



2,352 Hours of Prayer

One church's story of intentionally meeting with God day and night

BOB SMIETANA

Kim Fiser was nervous.

For several weeks, she'd been hard at work, helping transform a dingy storage room—with its “hospital green walls” and mop sink—into a warm and inviting room for prayer at Deerbrook Covenant Church in Lee's Summit, Missouri.

By September 26, 2004, the room was finally ready for use during a week of round-the-clock, “24-7” prayer by the congregation. Fiser was chosen to open the room with the first hour of continuous prayer. In preparation,

she made a list of every sin she could remember. Then she stuck the list, several handwritten pages long, in her Bible. She had become a Christian several years earlier but couldn't shake a sense of guilt over her past.

“I went to high school and college in the seventies, so I'll leave it at that,” she says.

At church, Fiser began to worry. What if she dropped the paper, or left it out where someone could see it? “I think that's how a lot of us go through life,” she says, “carrying around guilt

and shame, weighing us down, and making us feel exposed or unworthy.”

At the end of the church service, Fiser walked into the prayer room, locked the door behind her, knelt at the foot of the wooden cross in the middle of the room, and began to read her list out loud.

“It was like finally each and every one of those sins was lifted and I didn't have to carry it around anymore,” she says. “It was very healing.”

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When she finished the list, Fiser went over to the “sin shredder”—a small shredding machine—and fed the pages through it. The act was a “tangible way to grasp what Christ had done for me,” says Fiser.

That first week of prayer turned into a three-month “season of prayer” for Deerbrook Covenant Church, says Pastor Gary Schmitz, one that has transformed the life of the congregation. From the end of September until the first week of January, the prayer room was used round the clock, with more than 350 people taking one-hour shifts.

All of this has come as a welcome surprise to Schmitz, who admits that his church had “just not been very good at prayer” in the past. Despite his best efforts—Schmitz preached “eight or ten” sermon series on prayer—turnout for prayer meetings was sparse.

Some of that is just life; like most people, members of his church have busy, overfilled lives, with little spare time for prayer. The idea of going to an organized prayer meeting can be also less than appealing.

“When most people think of group prayer,” Schmitz says, “they think of six or ten people sitting in a circle, looking at the ground, and feeling nervous about having to pray out loud.”

The past year has been difficult for Deerbrook Covenant. The church, which started in 1996, had grown rapidly, reaching more than 700 in attendance when their new building opened in 2002. Since then, attendance has plateaued, with a number of key families leaving, and as a result, some financial struggle.

Schmitz was looking for a way to encourage the congregation when he came across a book on 24-7 prayer called *Red Moon Rising* by Pete Greig and Dave Roberts. (The title refers to Joel 2:27-32.) Greig started a 24-7 prayer room at his church in Chichester, England, after visiting Hernhutt, Germany, the eighteenth-century home of the Moravian Church. The Moravians, a small Christian sect, held round-the-clock prayer in Hernhutt for more than 100 years, and out of those prayer rooms sent hundreds of missionaries around the world.

The prayer room at Greig’s church was such a success that a number of English churches, including the national Salvation Army, copied it. The idea took off by word of mouth and the Internet (www.24-7prayer.com), inspiring thousands of prayer rooms in fifty-six countries.

Fiser and the other volunteers at Deerbrook borrowed several ideas from Greig’s book in setting up their prayer room. Besides repainting the room in a warm, inviting color, they set out journals for people to write their prayers, along with an art desk with paints, markers, and colored pencils for people to draw their prayers.

The group posted a series of maps on the walls, inviting people to pray for their community, local schools, the United States, and the world. A nearby retirement community donated a Warner Sallman painting of Christ in the garden, which was hung on one wall, next to an altar and kneeler. A liturgical candle burned on the altar during the entire season of prayer.

They also made a “wailing wall”—modeled after the one in Jerusalem,

where people could attach their prayers. Within weeks, that wall, and later the ceiling, was filled with hundreds of prayer requests, many of them desperate. One simply read, "Help, help, help, I am so broken."

