

Does Prayer Change Attitudes toward Evangelism?

A Case Study of The Brooklyn Tabernacle

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“All church leaders want to experience what it’s like to be involved in an evangelistically active congregation, where every Christian is purposefully reaching out to their spiritually lost friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family members,” observed Bill Hybels, pastor at Willow Creek Church in Chicago. ‘However, the truth is that zeal for the Great Commission has grown tepid in many churches, and pastors are often uncertain about how they can lead the charge toward a new era of effective outreach.’¹

Bill Hybels, Willow Creek Church

As he led the charge to create a new era of effective evangelism at the above Willow Creek Church in Chicago, Associate Pastor of Evangelism, Matt Mittelberg, recognized the need for prayer in his evangelism training:

This value—evangelism—always seems to be slipping away. About the time you think you have it for good, it starts to dissipate. No one is permanently motivated to reach others for Christ. It’s like water in a leaky bucket that constantly needs filling ... With frightening speed, the warmest, most outreach-oriented hearts can turn into cold, inwardly absorbed hearts. The same effect can happen to entire congregations and sometimes even whole denominations ... The first step toward making a change is admitting there is a problem ... The most natural thing to do after admitting that the value of evangelism has slipped in your life is to talk to God about it. The battle to raise this value is won first in the private arena of prayer (which, by the way, was the most mentioned activity among the leaders I surveyed about the question of what they do to keep their evangelistic fervor).²

Pastors have tried various programs to produce sustained, long-lasting evangelism among their congregants. They try evangelistic campaigns, new training methods,

¹Matt Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Church*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 9.

²Matt Mittelberg, *Becoming a Contagious Church*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 34.

and periodic sermon series—sometimes they even use guilt. Yet is it possible that most churches never experience invigorating efforts for evangelism because they ignore a genuine commitment to prayer before they begin any new strategies? Perhaps sustained evangelism might result from a different starting point--from simple, persistent prayer for the community and nonchristians.

The apostle Paul, perhaps history's greatest evangelist after Christ, admitted, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [unsaved Israel] is for their salvation" (Rom 10:1). Paul felt intense passion for the salvation of unsaved Jews. Earlier in the same epistle he actually said, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren" (9:3). The Pauline epistles are filled with examples of Paul's pleas for prayer concerning his evangelistic efforts (i.e. 2 Thes 3:1; Eph 6:19-20).

Paul's whole life and ministry reflected this heart's desire. He viewed everything he did in light of this intense passion. His single-minded focus demonstrated his deep conviction about reaching out to the lost or new person. How did Paul develop such a conviction and lifestyle? Obviously Paul knew well what Jesus had taught about the eternal destiny of believers and unbelievers. The teaching of the Scriptures motivates a desire to reach people, and thus pray for them. Yet was it also possible that Paul's prayers influenced the direction of his life? Is it possible that the act and nature of prayer itself guides the direction and motivations of the person who prays?

In an article in *Pray Magazine*, one author observed, "It may seem odd to pray for neighbors you don't know. When I first began to pray for my neighbors, I didn't know them. But as I began to pray for them, my awareness increased and eventually I felt a burden for them. I wanted to get to know them. What followed was a kind of friendship evangelism."³

Was his experience unique, or was his experience true of all Christians who pray for new and lost people? Does prayer significantly influence the attitudes of Christians towards nonbelievers? Is prayer associated with lasting efforts of evangelism? If so, the influence of prayer upon behavior carries significant implications for church strategies. Many pastors would have to admit that they ignore a primary key for congregational evangelism; few churches can point to directed efforts at increasing prayer for their community. Such a practice would change the way most pastors plan for evangelism. If prayer is significantly associated with sustained evangelism, perhaps church leaders should strategize for evangelism from a different starting point than we normally do.

³Dee Duke, "How to Mobilize a Congregation to Intercede," *Pray Magazine* 1 (September-October 1997), 20.

One church in a multi-ethnic, urban setting—renowned for its worship choir—would agree. The Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City intentionally commits to prayer as a central aspect of their ministry.

