

Prayer Walking with Your Community

By Cheri R. Holdridge

An Introduction: WHY DO WE WALK AND PRAY?

Prayer is a precious gift. When we pray, we trust that God wants to communicate with us. When we pray, we open our side of communication with God. Because, you see, as every college freshman learns in Introduction to speech class, communication takes two individuals, a speaker and a listener. In prayer, God always stands ready to listen. When we pray, we usually speak and we expect God to listen. In my own experiences of prayer, I find that prayer is deeper when I listen and wait for God to speak.

When we decide to “Prayer Walk” as individuals, or as communities of faith, we are seeking to connect in a deeper way with the communities in which we live and we are inviting God to speak to us. We are asking God to show us what we have failed to see. We are asking God to give us new eyes to see what has become invisible to us over time, and new ears to hear what has become “white noise” to us.

The act of walking gives our bodies something to do. The walking is a sort of calming distraction so that our minds and our souls can focus on listening to God.

Prayer walking has been one of the most amazing adventures of my life as a pastor and as a Jesus follower. I offer this prayer guide to you as an invitation. I hope it will help you listen for God, and see God more intimately in your communities.

PRAYER WALK ONE

You probably have picked up this guide because you and some of your friends or fellow church members want to connect in a deeper way to your neighborhood or community. The practice of Prayer Walking is just that: a practice. There really are no rules. What I can offer you are the suggestions of a seasoned pastor who has done her share of walking and praying and trying to discern God’s call.

The first two tasks are to gather a group of people who want to go on a Prayer Walk and decide where you will take your Prayer Walk. If you are part of an existing church, and you want to

connect in a fresh way with your neighbors, I suggest you lay out a plan to walk in few block radius of your church building. If you are investigating an area for a church plant or a site for expansion ministry, then pick a location for your Prayer Walk where you want to explore opportunities for ministry. Again, lay out a plan to walk a few blocks in this neighborhood. If there is a school, neighborhood center, or other community gathering place nearby, include that place in your walk. If there are both residential and commercial streets near your church or mission area, try to include some of both in your Prayer Walks.

Hopefully you will have more than one Prayer Walk Team. A team will consist of two or three people. Have each team walk a different route, or if you walk the same routes, stagger your start times so that you are not clumped together. We do not want to overwhelm our neighbors with too many strangers gawking at them. Someone (a pastor, leader of your study process, or other person) should plan in advance what the routes will be, and prepare a simple map for each Prayer Walk Team. In planning the routes, remember that many of your folks may have been driving to your church for years but perhaps never have walked even one block in the neighborhood. (This fact in itself is telling.) So a map is essential. If you are in an inner city neighborhood, you may need to think about teaming people who are more comfortable in the city with people who are less comfortable walking in the city. Of course, walking in the daytime is probably better for everyone's comfort level in an unfamiliar place.

When you have gathered your Prayer Walk Team of two or three people, sit down together and read through these questions. It will be better if you can put this paper aside during your walk, and just take in the experience. It is fine if you need to jot down a few key notes to help you remember, but try not to walk around the neighborhood with a clipboard, like you are taking a survey. Relax, and be ready to open your eyes and ears, to pray and soak up the experience with all of your senses.

For this first Prayer Walk we simply want to *see our neighborhood with fresh eyes*. We are on an expedition, a journey to learn as much as we can about the environment surrounding our church facility as we open our eyes and our hearts to our neighbors. We want to observe everything we can about our community, so we can begin to get to know these strangers whose 'hood we visit every Sunday. Here are some things to look for:

1. What do the homes look like? What do you see in the yards and in the driveways? On the porches? Do they *have* driveways and porches? Is there landscaping? If so, what kind and how is it cared for?
2. What do the cars look like? Are they old or new? What makes and models are they? What kinds of bumper stickers do you see?

3. What people do you see and what evidence do you see of people? Are there children in this neighborhood? Bikes and toys? Are there senior citizens? People who like to garden or work on their cars? What race and possible nationality might the people be? Do you see any flags flying that give you signs of any ethnic heritage or any geographic background such as being from some particular part of the U.S or from other countries?
4. What businesses are in the neighborhood? Are they thriving? Or not?
5. Are there boarded up houses or houses for sale? Businesses for sale or closed?
6. Are there any agencies serving this community? Any other churches? Schools?

