

What is Prayer Project Lifesaver?

Stan, a teenage boy at Salem Lutheran (ELCA) in Longville, Minnesota discovered he had gotten too old and was no longer going to be prayed for in their system. Someone found him out in the hall crying. They couldn't understand why he was shedding tears. When asked, he said, "Now no one is going to be praying for me." What if as E. M. Bounds said, "The poorest person in the world is the one who has no one to pray for them"?

First of all, are the young people in our churches being prayed for as they grow up? Are their parents and grandparents being prayed for? Are other members of our congregations being prayed for and daily? One challenge we have is Internet pornographers are on the prowl as are child molesters, the traffickers, the drug dealers, defrauders, bullies, domestic abusers, advertisers, predators, even advertisers, some writers of TV shows or popular music plus many pressures they feel from peers.

At the congregation I served we had a prayer chain made up of a few women taking calls from people facing serious issues: sickness, accidents, loss of jobs, etc. We left it at that! We had no structure for others to be prayed for. The average member was not asked to pray and many probably didn't. We heard Ephesians 6:18 more like a suggestion than a mandate. We held no trainings to help people learn to pray. So we relied on the Lord's Prayer and some worship prayers once a week. In other words, the average member felt no responsibility to be praying. Prayer was delegated to only certain people. Is this what the Psalms, Jesus and writers of the New Testament are urging upon us? Definitely not!

Mary Jane Haemig, retired professor at Luther Seminary and a Reformation scholar has written articles on Martin Luther, his prayer life and how he taught people to pray. She mentions how our modern day ELCA has lost track of this emphasis of Luther in many of our congregations. Who is more vulnerable to such things as the shrewd tactics of human traffickers than those who are not prayed for? I did not grow up with prayer in my home and I never became much of a pray-er. No one at my seminary trained us in having a personal prayer life. It was assumed and encouraged but left at that. Check this out for yourself. From starting with a man, Martin Luther, who prayed much, taught prayer, concentrates on the Lord's Prayer in the Catechism, how did we end up being a church where prayer is as minimal as it is?

The reality is prayer provides us with a great adventure with God. Pastor and author Walter Wangerin has helped us see prayer as a two way street—talking to God but also listening for God. God wants to be intimate with our lives, empowering us in love to live out our new identity in Christ. Prayer helps us see God active in our lives. That helps us realize God really is working behind the scenes on our behalf and on behalf of others. In turn we come face to face with God in confession of sin and discovering reasons to thank and praise him. Pastor and author Walter Wink said history belongs to the intercessors. See book (Engaging the Powers). Are we in the ELCA ready to come more alive and really make history?

There are churches which have discovered the power of prayer as a great priority in congregational life. I would love to discover more of these churches. One ELCA congregation I have found has its own 15 member prayer team. It is Ezekiel Lutheran in River Falls, Wisconsin. Their prayer team has divided up the 'membership of the congregation such that every congregational member is prayed for every day by one of its prayer team members.

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas started praying back in the 1960's when they realized they were not a praying church. Their pastor, Charlie Shedd wrote a little book "How to Develop a Praying Church". They got members to pray for members. Now in 2022 they have about 600 people who have committed themselves to pray daily for certain other members. So their approximately 3,500 members are all prayed for daily. How is it that they have persisted for about 58 years? Prayer transforms life. Let's find ELCA congregations that can give us some leadership in this. What if a congregation that prays all out has more fun seeing the hand of God working? Are we having fun yet?

So Prayer Project Lifesaver is getting everyone prayed for in a congregation daily. Youth can be in on this. The model of Memorial Drive Presbyterian in Houston is probably the most workable. The staff and leadership supports this. Every three months in worship services people are encouraged to sign up and pray for others members like up to seven members. A staff person keeps track of who is praying for whom and who isn't being prayed for? People get to know each other, pray for spoken needs, keep their relationship confidential.

St. James Lutheran in Fayetteville, North Carolina now has 37 members praying for 205 members daily. That came about because an enthusiastic member helped the congregation get 20 prayer booklets from Adults Saving Kids. They are called "Love Others by Praying for Them". Then she started calling people in the congregation who held no particular responsibility in the church presently. Many responded to her call with a "Yes", who can I pray for. Do not people in a congregation want a piece of the life of their church? Many people love the idea of being a positive part of some other people's lives. God wants us to pray and God is not only listening but making things happen. We have a glorious, loving God.

Can we expect our churches which have only a few people praying to be strong and vibrant? Can we expect families to be healthy and full of faith? Can we expect parents and grandparents to be bringing up their offspring to be safe and following Christ? Can we expect to grow or be transformed? Let's face it: How can we be a "God is alive here church" if we are only letting him in the back door? We can do better and Prayer Project Lifesaver gives us a way to make sure we are looking to the Holy Spirit to show us what it means to build up the body of Christ, our community which is "in Christ".

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