From a small handful of people to a congregation of several thousands the Brooklyn Tabernacle has become a beacon of spiritual light and a place of prayer for people seeking God's help for their lives ... The Lord has greatly helped us in seeing the multitudes here and elsewhere turn to Christ for salvation. We share in the feelings of Jesus as He looked on the crowds and then "*had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Matthew 9:36) We are asking Him not only for the workers needed for the harvest field but also for all the resources needed to see His Name and Gospel glorified throughout the whole earth.⁴

Both prayer and reaching people are part of the spiritual DNA of the church. The question is whether their prayer culture influences their evangelism—and whether their experience offers stimulating reflections for other pastors.

A Look at The Brooklyn Tabernacle

Introduction of Pastoral Leaders

Currently four full-time pastors, including Senior Pastor Jim Cymbala, serve a congregation of nearly 10,000 people—although specific attendance numbers are never the focus of the church. Two other pastors served until recently—one pastor died a few months before the writing of this case study, and a second moved to another ministry in New Jersey. Two part-time pastors serve along with the four others. One of the part-time pastors focuses upon the missions ministry, as well as working at Nyack College in Manhattan. The full staff includes 110 people, many of whom carry multiple roles. One of the hallmarks for the staff is their relational, Spirit-driven culture.⁵ Everyone meets together on a weekly basis for prayer and worship.

Jim Cymbala serves as the Senior Pastor at the Tabernacle. His story has been chronicled in his book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, and other resources. He and his wife Carol, who directs the Grammy Award winning Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, have ministered both domestically and internationally.

Steve Rhoads serves as the Executive Pastor. He graduated from Wheaton College with a bachelor's degree, a Master's of Arts in Biblical Studies degree in

⁴Brooklyn Tabernacle church web site. Accessed July 1, 2008. Available from http://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/site/PageServer?pagename=tbt_homepage

⁵Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Uttnage, July 17, 2008.

1984 from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a Master's degree in human resources development from National Lewis University in Illinois. When asked how he came to The Brooklyn Tabernacle, Pastor Rhoads shared:

After I graduated from DTS, I joined a church that my dad pastored in Charlotte, North Carolina for ten years. There was sort of a coup in that church. My brother and I were both on staff, and they asked both of us to leave in an attempt to get my dad to leave. So we both left. I didn't know what I was going to do next because I was trained as a pastor. We had started making trips to the Brooklyn Tabernacle and realized that the Lord was here. So we packed up our four kids and moved here.

He went on to say:

God opened a door for me to become a financial advisor working with investments bankers for about eight years on Wall Street. Then at the tail end of that eight years ... I was hired by Nancy DeMoss, with *Revive our Hearts* ministry, to do donor development for them. I worked for them for six months until Pastor Cymbala called and said we need a CFO. I did that for a couple of years, and then he needed me to take the role of Executive Pastor (which we had never had before) about a year ago. I've been on staff a little over four years.⁶

Pastor Brian Pettrey, an energetic and friendly young pastor, is very familiar with The Brooklyn Tabernacle—he married the Senior Pastor's daughter. He has served at the church for 13 years. He was originally hired to oversee the construction of the new building, which he did for six or seven years. He started the Young Adult Ministry, taking the full responsibility for it after he concluded the construction project. Sensing that his heart was for the evangelistic ministry of the church, he moved into the Evangelism Ministry in recent months.

The staff did not formally create the new role for evangelism. Pastor Pettrey, after prayer and discussion with the other pastors, sensed the Lord leading him to create the role:

It came about because [evangelism] is something that was in my heart. They said, "Why don't you take this thing and see what you can make of it?" Up until this point, we haven't had a pastor [of outreach], at least in my experience. [We have] a lot of multi tasking with limited resources. We've got a number of guys in various areas—pretty focused. In reality you work outside that focus, as well in working with each other ... I'm excited about the role.⁷

⁶Ibid.

⁷Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, June 24, 2008.

Rhoads, the Executive Pastor, observed that the new evangelism role will be completely open for Brian's direction.

Brian Pettrey is going to be at the front of [our evangelistic work], trying to let people know that this is an obligation that they have—and they should care about the lost, and that they're able to reach people that the church can't reach. Brian really wants to get them paying attention and he'll do it.

Looking at the magnitude of a new ministry direction, Rhoads realized that the new task carried a large responsibility. Yet he felt confident in Brian.