Obviously I don't expect anyone to respond to all of these questions on any single prayer walk. I suggest you read through this list of questions a couple of times before you go on your walk, just to give you some ideas of the breadth of things to watch for.

Then, as you begin your walk simply pray this prayer: **"God show me what you want me to see in this neighborhood."** And start walking and watching.

Before you begin, agree on the amount of time you will walk, perhaps 15, 20, or 30 minutes. Try not to talk to the other people with whom you are walking during your walk. This is a time to watch and listen. What does God show you about your neighborhood? Is God nudging you? Are you seeing something you have never seen before, in all the years you have been driving to your church in this place? What does that tell you? Try not to jump too quickly to conclusions or potential ministry ideas. We are not looking for solutions today. We are simply looking for clues and opportunities to connect with our neighbors.

At the end of your walk, meet with all the Prayer Walk Teams to process your experience. You might meet back at your church. Or if there is a coffee house or restaurant nearby, you might want to meet there for your conversation.

GROUP CONVERSATION ABOUT THE PRAYER WALK

When all the groups have gathered, **begin with a prayer.** Pray your own or use this suggested prayer to open your conversation.

Holy One, just as you walked with us today in our neighborhood, will You be with us now in our conversation? Give us clear heads to listen and learn from the observations of one another. God, You have given us *this neighborhood* as our location for ministry. We want to connect with our neighbors. Help us to see and hear what *YOU* want us to see and hear. Bless our conversation now and guide us by Your Spirit. Amen.

Next, have a facilitator lead everyone through a discussion of any or all of these questions.

1. What did you see that you expected to see, and what did you see that surprised you? Start by talking about anything *except* the people you saw. (This question in itself could take plenty of time to discuss. As the facilitator, try to keep people focused on the facts of what they saw, rather than jumping to conclusions and assumptions. Avoid moving ahead to “ministry ideas.” Linger in the realm of observation.)
2. Next focus on the people: Who did you see? Who lives in our neighborhood? What do they look like? How are they like us, in physical appearance, and how are they different?
3. Did you smell, touch, taste, or hear anything worth noting?
4. Based on the facts of what we have seen today, what might we “guess” are the deepest needs and concerns of the people who live in their neighborhood? (Facilitator, remind the group that we do not know much about the people we observed, so at this point we just have some hunches. If we are going to be in ministry with people, in time, we will need to be in relationship with them and hear *them* speak about their wants and needs. For today, we are just tossing out some preliminary ideas based on what we do know.)

Close with prayer. Pray your own, or use this suggested prayer.

God of Creation, we thank You that You give us eyes to see and ears to hear new things. Forgive us that which we have failed to see and hear in the past. We regret that we have not always connected with our neighbors in all the ways we might have as a congregation. Today is a new day. We are thankful that You are a God of new beginnings. Fill us with Your Spirit, O God. Breathe Your new life into us. Give us strength and courage to see the ministry opportunities that You will lay in front of us in the coming days and weeks and months. For now, give us open hearts and minds; we ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

PRAYER WALK TWO

For your second Prayer Walk, you can walk the same route as the first, a week, two weeks, or a month later. The purpose of the second walk is to take our prayer and our reflection a bit deeper, so it is helpful if at least some of the participants also took part in the first Prayer Walk.

As with the first Prayer Walk, look over the questions a couple of times before you walk.

