

How to Spend a Night in Prayer

By William MacDonald

Published in Interest Magazine, Dec 1985

When I first heard of all-night prayer meetings, all I could think of was calloused knees and a prayer list that would be exhausted in minutes. I honestly wondered how anyone could pray non-stop for hours.

What I didn't understand was that an all-night prayer meeting, or an all-day one, for that matter, features a variety of activities. It contains intermittent singing. It may include short messages on prayer from the Word. Interspersed with prayer might be brief reports from missionaries or home workers. Slide or movie presentations often add special interest.

Of course, prayer is the main thing. This may take many forms. We should worship God for who He is and for all He has done. We should thank Him for all His blessings and mercies, including the mercy of answered prayer. We will want to confess personal sins, the sins of the church, the sins of the nation, and the sins of the world. We will intercede for our assembly and for all the household of faith. We will offer supplication for all men, for rulers and all who are in authority. We will pray for specific countries of the world. And we should remember the unsaved.

There is no danger of calloused knees because the posture is changed regularly. At times we may pray standing, sitting, or even prostrate.

Such a prayer meeting greatly needs Spirit-led leadership. It is not realistic to think that a good meeting will just happen without spiritual preparation. Leaders must be thoroughly trained as to how to make the meeting interesting and varied.

They should be rotated regularly to prevent the meeting from becoming predictable.

Even more important, the leaders should spend time before the Lord in advance of the meeting, seeking direction as to the agenda to be followed. They should insure against long dull pauses and long, repetitive prayers. They must keep the meeting moving.

As soon as active prayer ceases, the leader should introduce something else. Usually 20 to 25 minutes is long enough to devote to any particular prayer segment. Then the leader starts a hymn or chorus as a signal to change.

Variety is one of the keys to an interesting meeting. Leaders should be innovative, thinking of new approaches to prayer. No two meetings should be exactly alike. Routine, ho-hum meetings need to be closed down. Sometimes the leader will suggest that participants pray in one group. He might give out a few prayer requests and ask specific individuals to take them. At other times, the meeting will break up into smaller groups. Fixed chairs are not ideal for this type of format. Movable chairs are needed to arrange and rearrange clusters of different sizes.

Many people like to come prepared with paper and pencils to write down prayer requests. The leader might want to have an overhead projector or chalk board. Sometimes a slide projector and a cassette player will be needed. Chorus books or hymn books are standard equipment.

Where does the fuel for prayer come from? It is provided by:

1. Prayer letters or missionary magazines, with specific requests highlighted in advance. If there are enough letters, one can be given to each person, to be prayed over in small groups.
2. Requests voiced by people in the meeting. Also, answers to prayer that they might share.
3. Requests from visiting missionaries or home workers. Sometimes it may be possible to play a tape recording or to have a live phone conversation. These must be amplified, of course.
4. Requests collected in advance by the leader. These may deal with government officials, the sick, the sorrowing, or those in prison for the gospel's sake. Requests can be typed, photocopied, and given to all in the meeting.

Not too many requests should be shared at one time. This proves discouraging and requires too much time for an one portion of the meeting.

When a meeting is to last for hours, there should be short intermissions so the participants can stand and stretch.

Many of the principles for an effective all-night prayer meeting apply equally to regular weekly prayer times. Prayer meetings don't have to be dull or boring. With Spirit-led leadership and thoughtful planning, such meetings can be so attractive that people will not want to miss them. The goal should be to encourage the joy of prayer. When young people say, "We love our prayer meeting," then an assembly is moving in the right direction.

The prayer meeting should be one of the most popular—and profitable—meetings of the local assembly.