For the first week of 24-7 prayer, the Deerbrook congregation needed to fill 168 one-hour slots in the prayer room, something Schmitz thought nearly impossible. He was sure that he would have to sign up for dozens of hours, and figured he could lean on some of his closest friends to do the same.

"I had a behind-the-scenes plan B in case every thing fell through," he says. "As a matter of fact, it was an elaborate plan B, because I thought this whole idea might crash and burn."

Within a day or two, all of the slots



Resources in the prayer room included journals, paper, and art supplies for those who wanted to record or illustrate their prayers.



Deerbrook's prayer room included a "sin shredder."

on the first week's sign-up sheets were filled. The response was so great that Schmitz had to keep adding weeks to the schedule. That first week, he ended up squeezing in only one hour in the prayer room.

Jennifer Jackson, a single mom, has been spending an hour in the prayer room at 4 p.m. on Monday afternoons,

just after work and before she picks up her daughter from child care.

Jackson says that most days, by the time she settles her three-year-old daughter into bed, there's not enough time and energy to pray.

"The prayer room came along at a point when I really needed it," she says. "Once a week I get to sit down and have some one-on-one time with God, with no outside influences. . . . When those doors open wide, it's like God's own arms opening up. When they close, it's like walking into a hug from God."

The first time she went into the prayer room, Jackson wondered if she would make it for an hour. Now, when the next person knocks on the door, she is a little disappointed that her time is up. She spends the first fifteen minutes reading the prayer requests on the wailing wall. Knowing what is going on in other people's lives helps her feel closer to the rest of the congregation.

"I really think through the prayer room everybody has been pulled together and is praying for each other. You can really see God working day by day in people's lives," she says.

Jackson, whose divorce was final in August, says being in the prayer room has changed the way she views her former husband, who struggled with substance abuse. She started praying for him, and heard recently that he had checked into treatment.

"I want my daughter to have a father," she says. "I have been able to forgive him and move forward. I was carrying all of this anger, guilt, and frustration around with me. Going into the prayer room and letting it all go to God has made a world of difference."

The journals in the prayer room are filled with dozens of stories like Jackson's. One man went home and wrote out a list of all the people he had ever offended and began to call them, asking for forgiveness. A couple wrote about being on the brink of financial collapse: "We are in a hole that keeps filling with dirt. The sides are falling in and no matter what I do, it seems like we get more attacked." Then they gave thanks for gifts of food and money that kept them afloat. Several couples had been on the brink of divorce before going into the prayer room together and

Prayer and the Mission

An Interview with Pete Greig of 24-7

From a single prayer room that Pete Greig started at his church in Chichester, England in 1999, the 24-7 prayer movement has spread to thousands of churches in more than fifty countries. The group also supports Make Poverty History (www.makepovertyhistory.org) a campaign to relieve global poverty by changing British foreign policy.

Greig recently moved to Kansas City to facilitate a 24-7 movement in the U.S. There he became friends with Gary Schmitz, pastor of Deerbrook Covenant Church. *Companion* features editor Bob Smietana recently spoke to Greig by phone.

Why is it important to set aside a specific place to pray?

Having a space set aside is helpful for various reasons. On the spiritual side, there is a great sense of God's presence that somehow builds up when people have been praying in a place for a long time. The practical side has to do with accountability, that you have to show up in a particular place at a particular time, and with the way that a room gives space for people to pray nonverbally through art, to appreciate one another's expressions of prayer, and to share one another's testimonies by reading the answered prayer books. If you look at sites of road crashes and 9/11 memorials and tragedies anywhere in the world, you'll find there is this distinctive desire to set aside places of prayer. The ancient Celts called them thin places—places where heaven seemed somehow closer.

In *Red Moon Rising*, you talk about the need to take prayer meetings out of the church and into the world. Why is that?

So much of our evangelism has been about telling people what they are not, instead of recognizing the thumbprint of God that is already upon them, and seeking to draw that spirituality out of people. People don't want to be preached at but they still want to be prayed for. I

am amazed that people who claim not to believe in God still appreciate the offer of prayer and will even testify to answered prayer.

Gary Schmitz talks about 24-7 as a relationship and not a program. Why does that distinction matter?