I think what he is trying to do is a pretty huge task. Because we're doing so many other things, [evangelism] to me becomes one of the bullets. For instance, we've gotten involved with a prison in Louisiana and our view of evangelism is different. Through a relationship that we've developed with Angola Prison in Louisiana, we created a DVD, called *The Miracle of Hope*, that chronicles sort of a revival that is going on at that prison. One of the things that we are trying to do is to get that DVD to as many churches as possible so churches can get excited about evangelism and prayer. So it's more of dealing with people not in New York. A lot of the evangelism we try to do winds up being non New York based. This is a result of Pastor Cymbala being kind of a missionary ... I don't think he consciously says, "Let's come up with a program to reach New York," because he's not one of those we're-going-to-take-the-city types...It's far more organic for us.⁸

History of the Church

The Brooklyn Tabernacle has a long history. It was established in 1847 as the Central Presbyterian Church. The first building was located on Willoughby Street at the corner of Pearl, originally occupied by the First Presbyterian Church. Central's congregation grew as the result of evangelistic prayers and revival. The church influenced New York City's spiritual, political, and social realms. By the end of the nineteenth century, the church held crowds of 6,000 to 7,000 people, led by the preaching pastor, Rev. T. Dewitt Talmage.

However, the church lost its initial identity and fervor throughout the decades as the city—and the people of the area—changed. Several buildings were destroyed by fires and thunderstorms over the years. The ethnic—and, more importantly, economic—culture of the immediate neighborhoods changed. As one volunteer who currently serves at the welcome desk at The Brooklyn Tabernacle said, "[The story of our church] is the story of New York City and the story of God."⁹

⁸Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, July 17, 2008.

⁹Volunteer at *Welcome Desk*, Brooklyn Tabernacle, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, June 24, 2008.

The church that is known around the world today truly began with the arrival of its current pastor, Jim Cymbala.

In the autumn of 1971, my wife, Carol, and I took over the leadership of The Brooklyn Tabernacle on Atlantic Avenue in downtown Brooklyn. The small, struggling congregation numbered less than 30 people and met in a small run-down building surrounded by the physical and moral blight of the inner-city. But this was where God had placed us and we very soon realized that it was a unique opportunity to see the power of the Gospel in action by loving and ministering to all colors and kinds of people. Most were poor and many struggled with the typical inner-city problems of drug and alcohol abuse or the pain of disintegrating families. No money was available for salaries during most weeks so we took second jobs and struggled to make ends meet both in the church and at home. Right away, we realized the necessity of real prayer to secure God's grace and power in our work.¹⁰

Cymbala described the decision to focus upon prayer as the central tenet of the church in his book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. He described his experience of God's guidance while standing on a boat during a vacation rest:

Carol and I had frankly admitted to each other that unless God broke through, the Brooklyn Tabernacle was doomed. We couldn't finess it along. We couldn't organize and market and program our way out. The embarrassing truth was that sometimes even I didn't want to show up for a service—that's how bad it was. We had to have a visitation of the Holy Spirit, or bust.

"Lord, I have no idea how to be a successful pastor," I prayed softly out there on the water. "I haven't been trained. All I know is that Carol and I are working in the middle of New York City, with people dying on every side, overdosing from heroin, consumed by materialism, and all the rest. If the gospel is so powerful ..."

I couldn't finish the sentence. Tears choked me. Fortunately, the others on the boat were too far away to notice as they studied their lines in the blue-green water. Then quietly but forcefully, in words heard not with my ear but deep within my spirit, I sensed god speaking: If you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack for something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that's needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response.¹¹

¹⁰Brooklyn Tabernacle church web site. Accessed July 1, 2008. Available from http://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/site/PageServer?pagename=jim_cymbala

¹¹Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 24-26.

Upon his return to the church, Pastor Cymbala told his small congregation:

“It’s not fancy or profound or spectacular. But I want to say to you today with all the seriousness I can muster: from this day on, the prayer meeting will be the barometer of our church. What happens on Tuesday night will be the gauge by which we will judge success or failure because that will be the measure by which God blesses us. If we call upon the Lord, he has promised in his Word to answer, to bring the unsaved to himself, to pour out his Spirit among us. If we don’t call upon the Lord, he has promised nothing—nothing at all. It’s as simple as that. No matter what I preach or what we claim to believe in our heads, the future will depend upon our times of prayer.”¹²

With that announcement, a different approach to ministry was born.

