

Prayer Power by Michael C. Mack

Group prayer is powerful. Don't let it become dry and meaningless.

"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).

I've been waiting for this to happen in our small group. But it hasn't happened yet.

Small group experts talk a lot about small group dynamics. But none of them is as important as the dynamic of prayer and worship. Other dynamics have to do with horizontal relationships; that is, relationships between two or more people. But prayer and worship bring into the group the horizontal relationship, the primary relationship between us and God. Prayer and worship invite God's presence into the group; they seek for his purpose to prevail in our meetings and for his power to be displayed.

Before I even invite people to a group, I start praying—for me as a leader, for the group as a whole, and for those who will be invited to the group. I pray for the people by name, especially those who are not believers, and I ask God to begin working in their hearts. After a group begins to meet, I take time each day to focus on one or two of them in the group. For example, if there are ten in the group, I write two of their names on each of the weekdays of my calendar. I consider it my responsibility as a leader to hold them up to my Father in prayer every day. And I encourage other members to do the same.

Churches with small group ministries in countries like Korea have exploded with evangelistic growth. Most American ministries have not done as well. Why? One reason may be that many Korean small groups devote up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of their time in prayer. They rely on God's power more than human effort to lead them. I may not be able to get my group to regularly spend $\frac{3}{4}$ of our time in prayer. But I think we could do that once in a while. And I believe it would bring great blessings to the group if we did.

I also teach my group about prayer, reminding them that prayer is more than just asking for things. It is sharing our thoughts and feelings with God. I also try to steer them away from sharing surface-level requests: Aunt Mary's sick cat, the missionaries in Botswana, a cousin's friend whose mother is having her appendix removed. Those are legitimate things to pray for in private, but group prayer has a particular purpose, which ought to center on the group and the individuals in it. I also like to focus prayer times on specific needs or topics. So we may take a night and pray only for our families or for our friends at work, or we may spend an evening praising God for his grace and power, or we may use our prayer time to confess our sins to God and to one another (James 5:16).

Some people would rather have their teeth pulled than pray out loud, while others use it as a chance to gossip or monopolize the time with long-winded prayers. Many also take more time to share requests than to actually pray. Prayer time can also become dry and meaningless if it's something you do every week with little enthusiasm. How can your group keep prayer time fresh and meaningful? Answer that question, and you may be on your way to an earth-shaking prayer experience!

Prayer Signs by Sue Skalicky

Use common road signs to provide traffic control for your small group.

I've been driving for years - 25 to be exact. After all these years, much of what I do is second nature. I don't think much about stopping at a stop sign because I've stopped at thousands. I merge onto the interstate without hesitating because I've done it all across the country. I've made U-turns in little cars and big. I've stopped for hundreds of trains. I've driven in the left-hand lane on a one-way street because it's okay to do that. But I wasn't always so confident. When I first got my license, I'd go out of my way to avoid 4-way stops, steep hills, and interstates. After I grew confident and got tired of spending extra money on gas because of all my detours, I faced these challenges head on.

I can say the same for my prayer life. Even before I made a serious commitment to Jesus, I possessed a look in the small group I was attending that said, "Don't you dare ask me to pray!" I wanted to take the detour and avoid public prayer at all cost. My small group leader began to point out signs and give me the safe opportunity to stretch my prayer muscles. Over time, I grew stronger and more confident in praying out loud. She never told me I had to; she simply modeled the joy of doing it.

During the Bible study portion of your small group meeting, try using prayer signs. Create a set of signs for each person in your small group on index cards and explain how to use them. During the study, give each person a chance to hold up one of their prayer signs, signaling to the group to stop and pray. For example:

Stop—When a person holds up the "stop" card, the group should stop right where they are at, and the person holding the card should pray. He or she can pray a prayer of thanksgiving for God's command, promise, or truth discussed in the lesson.

Yield—The person who holds up this card can ask a question about what is being discussed. The group should stop discussing, and the person to the right of the one who held up the card should pray a quick prayer asking for discernment and understanding.

Merge—The person who holds up this card senses disagreement. Stop discussion while someone prays for wisdom and understanding, then finish talking about the issue.

U-turn—When a person holds up this card, discussion should stop and everyone should pray a prayer releasing his or her opinions to God. Everyone should then take turns questioning what is being discussed so as to discuss it at a deeper level.

These signs can help show the importance of prayer while discussing God's Word, and they can offer people the opportunity to learn to pray.