complicated puzzle was complete. And that's when it happened: I got caught up in finding the trees, then the sky, and then I had to stop before allowing myself to start on the sunflowers which fill two-thirds of the picture.

That is what can happen when a prayer advocate gets involved in global missions activity. A missionary first invites the individual to pray and shares a request here, another there. Weeks later, the intercessor is slowly beginning to see the framework of the missionary's ministry and to learn the names of a few frequently mentioned nationals. Then it happens: the advocate gets caught up in finding ways to minister alongside the missionary, then to share the prayer needs with others, and then...well, then they don't want to stop before the picture is complete.

But just how does a missionary find those prayer advocates who will passionately and sacrificially intercede? How do we effectively communicate the strategic prayer needs of the ministry? And how do we nurture the long-term commitment of our prayer network?

FINDING PASSIONATE PRAYER ADVOCATES.

Jesus consistently prayed over the significant events and people in His life. In His High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed for Himself as He anticipated what is irrefutably the most challenging act of service anyone could face—crucifixion. There in the Garden of Gethsemane, He also prayed for His co-laborers that they would be sanctified and equipped for their ministry in the world. And Jesus then prayed for those who would come to salvation through the testimony of His disciples. We must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we pray for personal purity, for the co-laborers we invite to join us, and for the lost who will believe on Jesus through the

testimony of our words. Where does one begin in mobilizing prayer advocacy? *Start with prayer.* Determine that prayer will be foundational in your ministry and jealously guard your time with the Lord. As your personal prayer life deepens, you will more effectively communicate God's heart for your people group and inspire others to join you.

People gathered around Jesus wherever He went, but Jesus also made a point of gathering particular groups to Himself. As Jesus began His ministry, He selected the twelve disciples and poured His life into these men, training them to teach others. Within their number, Jesus had His inner circle of Peter, James, and John. Following the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and to a gathering of more than 500 believers. Later, He was also seen by Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). As Jesus gathered His witnesses of the resurrection, we, too, can gather advocates who will actively proclaim the good work that God is doing around the world.

Missionaries serving with the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention are encouraged to develop a Comprehensive Prayer Network and categorize their advocates as Prayer Partners, Ministry Partners, and Personal Intercessors. Enlisting five churches to pray regularly and intentionally, missionaries establish their broad base of prayer partners similar to the gathering of 500 who witnessed the resurrected Jesus and faithfully shared what they had seen. It may be that a church is already praying for the people group or country where a missionary plans to serve. Making connection with that church represents an answer to their prayers and reminds us that God is the one mobilizing prayer advocacy.

Some of these prayer partners develop a stronger bond as they persist in daily intercession for the missionary and for the people group served. They often take volunteer trips to the field to labor alongside the overseas team. These **Ministry Partners**, akin to Jesus' disciples, are always looking for a deeper involvement in the work on the field and are excellent advocates in conveying

prayer needs to their church family and association. The partnership and friendship is mutual, encouraging both the missionary and the Ministry Partner.

An even smaller group relates to Jesus' inner circle, those **Personal Intercessors** who are sensitive to the intimate prayer needs of a missionary, his family, and his team. Confidential requests can be communicated without a concern of the information being shared further. Do not force any intercessory relationship. That person who is a close friend may not demonstrate any interest in your adopted foreign culture or the exciting work God has given you. Although such friends will pray, they do not necessarily form this core of personal intercessors. Ask God to reveal a small group of people who are so keenly attuned to the ministry and to the Lord's heart that they will stop whatever they are doing to pray whenever the Holy Spirit prompts them.

All missionaries should mobilize a network of Prayer Partners, Ministry Partners, and Personal Intercessors. Recognize the different levels of interest as well as availability and celebrate the commitment each intercessor brings to your ministry.

It is important not to overlook the avenues available through the sending agency. Although personal contact is invaluable, we can also invest tremendous time, energy and resources in developing newsletters, Blogs, virtual prayerwalks and websites. The IMB asks each field team to submit their top-priority, strategic prayer items monthly. When a team intentionally considers their strategic needs each month, team members are more apt to remain focused on their goals and rejoice in the fruit the Lord has provided. These prayer requests and answers to prayer are posted on CompassionNet, www.imb.org/compassionnet. Stateside prayer supporters, national believers, and worldwide intercessors can access a 90-day history of requests submitted by each team, as well as daily view approximately 30 requests from around the world. By taking advantage of the sending agency's resources, a missionary is able to multiply prayer support, provide the most strategic requests, and maintain ministry focus.

Please do not hear me say that there is no place for newsletters, Blogs, virtual prayerwalks or websites. Without question, they are critical tools in communicating the prayer needs of individual missionaries, their field teams, and people groups. But no one person can do everything, so maximize the resources available through the sending agency, and then enlist special help for the team. Recruit one or several ministry partners to serve in the unique role of **Stateside Prayer Advocate** (SPA). Although responsibilities vary by team and gifting, an SPA may receive and distribute prayer requests from the field via electronic newsletter and “snail mail,” recruit additional prayer partners, organize virtual prayerwalks in local churches or coordinate prayer journeys to the field, and help with the team’s publication needs. When an intercessor makes an offer like, “Let me know if you ever need anything,” be ready with specific ideas.