In the months and years that followed, answers to prayer became noticeable. New people joined. Unsaved relatives and total strangers began to show up. Many people began to trust Christ as Savior. Today the church has four Sunday services, each approximately two to two and a half hours long. They have planted seven churches in the greater New York area, plus another ten in the United States and overseas.

The Prayer Band

As Pastor Cymbala began to teach his emerging congregation about prayer, the first result was the creation of a group of prayer warriors. Kenneth Ware, one of the associate pastors in the earlier years, started all-night prayer meetings on Friday nights at the church. Then he organized the Prayer Band—a group of people committed to praying at the church around the clock. Members of the Prayer Band were praying five nights a week. For many years they were in the church seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. Every request received by the church was lifted to the Lord for thirty days.

Today, “we don’t do [the Prayer Band] twenty four hours a day on site anymore for a lot of reasons, but mostly for twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day there is usually someone in the prayer room, one to five people who are praying through requests ... It’s an ongoing prayer ministry. People sign up for one to two hour shifts and it kind of happens organically though we don’t ever stand up in the pulpit and say, sign up for a shift. It happens as God puts a burden on people’s hearts to pray.”¹³

The daily prayer experience often moves people to serve in other ways in the church. In most cases, the people who serve on the Prayer Band also stand to pray

¹²Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 27.

¹³Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, July 17, 2008.

with others at the Tuesday evening prayer meetings. Many of these people become connected with the larger ministry of the church.

The Tuesday Night Prayer Meeting

After people began to pray on a regular basis—and as Cymbala continued to teach about prayer—the central activity of the ministry at The Brooklyn Tabernacle became the Tuesday night prayer meeting. Even Sunday services take second precedence to the midweek prayer meeting. All pastors and staff attend the services, and most of the pastors are visibly available for prayer at the front of the sanctuary. On many occasions, people arrive two hours early on Tuesdays, and the pastors are often available for them during that time. People of all categories and backgrounds walk to the front for prayer. Each one receives prayer by members of the prayer band and leaders. Some stay at the front by themselves, quietly praying. Others openly cry, or smile. Every person is welcome to pray—or be prayed for—at the church.¹⁴ By the beginning of the service, 2000 people have crowded into the sanctuary. Pastor Cymbala believes that the Tuesday Night Prayer Meeting is so important that he limits his travel schedule so that he does not miss two weeks in a row.

All types of people fill the auditorium—each one expecting to meet God that night. Cymbala described the growth of the prayer meeting in his book.

We never knew who might come to Christ at the Brooklyn Tabernacle. There were junkies, prostitutes, and homosexuals. But lost lawyers, business types, and bus drivers turned to the Lord there, too. We welcomed them all. There were Latinos, African Americans, Caribbean Americans, whites—you name it. Once people were energized by the Holy Spirit, they began to see other races as God's creation. Instead of railing at homosexuals, we began to weep over them.

People began driving thirty or forty minutes from Long Island. The one—and perhaps only—advantage of our location in downtown Brooklyn is that excellent mass transit was available...By the time we grew to 150 or 175 on Sunday morning, the prayer meeting was up to 100. There was life, joy, a sense of family, and love. When a meeting ended, people weren't in a hurry to leave; they lingered and prayed and talked to one another.¹⁵

Prayer became the essential ministry emphasis—and people started changing and trusting Christ.

¹⁴Personal observations of the Tuesday Night by the author of this case study, June 24, 2008.

¹⁵Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 34-35.

The Pastors Commitment to Prayer for Evangelism

Guests quickly hear the same reason behind the growth and ministry of The Brooklyn Tabernacle—the effectiveness of the Brooklyn Tabernacle is dependent upon the fresh work of the Holy Spirit as he responds to dependent faith that is expressed through humble, persistent prayer.

