

From The Upper Room to the Nations

By Fred Hartley

Printed with permission from PrayerConnect Magazine, Issue 10, May-June 2013

A Praying Church is a Missional Church

The church in Antioch may be separated from my congregation in Atlanta by 2,000 years and 64,000 miles, but we have much in common.

- We are both multi-ethnic.
- We both minister to the presence of Christ through worship— this is our primary assignment, and we know it!
- We are both missionally focused—to thrust world-impacting believers off the launching pad of prayer.

Twenty-five years ago the membership of Lilburn Alliance Church in Metro Atlanta was 99 percent white and English speaking. Today our congregation is made up of people who were born in 54 different nations of the world. We have hosted seven different cross-cultural congregations with whom we are **ministry partners—Vietnamese, Spanish, Spanish second generation, Eritrean, Asian-Indian, French-African, and Chinese.** Our Vietnamese congregation has planted seven other congregations around Atlanta, and has led more than 1,000 Vietnamese to faith in Jesus Christ.

None of this would have happened without devoting ourselves to Christencountering prayer. We follow the upper room model of ministry taught by Christ, demonstrated throughout the early Church and most vividly exemplified in Antioch.

The church in Antioch (see Acts 13:1–3 and Acts 11:19–29) was entirely multi-ethnic: Barnabas from the Mediterranean Island of Crete; Simon from Africa; Lucius, a Greek; Manaen, an associate of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul, a full-blood, pedigree Jew! The eclectic believers all devoted themselves to ministering to the manifest presence of Christ by staying focused in their worship.

They fasted.

They hungered more for a move of God than for food.

As they knelt on the launching pad of prayer, the Holy Spirit spoke and said to the apostolic-prophets in their prayer filled, God-encountering gathering: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

They not only built a launching pad of prayer, they had ignition and lift off!

Guiding Principles

Before I tell our story of how God built a launching pad in Atlanta, we need to **understand several guiding principles.**

- **When Jesus built His church, He** built a praying church. *What kind of church are you building?*
- When Jesus made disciples, He made praying disciples. *What kind of disciples are you making?*
- The size (scope) of your ministry is determined by the size of your prayer life.
- The size of your church’s prayer life is revealed by the size of the answers to prayer. *What are you asking God for?*

The Cape Kennedy Space Center on Florida’s east coast built a most remarkable launching pad for the Space Shuttle—Pad 39. It was built to withstand more thrust than any other—36,000 pounds of thrust per square inch. Built of solid, poured concrete, it is 390 feet long, 345 feet wide, and an impressive 48 feet thick!

Jesus said, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out [thrust forth] workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:38, bracketed material added).

If we want *thrust*, we need a launching pad—a sizable launching pad. As Rick Warren often says, “The significance of your church is not determined by your seating capacity but by your sending capacity.”

Sending capacity is determined by the thrust of the Holy Spirit. In order to sustain Holy Spirit thrust, we need a substantial launching pad of prayer.

Upper Room: The Crown Jewel

It was no mere coincidence that the only thing Jesus built while on earth was the upper room full of praying disciples. The upper room was the highest accomplishment of Jesus' discipleship ministry— the crown jewel. The tragedy of the modern church is that Jesus' highest accomplishment has become our flagrant omission. An upper room or *huperoon* in Greek (Acts 1:13) was common in the Middle East in Jesus' time. People gathered in the flat, open space on the rooftop of the square buildings for conversation—to sip tea, tell stories, welcome out-of-town guests, or unwind at the end of the day. For Jesus and His disciples the upper room provided a meeting place where they could talk, pray, plan, and eat together.

In one such upper room, Jesus broke bread, served the disciples the Passover meal, and washed their feet. Before He ascended into heaven, while gathered with them on the Mount of Olives, Jesus "gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about'" (Acts 1:4). The word *command*, used in the military, is the strongest word in the Greek language for *decree*. So Jesus put them under strictest orders.

Obviously, 40 days earlier, when Jesus was begging them in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him one hour, His disciples were not yet upper-room disciples.

But now they were fully engaged.

Something had changed. No sooner does Jesus bodily ascend into heaven, right before **their eyes, than they demonstrate that transformation: "Then they returned to** Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room [*huperoon*] where they were staying" (Acts 1:12–13).