Starting a prayer room is about a community going off and doing an experiment together; stopping all the programs

and activities and strategy and use prayer as a rubber stamp and not as a rudder. What we really need to do is bring prayer and mission together—as two sides of the same coin. The people who spend a lot of time with God need to become activists for social justice, and the activists need to pray.

One of the mistakes we are in danger of making in the church is divorcing prayer and mission. Either we pray and don't do any outreach, or we are full of

programs and activities and strategy and use prayer as a rubber stamp and not as a rudder. What we really need to do is bring prayer and mission together—as two sides of the same coin. The people who spend a lot of time with God need to become activists for social justice, and the activists need to pray.

What are some of the unique places that have hosted prayer rooms?

There was a prayer room at the U.S. Naval Academy, and there was also a prayer room in a brewery in Missouri, right there next to all of the beer. They were Episcopalians so they could get away with it.

How have you dealt with the question of unanswered prayer?

Life is full of paradox. A year after 24-7 started, my wife, Samie, was diagnosed with a brain tumor the size of an orange. Miraculously they were able to operate and remove it, and she retained her speech and movement. As a result, she suffers from very serious epilepsy, and we are still on the long journey of praying for some kind of breakthrough.

That is the reality of everyone's life—we live with the tension between answered prayer and unanswered prayer. If I had been through what my wife has been through, I'd probably be doubting God profoundly and question his existence. When I asked Samie why she hasn't done that, she said, "He's all I've got. I don't want to shoot that away." I am just amazed by her quiet faith. □



Pete Greig

and saying, "We are going to meet with God and see what happens." It amazes me that you can take the newest Christian and put them in one of these prayer rooms and find that they do know how to talk to God. The moment we start to see prayer as programmatic, we've lost the very heart and the soul of the faith.

You spent a lot of time talking about the Moravians, a group that influenced early Covenanters. What can we learn from them?

The Moravians are a phenomenal example for us. They tend to be known for their 100-year prayer meeting, but what they really got out of bed at four in the morning for was serving the poor and reaching the world in mission. These mostly uneducated villagers in the eigh-



Kim Fiser (right) passes the prayer room candle to Tom Manz, pastor of Cornerstone Church in Blue Spring, Missouri.

experiencing a sense of forgiveness and renewal.

When Kim Fiser learned that a close family friend's marriage was collapsing, she posted a prayer on the wailing wall. Soon afterwards, the friend and her husband visited the prayer room and decided to reconcile.

"We didn't think there was any hope at all," Fiser says, "and we just started praying and praying."

During each week of 24-7 prayer, Schmitz asked one or two people to share their experiences in the prayer room on Sunday morning. He has collected more than 100 stories from people as well.

"It's not grandiose—we are not experiencing tremendous miracles," he says. "But when you have this many people experiencing transformation and growing closer to God all at the same time, something wonderful is happening."

As news about the prayer room spread, Schmitz began getting calls from other pastors. So far, eight other nearby churches have begun similar rooms. A local Catholic church is praying round the clock from the beginning of Lent until Easter, and there are even plans to start a prayer room in a local tattoo parlor.

After 2,352 hours of continual prayer, Sunday January 2, was the last

day of 24-7 at Deerbrook, at least for now. The congregation is now focused outward, launching a "kingdom assignment" program by giving ninety-five church members \$50 each, and asking them to use it as seed money towards community outreach, and looking at starting several other ministries.

"The reason God draws us into his presence is ultimately for mission—so we can be his hands and feet in the world," Schmitz says.

In a literal "passing of the torch," Fiser and several volunteers took the candle from the prayer room altar to Cornerstone Church in nearby Blue Springs, which was beginning another 24-7 cycle.

The Deerbrook room is still used five or six hours a day for prayer, and is filled with people praying before and after Sunday services. Schmitz is amazed at the change that has come over his congregation, most of it without any help from him.

"The whole atmosphere is different," he says. "I think every pastor's dream is to see people transformed—and I am not even in the prayer room helping. I am not giving a sermon, I'm not telling them how to pray or what to do. They are just simply going in there and being with God, and God is doing the work." □