The history of past revivals portrays this truth in full color. Whether you study the Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, the Welsh Revival, the 1906 outpouring on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, or any other period of revival, you always find men and women who first inwardly groan, longing to see the status quo changed—in themselves and in their churches. They begin to call on God with insistence; prayer begets revival, which begets more prayer.¹⁶

No one suggests that prayer takes precedence over God’s involvement in the church. At the Tabernacle, Christ is the head of the church. The Holy Spirit enables and guides all aspects of the church. People are transformed by faith alone.¹⁷ Yet prayer is the crucial demonstration of that faith in the Spirit’s movement among his people and church—and that describes the visible difference of the Tabernacle from many other churches. They are committed to prayer first, prayer primary.

When interviewed and asked whether prayer influences the effectiveness of their ministry, there was a rapid response. Pastor Pettrey was incredulous that someone might question the relation:

If you’re a student of church history, how do you not measure the connection between prayer and outreach? When you look at the way God has poured out anything down through the ages, there has always been a clear connection between even the prayer and the preaching and the response that comes—it’s outreach that flows out. Honestly [the idea that prayer might not influence people’s connection with others] blows my mind ... Most people say that when they get involved in ministry, their heart has been changed and they seek out ways to be involved. New York is not an easy place to live. It’s hard to even get to the church. People come because they are drawn there because of God. Most people seek because their hearts have been changed by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

As the Executive Pastor, Steve Rhoads added his observation:

¹⁶Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 58.

¹⁷See Appendix 1 for a *Statement of Faith* for the Brooklyn Tabernacle.

¹⁸Brian Pettrey. See Appendix 2 for Pettrey’s fuller response.

The way that we define prayer is so different than the way you would find prayer defined in other evangelical churches. Prayer is fundamentally opening your heart wide to God. When that happens, when people learn to do that and they start to do that, they draw close to God. And as a result of drawing close to God, they become like God and, as a result of that, they wind up having the same heart that He has, which is for people—to be a heart of love and mercy and compassion ... I think if people are praying the way I think the Bible is talking about praying in the Old and New Testament, if they pray that way, it engages their heart, and when they are open to God, then God starts to work in their lives and they start to adopt His character and the things that He cares about, which includes loving people.¹⁹

Prayer is unquestionably associated with evangelism in the mind of the pastoral staff.

Have people really become more involved in evangelism because of the Tabernacle's prayer culture?

I think that prayer kind of begets prayer. There's a close connection between the amount of time people spend praying and the amount of time that they want to spend praying. I think that happens in the prayer band. I've never tracked what happened so I don't have any research for you, but my impression is that those people in the prayer band become the people that usually pray in the front. So when there is a need, the prayer band is down there because first of all they are already teed up to pray, they've been praying, even though they don't have a lot of taxi space to get off the ground, they've been praying. They already have a heart for the people. Those become the frontline helpers when there is a crisis, when a group is going out to evangelize, it's the fastest way that I know for your heart to get softer.²⁰

Prayer influenced the attitude of Prayer Band participants, and attitudes led to sustained behavior in other ways.

What about faith? Perhaps faith is the real motivator behind the change in people's attitude and behavior at the Tabernacle. But Pastor Rhoads does not want to separate the two—faith and prayer.

I think it's the chicken and the egg type thing. You're not going to pray if you don't have faith, but faith is generated by the prayer. I think it's sort of obedience and then the feelings follow. You call on God, and as you begin to call on God the faith just comes. There were times when we're praying on Tuesday night and I don't feel any faith; I don't sense God is going to do

¹⁹ Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Uttnage, July 17, 2008.

²⁰Ibid.

anything; but as a result of being obedient and praying and opening your heart to God, faith is build by the Word of God and all those things. Frankly, when people question the importance of prayer, I think it's that we believe that this process works and I don't think that most people do.²¹

The Brooklyn Tabernacle operates by a different paradigm than most churches.

A Description of the Evangelistic Ministry at The Brooklyn Tabernacle

When one initially encounters the Tabernacle, it is easy to see that thousands of people have become Christians through the congregation's ministry. In fact, guests often walk away, recognizing that God was present and active in the church—sometimes in unexplainable, yet obvious, ways. People spend time talking and visiting, praying and sharing. Most of the congregants trusted Christ through the ministry of the church. Yet one hears little evidence of strategic plans for outreach. People who once struggled with life on the streets begin to reach out to others who struggle with life's crises. People who once lived an isolated life begin to help other people through some ministry. Yet there is little pressure on people to do so. As Pastor Pettrey confided, "It just happens as the Spirit works in people's lives."²²

The pastors of The Brooklyn Tabernacle point to several ministries that demonstrate the sustained emphasis upon evangelism—the regular services, homeless shelter, Prayer Stations, The Downtown Learning Center, and missions.

