



Innovations with Youth

What Happens When the Church Prays?

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“When they had prayed, the place in which they had gathered was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31)

Some time back I was invited to join the staff of a large membership church as their youth director. It wasn't long after I began working that it became clear youth were to be seen and not heard, and if I really wanted to make the adults happy, seen as little as possible. The only people in the church who seemed to have any relationships with the youth were their parents, all others kept a safe distance away.

To say that my ministry was challenging was an understatement. The youth were aware they were tolerated and not welcomed. In worship they sat as far away from the congregation as they could as a group and did the normal things youth are capable of during worship unsupervised: passing notes, whispering, and squirming.

Nine months into my ministry I found myself lamenting to a ministry friend of mine over lunch one day of the difficulty working in a church that flat out did not like nor want the youth as part of the life of the congregation. As we talked he shared a ministry he had created over two years before and the impact it was having in the life of his church and especially with how the youth were being impacted. He had designed and implemented a prayer partner ministry linking the adults and the youth of his congregation. The longer he talked the more intrigued I became with the possibilities of implementing this ministry in my setting. I began to see real value in partnering one adult with one youth. I began to vision the benefit of a church praying for its youth, one adult matched with one youth.

My first stop upon returning back to the church was the senior pastor's office who responded with “this needs to go before our staff, but I want you to know I want to be the first to sign up.” At staff meeting the idea was received with the same

enthusiasm and willingness to sign up to be a prayer partner by every staff person in the room. Then ideas began to flow on naming the prayer ministry. So began The Elijah Project, based on the power of prayer in the life and ministry of the prophet Elijah.

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest. (James 5:18)

We launched the opportunity to sign up for this ministry the first Sunday in Advent. Within three Sundays 90 adults had agreed to be secret prayer partners, enough adults for every youth on the youth ministry rolls. The prayer ministry started January 1 and concluded six months later with the “Power of Prayer Celebration Dinner” where the prayer partners would be introduced to the youth for whom they had been praying.

A brochure was created to describe the prayer ministry to those adults who had signed up and included essential information about the youth for whom they were to pray for daily. A brief overview of the prophet Elijah taken from 1Kings 17-19 helped set the stage for the prayer ministry followed by questions and answers like:

- **Question:** Okay...I've read the story of Elijah, and I want to know; what in the world does the Old Testament prophet Elijah and his fight with those ancient false gods have to do with praying for youth today?
- **Answer:** Whatever we organize our lives around can become a “god,” and false gods still attract! Our youth are tempted daily by many false gods. These things (or the desire for them) can leave a young person feeling as though they live in a world struck by famine.
- **Question:** Can my prayers make a difference if the youth don't know me?
- **Answer:** Your prayers can be like rain falling in the famine-struck land of Elijah's time.

Just knowing that someone is praying for them is an important gift to young people in our church. They will know that you are lifting their name to God, regardless of what they may be involved in, regardless of how “good” they are.

- **Question:** How can I remind the youth assigned to me that I’m praying and thinking of him or her?
- **Answer:** Send seasonal greeting cards. Send cards for no reason at all. Send a poem that’s meaningful to you. If you hear good news or bad news involving the youth, their family, their school, write an appropriate note. Use your imagination.

Space was given in the brochure to list out the essentials of prayer: praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. Along with the suggestion to choose a specific time each day to offer prayers of intercession noting that without a prayer “habit,” it is often difficult for us to maintain our commitment to this important discipline.

Because I was often aware of specific needs of the individual youth, if the information was not confidential, I would contact their prayer partner and ask them to pray for the specific need. Youth were sent a letter informing them that an adult in the church had agreed to pray for them daily. Without knowing them, this adult believed in them.

Youth became curious about these “secret” adults who had agreed to be in prayer for them and began to bring in cards or letters to be given to their prayer partners. Sometimes saying thanks, other times with specific needs they wanted to share, or just saying I am also praying for you even though I don’t know your name. The prayer partners came asking for photos of their youth, they wanted to create a devotional space in their home with their Bible and photo of the youth.

By the time for the Celebration Dinner, excitement had built among the youth, their parents and the prayer partners wanting to “officially” meet one another. The family life center was filled with energy as youth, parents and prayer partners entered for the meal. Placards were out on the table as prayer partners and youth sought out their seats to be seated across from one another. Parents sat at separate tables and received the honor of watching the interaction between their child and prayer partner. It was an evening in which people wanted to hang around afterwards and continue to share the meaning of the last six months. Prayer partners continued sharing how rewarding it had been to have a reason each day to pray for their youth. Youth were sharing what an important gift they had received knowing that someone was praying for them each day no

matter how good or bad they had been. Parents were thanking their youth’s prayer partner for sharing in the life of their youth and being blessed knowing someone was holding their youth in prayer each day.

In August youth and adults were starting to ask if we would be doing The Elijah Project again in January. While I remained at this church, this became a central ministry between the adults and youth. In the fifth year, for the first time, I began to have adults say they could not participate anymore. Concerned I went to each of these adults to understand why they were leaving the prayer ministry since they had been some of most faithful prayer partners and was thrilled to learn that not only had they agreed each year to be a prayer partner, they also were continuing to prayer for each of their prayer partners the following years. They were concerned that adding another youth to their prayer list, they would be slighting the other youth they were continuing to hold in prayer. But they also wanted to assure me that they were recruiting other adults to enter into this rewarding ministry of being in prayer for a youth in the church.

As I look back on The Elijah Project wonderful transformation began in this church. Adults who didn’t care about youth, found that one on one youth mattered. Youth who felt dishonored found that adults do care about them and value them when given an opportunity to touch them in meaningful ways.

Were there bumps in the road? You bet. The first year was a year of significant learning for me. Time was spent in helping adults understand intercessory prayer. That it was not the purpose of the prayer ministry to change the youth to fit their mold of what a good Christian youth looks like or act. The purpose of the prayer ministry was to hold a youth up to God each day, to pray God’s blessings on that youth, to lift up that youth’s need for love and then to trust that God will act, even if it’s not in the manner or the timing that the prayer partner might be seeking.

Time was spent with youth in helping them understand the prayer ministry was not about who got the most cards this past week, or who got balloons for their birthday at school. The purpose of the prayer ministry was that someone had promised to pray for them daily and that was the most important gift to receive.

Were their rewards? Far too many to count. The first year I experienced subtle changes in many of the youth’s behavior; they began to talk more positive about themselves. Adults were saying for the first time in their life they had a reason to get out of bed each morning and go directly to their devotions. By year three youth were asking if they could be prayer partners to elementary classes, to the church

members in nursing homes. Youth and adults would recognize each other out shopping and speak. Adults were showing up at school plays, sports and other opportunities to see their former prayer partners. And the youth section in the balcony – it seemed to disappear as youth came down to sit with their families or during year two-five of the prayer ministry with their previous prayer partners on occasion.

And the greatest reward was experiencing adults and youth growing in their dependence on God's love and direction.


For More Information on the Elijah Project

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