The same disciples, who before couldn't pray one hour, now could pray the better part of 240 hours—ten straight days! Into that upper room He had led His disciples. Into that room He had poured out His Spirit. Out from that room He had thrust forth His empowered disciples. Out from that room He carried out His mission on earth.

In a matter of hours the early Church grew from 120 to 3,120. That kind of church growth would be impressive anywhere, but this happened in Jerusalem!

We, as a local church in Metro Atlanta, realized that this pattern of upperroom, God-encountering, launchingpad- building prayer is a prototype that continues through New Testament life.

The initial upper room in Jerusalem was by no means the only upper room in the Book of Acts.

- Peter and John were on their way to an upper-room encounter with Christ when they met a lame man (Acts 3).
- The early Church had an upperroom, earth-shaking, prayer encounter with God (Acts 4).
- The apostles appointed deacons so they could remain devoted to upper-room prayer (Acts 6:4).
- Paul had an upper-room encounter with Ananias (Acts 9).
- Peter had an upper-room encounter with God (Acts 10).

The church in Antioch certainly built an upper room that launched the first mission team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). In fact, every church Paul planted **became an upper room. And when Paul launched a new mission trip, he was sent from the launching pad in Antioch.**

An Upper Room in Every Church

When Lilburn Alliance Church saw this upper-room, God-encountering, launching-pad-of-prayer pattern, we realized we needed an upper room. We asked God for His blueprint and began **a central, all-church prayer gathering known as the RIVER.**

What makes an upper-room prayer gathering unique?

The primary focus of an upperroom prayer gathering has one ultimate purpose—to minister to the manifest presence of Christ. Just as in Antioch they were worshipping the Lord when **God gave them their mission, so every upper-room prayer gathering has one agenda—to minister to the Lord with our prayer and worship.** Until we understand that our first assignment is to minister to the manifest presence of Christ, God will not give us our second assignment.

It was in the RIVER one night that God put a burden on our hearts for the **neighborhoods, apartment complexes and subdivisions immediately adjacent** to our church property. I saw a picture of myself going door to door, introducing myself and saying to the people, “I would like to pray for you—what would you like Jesus to do for you?”

This struck a chord with our whole church family. Since then, we have visited 5,000 homes around our church **campus. At our Wednesday night AWANA kids clubs, more than half of** the children are from the neighborhoods around our church. Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu parents bring their children to our church. It looks like a meeting of the United Nations each week.

Now when I walk the neighborhoods around our church, most of the people **recognize me, smile big, and many thank me for all our church is doing for the** community.

During the past 25 years, we have seen more than 3,000 people come to faith in Christ through the personal witness and ministries of our people. I wish I could say they all became members **of our church, but they have not. The greatest reward, however, is the** knowledge that we will all be gathered before God’s throne one day in united worship.

The Upper Room Today

The upper room is the closest place to heaven on earth. Just think about it.

Jesus went from the throne room to earth to build the upper room. Before leaving earth He told the disciples to go to the upper room so that He could ascend back to the throne room. From the throne room through the upper room, **He would then carry out His ministry on earth. This is the New Testament upper-room pattern.**

In the first century the upper room was on the rooftop. For us the upper room can be in a basement, a chapel, or the back porch. The upper room does not need to be “upper” in location, but it needs to be upper in *priority* and upper in *prominence*. Upper-room, Godencountering prayer is the launching pad and lifeline of every church ministry and activity. Everything else is wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

Recently, when I preached a new message on the upper room to our people, a woman ministry leader came to me in tears and said, “Pastor Fred, that message described to a *T* what our women’s meetings are like every Tuesday morning. Thank you for pointing us to keep first things first.”

Though 6,400 miles separate my church in Atlanta from the church in Antioch, we share the same DNA. The same missional thrust that God created in Antioch, He is creating today in Atlanta some 2,000 years later. It is all coming out of a culture of prayer. We take seriously the words of Jesus, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:38).

Our mission is to reach a lost world through a revived church. A lukewarm church will never get the job done. My congregation in Atlanta wants to be part of reaching the remaining unreached people on earth. For this reason we take seriously our call to build a Christ-encountering, upper-room, launching pad **of prayer.**