In the busy activities of the church's ministries and counseling, the major opportunity for evangelism happens in the services.

Most of what we do is through the [Sunday and Tuesday] services. We do a fair bit of radio advertising for special services. We have three services, 9am and 12pm which are more traditional in terms of Pastor Cymbala and the choir. The 3:30 service tends to be more special event type stuff where we have a special musical guest, or Tony Evans or David Jeremiah. So most of what we do is centered around inviting visitors and getting people to come to those services.²³

The services attract many people who hear the gospel at that time.

Over and over again, most people who have trusted Christ and changed their life first visited one of the Tabernacle's services. Every service is open to a testimony, a story, a conversation, a sudden change in plan in order to follow the

²¹Ibid.

²²Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utmage, June 24, 2008.

²³Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Utmage, July 17, 2008.

prompting of the Holy Spirit. People come from around the city, or off the streets, or at the invitation of a church member, and they encounter God in the services—this is the historic desire at the Tabernacle. Many people have taken their first step of faith at the Tuesday Night Prayer Service. As one visits with church leaders, every pastor talks about the evangelism that occurs week after week through their services as God works. If one misses this emphasis, one misses the focus of the Brooklyn Tabernacle.

In contrast to the simple growth that rises from the services, people have created evangelistic opportunities through service or witnessing. The homeless shelter was the Tabernacle's first spontaneous outreach.

People who came from the streets—and God has taken them and turned their lives around—understand those they are, in turn, trying to help. It has developed and passed through different hands, and is currently run by a Haitian couple who came from destitute lives. They reach about 18 shelters a month. They mobilize people to visit each of the shelters for praise and worship, Bible teaching, loving in people, etc. In winter time they'll bring clothes, hats scarves. They are a real blessing.²⁴

The shelter has been supported by congregants since the early years of the church.

The Prayer Stations are perhaps one of the more cultural opportunities for evangelism. The prayer stations are mobile booths located along busy city streets. Volunteers offer free tracts and bottles of water, and then offer prayer for people who stop to talk. The efforts definitely catch attention.

It's really weird, especially in New York. Here, it is not easy to talk to people. You start talking to people you don't know and they put up their guard—they wonder what you want...[after some conversation] they ask if they are praying for people, and they say, "Yes, do you have someone you would like us to pray for?" Seventy percent of the people who come up to it are not Christian. They obviously believe in God and stopping for prayer. Most of the people who approach it are in vulnerable situations...In a couple of hours, 150 people can stop by...It's just listening and asking a few questions, and in a couple of minutes you've got plenty of different angles where you can come at them with the Gospel and apply it to their need ... By the time it's over, you've got someone on the street that you would never have been able to have met ... they will respond to something with no strings attached, when we're trying to do something to help, which is the opposite of life and survival here in the city.²⁵

²⁴Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, June 24, 2008.

²⁵Ibid.

The Prayer Stations are manned by volunteers who have been changed by the preaching and prayer ministry of the Tabernacle.

Pastor Rhoads mentioned another evangelistic opportunity that occurs through education.

Probably our biggest calling card from an outreach, or evangelism, standpoint is a separate 501(c)3 we created called *The Downtown Learning Center*. In the spring, we had about eleven hundred adults for free—and we offered GED preparation, English as a second language, and basic literacy. So you get a lot of people because it's free; you get a lot of people who aren't going to come to a meeting, but come in there and all of the tutors are Christians. It's sort of a moderately Bible-based curriculum, and so people get saved because of that and walk across the street to a meeting. We have a fair amount invested in that as a way of evangelism and a way of leveling the playing field to give people additional educational and kind of career opportunities. A lot of this population is pretty under employed.²⁶

The work of The Downtown Learning Center was created by people who believed the Center would help others, as well as reach others for Christ.