SPAs are often former missionaries whose hearts are still on the field. Others are lay people who have a longing to serve as missionaries but life circumstances prevent the opportunity. What bonds them together is the prompting of the Lord which keeps them lifting up the lost of the world, looking toward the day when “their” people group will know the salvation afforded through Jesus Christ. Like Paul, the witness who saw the resurrected Jesus at a later time, a committed SPA will voluntarily serve with unparalleled fervency. Multiply your labors and your prayer network exponentially by locating Stateside Prayer Advocates within those who are already demonstrating a zeal for prayer and missions.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY.

By gathering a prayer advocacy network, missionaries take on the responsibility of communicating their strategic needs effectively. The methods will vary widely and should take into account the needs of the intercessor as well as the predilection of the field. Many intercessors simply prefer a printed prayer letter that can be slipped into their Bible for ready reference. Others get a charge out of logging on to a Blog and reading the latest word from the field. Your prayer

team wants to hear how God is at work, so be sure to include answers to the requests you have previously shared.

In selecting strategic needs, consider Paul's requests for prayer. In the letter to the Romans, he urged them, "by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with *him* in *their* prayers to God for *him*" (Romans 15:30, NKJV). And in the letters to the Thessalonians and the Ephesians, Paul asked the brothers to pray "that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified" (2 Thessalonians 3:1, NKJV) and "that words may be given to *Paul* in opening *his* mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel" (Ephesians 6:19, ESV). Intercessors want to hear cultural stories—funny, exotic, poignant—but they are also ready to give themselves in ardent prayer for the sake of the Gospel. Strategic prayer needs will communicate the difficulties of ministry clearly and soberly while demonstrating complete trust in the Lord's sovereign ability to answer. Strategic requests may include personal concerns but always keep the focus on the rapid spread of the Gospel and a missionary's ability to proclaim with fluency and courage.

NURTURING LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.

By gathering a prayer advocacy network, missionaries also take on the responsibility of communicating regularly. Intercessors that are encouraged by the field through consistent communication of strategic field needs can be counted on as long-term passionate prayer advocates; but failure to keep in touch may convey a sense of disinterest from the field and cause intercessors to feel unnecessary. Monthly updates via a sending agency's website or a team's newsletter will suffice for the broad base of Prayer Partners. Ministry Partners, however, benefit from more frequent communication. One of my favorite electronic newsletters is a simple calendar format sent daily by the team's SPA with a picture and one sentence. With the knowledge of their overall work gained through the agency's website and their less-frequent personal emails, I am prompted by

these daily emails to pray for a different aspect of their ministry. If daily is not possible, a succinct weekly email will keep your ministry partners connected.

Really encourage your intercessors by inviting them to come and visit you on a short-term volunteer trip, placing an occasional phone call from the field, or even dropping a personal letter in the mail. Consider your intercessors a part of the team with differing levels of responsibility and requiring differing levels of interaction. The more intimately involved the pray-er is with the ministry, the more frequent the communication.

CONCLUSION

Most of us tackle a puzzle by finding all the straight edge pieces and assembling the frame, then we sort the remaining pieces by color or another distinctive characteristic. Assembling a prayer advocate network requires equal commitment to organization and capitalizing on the distinctive gifts others bring to the task. Start with prayer, asking God to help you gather a passionate prayer advocate network. Intentionally ask individuals and churches to partner with you in prayer. Communicate your team's strategic prayer needs effectively by staying focused on proclaiming the Gospel. And nurture a long-term commitment from the prayer network by staying in contact regularly.

The puzzle I mentioned earlier has absolutely no priority in our office. Other than the picture not being completed, there will be no adverse consequences if it is not even touched for several days. However, the Christian who fails to make prayer an intentional, integral part of his global strategy plan may find himself "going it alone" and suffering from a fruitless ministry. Prayer cannot be optional; rather it is foundational. Allowing others to come alongside a partner in prayer helps everyone in bearing one another's burdens and in celebrating the great work God is doing around the world.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS:

1. Where does one begin in mobilizing prayer advocacy?

Start with prayer—pray for personal purity, for the co-laborers invited to join the work, and for the lost who will believe on Jesus

2. What are the three basic categories of partners and how do they relate to a field team?

Prayer Partners—broad-based network of intercessors who pray regularly

Ministry Partners—a smaller group of intercessors who pray daily and are always looking for a deeper involvement in the work of the field

Personal Intercessors—the smallest group of intercessors who pray daily and whenever the Holy Spirit prompts them. Confidentiality and sensitivity are key qualities.

3. What are the responsibilities of the missionary in gathering a prayer network?

Communicate strategic field needs **effectively** and **regularly**

Eleanor J. Witcher
Associate Director, Office of Global Prayer Strategy
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