

Reenergising prayer at Highfields

A. Context

1. The ministry of the Word and prayer are (arguably) the two most important priorities of church life. They are the priorities of church leaders (Acts 6:4), and along with the Lord's Supper & Fellowship, formed the basis of early church practice (Acts 2:42).
2. I think most people would agree that Highfields scores pretty well on 'ministry of the Word', but poorly at prayer.
3. We're especially weak at corporate prayer as a church. We have 400 church members, perhaps up to 800 on a Sunday, with less than 10% of us at monthly prayer meetings (even if you add both Thursday & Saturday meetings.)
4. As things stand, our corporate prayer meetings have become a kind 'extra-curricula', 'for keenies' meeting (fourth in priority of meetings for many, after Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and midweek small group) rather than an absolutely critical & core engine room of church life.
5. We continue to live extremely busy lives, and would love to make space for more personal evangelism & witness.
6. At our 2016 AGM, we announced we'd trial adding the Thursday prayer meeting alongside the Saturday in September. There's been a little more take up in congregational prayer across the two meetings, though not loads. We've probably moved from around 40 people to around 70 coming overall, on an average month.
7. The Equip seminars have shown us that Sundays, and especially Sunday evenings, continue to be an excellent slot for doing ministry together.

B. Proposal

Turn the Sunday evening service into a whole church prayer & praise meeting once per month (say on the first Sunday of the month). Conduct a six successive month trial period, over the Autumn 2017 & Spring 2018 and evaluate afterwards.

C. Some clarifications

1. We'd still have a Bible talk in the service, to inform our prayers, but this would be kept to a strict 15 min max length to free up more space to pray. Our post-Equip talks back in January (by Matt Bownds & Michael Teutsch) showed us you can have a powerful, relevant, applied Bible talk that's only 5 minutes. Just think what you could get out of a whole 15 mins!
2. We'd still sing together (e.g. 15 mins), perhaps 3 or 4 songs (as usual), along the theme of the Bible message (as usual).
3. Notices would be kept to a minimum.
4. If we kept it to a 75 minute meeting (as usual), we'd now have freed up 40 mins space for congregational sharing & prayer.
5. We could have some larger open prayer (whether praise or intercession as we've done at times before), but most of the time would be smaller groups to facilitate wider engagement. Perhaps we'd plan a few 3-4 min interviews/sharing of prayer needs from people around the church around the themes of 'reach, build, send' & then get into groups.

D. FAQs

1. What about non-Christians?

We love them! And the NT expects them to be present in just such meetings—not only evangelistic guest services. In fact, the NT envisages such a transparent display of (intelligible) Christian spirituality as most attractive (1 Cor 14:25: 'God is really among you!'). We'd need to make them feel totally welcome, but let them know that they've come to our church family prayer & praise time, and we put a huge premium on it.

2. What if people don't feel comfortable praying in small groups?

That would be fine, as long as the leader made it clear that no one was being forced to pray or share. People could be encouraged that they can pray silently in their hearts, or just listen. If people struggled to hear others' prayers (due to a chapel full of people prayer--what a great problem to have, btw!), we could also use the coffee lounge or Aber room.

3. Won't the monthly interruption mean we miss our regular consecutive Bible teaching on Sunday nights?

A couple of options here:

- We could insist that the 15 min talk keeps the series going. Its only a shorter message.
 - Or, if we're happy to break the series (and already we rarely go a whole month without breaking a series, what with Mission Sundays, Guest Events & FacetheBooks), we could do a stand alone 'Church Family Prayers' preaching series going through, e.g. the Songs of Ascents (Ps 120-134), or Prayers of Paul, or work through Psalm 23 very slowly.
4. Oh no, we've had Equip—not *another* change on Sunday evenings?!

Praise God that people's fears about Equip weren't realised. People didn't boycott them en masse. People didn't stop coming to our other Sunday evening services. They've been hugely successful. But as we said last time, there's nothing explicitly biblical about the precise way we currently do our Sunday meetings.

5. Won't the students miss out on a decent sermon series, especially given some go elsewhere in mornings?

Don't get me started... We don't think we should shape what we do around those who only come on Sunday nights. And besides, what better conviction to instil in our students during their time at Highfields that we believe corporate prayer is a priority, and have done something drastic about it.

6. Is it so much of a problem that our whole church prayer meetings are poorly attended, if many of our people pray regularly in their small groups?

Many of us are in groups. Many more are not. Besides, as well as meeting in homes, regular whole church, gathered prayer seems to be a NT norm:

- 1 Cor 14. Topic is intelligibility in worship, covering prophecy (v1-5), speaking in tongues (v4-6), and prayer (vv13-17)—though there's probably some overlap between these things. Paul seems to describe the context this is happening in as when 'the whole church comes together' (v23).
- Acts 1. The disciples (around 120) gathered together to pray for God's leading to replace Judas (v24).
- Acts 4. After their arrest, Peter and John return to their own people, and together they praise God for his intervention & empowerment (v24).

7. Would different types of people be willing to share & pray together in small groups?

I should hope so! The idea of students, 'normal people', older people, internationals, etc & all praying together would be a thrilling thing, in my view – and very much an outworking of Philipians 1:19. What a brilliant way to demonstrate the fact that 'we are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28).

8. What would happen to the other Saturday / Thursday night prayer meetings?

Open to suggestion, but our hunch would be in the short term to stop the Thursday one (Lifegroups / 20s can have an extra study or be encouraged to be 'on mission' together, e.g. go to the pub with their mates, do a social, etc./ run an optional seminar), but to let the Saturday morning continue and give it over to non-staff to lead (if people want to keep meeting then). Maybe turn it into a specific Mission focus prayer meeting (as per the current early morning Monday prayer meeting).

9. Have other churches tried this?

- Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh have started doing it once per month. From seeing around 20 at their monthly prayer meeting, they're now getting 180-240 on their monthly Sunday prayer meeting (the other Sundays in the month they get 260-300 in the evenings, so much the same as us). Striking.
- Capitol Hill Baptist in Washington DC do this kind of prayer meeting every Sunday evening. For many church members, it's their most treasured corporate meeting of the church, and is seen as the second most important meeting to attend, after the morning service (and before midweek small groups, interestingly). Full child care is provided.

- *And don't forget, at Highfields we've actually tried to inject a little more corporate prayer in some evening services since 2014, notably over the summer of 2014. It worked quite well, but we never went down the praying in small groups route.*