Additionally, the Tabernacle has a strong emphasis upon missions. In fact, they include a description of their missions ministry on their web site—one of only a few statements about outreach on their site.

Realizing the limited impact that anyone church can have in a large metropolis like New York, we began to plant churches in other needy areas of the city. As we trained our own pastors and sent them out with small groups of workers from our own congregation, we started a replication of the work we had begun in downtown Brooklyn. Our church then began to reach out financially and in prayer to see other areas in New York City be impacted by God's love through the planting of Daughter Churches, of which there are now six in the New York Metro area, all to the glory of God ... At that same time, we began to look beyond our own locale to plant missionary stations in impoverished places like Haiti, Peru, a poor neighborhood in the Dominican Republic as well as in Israel. The leadership for these works has been raised up by God from our own congregation which itself represents so many parts of the world. These missions have seen a demonstration of the far-reaching power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁷

²⁶Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, July 17, 2008.

²⁷Brooklyn Tabernacle church web site. Accessed July 1, 2008. Available from http://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/site/PageServer?pagename=jim_cymbala

As mentioned in an above quotation, their prison work is one example of such missions involvement.

One of Pastor Pettrey's newer ideas for outreach is prayer cards and visitation:

My idea is that everyone who comes to church here knows someone going through a tough time. It makes sense to me that, with no strings attached, we try to reach out and in a loving way say that we've heard about their situation and we want you to know you have a friend. We could use prayer cards. When you come in, you write the prayer request, put it in the box, and know someone will pray for you for thirty days. If a person has been praying for a neighbor and feels they've done all they can do, write down the situation and put the name of the neighbor who knows them. Call them on the phone as a random call, say you have a mutual friend, and ask if you could pray with them on the phone...The second part is this. We have so many people all over the city; we've got somebody in somebody's neighborhood...Can I bring you something that might be an encouragement to you? Now ... you've at least got a foot in the door, a contact they can keep in touch with. My idea is that we have a huge church and we have a chance to get people outside the church and do evangelism.²⁸

Some efforts rise from spontaneous thoughts; others efforts rise from strategic thinking.

Evangelism as a Lifestyle, not a Strategized Program

Evangelism has never been a formal, strategized emphasis. This is unusual in that the Tabernacle reports that thousands of people have trusted Christ as their personal Savior and been helped by their ministries. As each pastor said, "It just happens in everything we do." Pastor Cymbala wrote in his introductory book, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*:

Most ministries in our church have not begun with a bright idea in a pastors' meeting. We usually don't say, "Let's start a street outreach," and then go recruit laypeople to staff it. We have learned over the years to let God birth something in people who are spiritually sensitive, who begin to pray and feel a calling. Then they come to us. "We want to start such-and-such," they say—and the ministry gets going and lasts. Discouragement, complications, and other attacks by the enemy don't wash it out.²⁹

²⁸Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utmage, June 24, 2008.

²⁹Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 74.

Obviously, as one observes the weekly flow of ministry, some efforts rise from strategic thinking. Yet many other efforts rise spontaneously through prayer, as the staff trusts the Holy Spirit to guide.

Pastor Pettrey, the first pastor with an assigned task for evangelism in the history of the church, added, “We have homeless ministry, prison Ministry, food distribution. They don’t fall under an outreach ministry umbrella. They just happened to develop where people in church got inspiration to reach out in ways and started up the ministry and got people around them. Nothing that was planned out, but more organic by the needs that we see and inspiration.”³⁰

How do people get involved in outreach? There is a formal structure for membership. People must go through membership classes and membership interviews to make sure everyone is on the same page. “Once you go through that, you are released into ministry. Most everything happens from within. In some cases, people who are running the ministry have you come in and interview and train to make sure that [you] have an understanding of what is involved and what the responsibility is.”³¹ Yet it is up to the person. Most of the volunteers simply ask about ministry after they have been involved in the prayer services. As Pettrey added:

To be honest, one of our great weaknesses is organizationally. We are trying to find a place like—for instance we don’t have a Welcome Center. The pastors met with Pastor Cymbala and said they need a place where people can come and see what the church can offer. If somebody wanted to find out how to become a member, or find out what the various ministries are in the church, then maybe a card people could pull up to find out what the heart of the ministry is. Then a signup sheet or a kiosk to type in who they are, what they’re interested in. If it’s not easy, then they are really driven to be a part, to get connected. There is something driving them.³²

Evangelism has certainly been on everyone’s mind at the Tabernacle—clearly from the beginning. Yet their dependence is upon the Holy Spirit who guides the church—meaning its leaders and congregants—in His steps as He reaches the city for Christ. In response to their dependent faith in prayer, people have changed their behavior as God has worked in their life. Evangelism has occurred as a result.

³⁰Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, June 24, 2008.

³¹Steve Rhoads, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, July 17, 2008.

³²Brian Pettrey, a personal interview by Paul Utnage, June 24, 2008.

Concluding Observations

Their emphasis is contagious for many believers, even believers from different church traditions. Tour buses line the street after the Tuesday Night Prayer Meetings as people simply stand around reflecting on their experience, or just connecting with each other. Churches send delegates to the Tabernacle to try to understand the prayer emphasis. On some nights, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals visit at the same time.

All kinds of visitors come back repeatedly from different backgrounds. I'll give you a perfect example. There was a couple that came to a pastor's conference from a Baptist church in Houston. They came with their pastor, kind of fell in love with the church—fell in love being in the presence of God—and so they closed up their house in Houston, rented an apartment off Central Park, and just lived up here for a couple of months helping out, volunteering, going to the church, and sharing with people on the street. They just said the Lord is here—so they wanted to be here.³³

Pastor Rhoads, in talking about the overall ministry, added:

If you hang around here long enough, you'll realize that it is really not us. Maybe that is why the modeling is so important. You get around people who by all external analysis are nuts. People just don't pray like this. This is crazy; this is wild; I'm not comfortable with it; it's not the way I was raised. The problem is that you can't argue with the results because these people love God more than they love anything else. Their depth of gratitude and their love for others is deeper. Why is that deeper?³⁴

Indeed, why does it appear deeper?

As one watches the crowds on Tuesday nights, it might be easy to feel guilty about the lack of prayer in one's own church. The pastors at The Brooklyn Tabernacle would never proclaim themselves a "model" for church ministry everywhere—as if churches should mimic their programs. They simply hope that church leaders will ask some stimulating questions under the guidance of the Spirit.

- Might prayer be associated with sustained evangelistic efforts? More or less than thought in the past?
- Have pastors generally missed something crucial at the starting point of evangelistic efforts?
- Understanding one's own church's spiritual DNA, how might prayer become more prevalent? Should it? Would a sustained, long-lasting difference be encountered?

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

- Where are church leaders purposefully including prayer for the salvation of more people in their overall ministry structure?
- Since every church has something at the center of its ministries, what is the center of my ministry? Does my paradigm actually lead where I aim? Where does prayer fit in this paradigm?

Appendix

Statement of Faith of Brooklyn Tabernacle

- We believe in the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures and the authority of both the Old and New Testaments.
- We believe that God eternally exists in three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and that these three are one God, having the same nature, attributes, and perfections, and worthy of the same worship, reverence, and obedience.
- We believe man was created in the image of God, but sinned and fell through disobedience, and that the entire human race shares in man's lost and depraved nature.
- We believe Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took upon Himself the form of a man by means of the virgin birth, lived a sinless life, yet retained His absolute deity, being at the same time very God and very man.
- We believe that atonement for sin was made by the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.
- We believe in the literal resurrection of the crucified body of our Lord, in His ascension into heaven, and His priestly intercession.
- We believe salvation is the gift of God by grace alone and received by personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that this faith is manifested in works pleasing to God.
- We believe the Holy Spirit is the Promise of the Father, the Comforter who indwells and places every believer in the Body of Christ, bestows spiritual gifts upon the Church and convicts the world of sin and the judgment to come.
- We believe the baptism of the Holy Spirit is for all believers as a definite endowment of power for service and is subsequent to, and separate from, conversion.
- We believe that the ordinances of the church, by the command of Christ, are Water Baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper, both of which are administered to those who are born again.
- We believe in the eternal salvation of the believers and in the eternal damnation and punishment of the nonbelievers. We believe that the consummation of all things includes the visible, personal, and glorious return of Jesus Christ the "Blessed Hope" of the Church.