1. Pay close attention to the people you see on your walk. Make eye contact as you walk past them. Smile. Greet them with a "Hello" or a "Good Afternoon." You are a stranger in their neighborhood. Walkers for a stroll (and not for exercise) are rare these days. Let them know you are not a threat. If you have a chance, it's okay to introduce yourself and tell them you are from the church nearby and you are on a Prayer Walk. Don't spend too much time, but if you have a chance to let your neighbors know you are praying for them, by all means, do not miss this opportunity.
2. Consider how the people you see are similar or different from yourself and the people who attend your church. If these people walked into your church, would they "stick out?" And if so, how would they appear "different" from the people in your church? Think about all the various "categories" we use to break down groups of people. How do the people you see in this neighborhood compare to the people who are part of your church in terms of the usual "categories": age, gender, race, class, education. (Of course, some of these things you cannot tell by walking down the street; you will be making assumptions, so be careful. But be aware that we often make assumptions when people walk into our churches. This is food for thought.)
3. Look at the types of clothes people are wearing, the kinds of houses they live in, and the cars they drive. Do they have tattoos? Are they clean-shaven? Do they wear designer suits? Do they appear to have showered recently? How is their hair cut? How is their personal "style" reflected in how they look? Would people in your church welcome them, or turn the other way, if they walked into your worship service? Why?
4. Are there signs in your neighborhood that people speak a language other than English? Does your church have a worship service in another language?

Some of these questions will be more relevant than others to your context. Read through this list of questions a couple of times before you go on your walk, just to have some ideas of the breadth of things to watch for.

Then, as you begin your walk simply pray this prayer or your own: "God show us our neighbors with fresh eyes today. Open our hearts to the faces You want us to see. Amen."

Before you begin, agree on the amount of time you will walk, perhaps 15, 20, or 30 minutes. Try not to talk to the other people with whom you are walking during your walk. This is a time to watch and listen. Who is God showing you in your neighborhood? If you are planting a new church or ministry, this is a time to discern whether or not this is a place where your gifts are suited for ministry. We need to work where we can connect with people. Usually God does not call us to plant a new church in a place that is completely foreign to us. Most church planters are most successful in a place where they have some "affinity" with the community.

For those in an established church who are trying better to connect with their community, this is a time really to see our neighbors with fresh eyes. If we have become disconnected over the years with our neighborhood, this is the time to be honest and consider whether we can realistically connect with this neighborhood. If so, we need to take a close look at whom our neighbors are, and ask God to help us learn how to get to know them.

Finally, remember not to jump too quickly to conclusions or potential ministry ideas today. We are not looking for solutions yet. We are simply looking for clues and opportunities to connect with our neighbors.

At the end of your walk, meet with all the Prayer Walk Teams to process your experience. You might meet back at your church. Or if there is a coffee house or restaurant nearby, you might want to meet there for your conversation.

GROUP CONVERSATION ABOUT THE PRAYER WALK

When all the groups have gathered, **begin with a prayer.** Pray your own or use this suggested prayer to open your conversation.

O God, give us gentle spirits as we share our experiences now. Guide us to see the people in our neighborhood through the eyes of Jesus. Give us wisdom to discern how we have missed opportunities to connect with our neighbors in the past. Give us courage to consider how we might reach out to our neighbors in new ways in the future. Most of all, give us open hearts to listen to You, and to one another, in this time of conversation today. Amen.

Next, have a facilitator lead everyone through a discussion of any or all of these questions.

1. Who did you see today, who could come to our church and fit in easily?

2. Now be brutally honest. Who did you see today that would really “stick out like a sore thumb” if they walked into our worship service?
3. What social barriers keep people from feeling “at home” when they come to our church?
4. Which of these barriers is it practical to think we could overcome? And which ones can we not overcome. (It’s ok to recognize that our church cannot reach everyone. That’s why there are many different churches.)
5. As a result of this prayer walk, is there any particular group of people that you are beginning to feel a “nudge” from God that your church might be being called to reach. These are people you are not currently reaching, but who live in your neighborhood. (This is a hunch at this point, a prayer “nudge” from God. We need to keep praying about this.)
6. Any other comments from today’s Prayer Walk?

PRAYER WALK THREE (A SIMPLE ALTERNATIVE)

This Prayer Walk can be done after Prayer Walk One and Two, or in place of either of them. This simpler alternative to one of the first two Prayer Walks involves taking a walk around your neighborhood and observing your surroundings. Simply try to empty your heart and mind of any extraneous thoughts and feelings. Say a short prayer like this to God: “God we want to be a church that cares for our neighborhood. Show us what You want us to see.”

Go for a walk, and see what God shows you.

Then come back together and discuss your experience.

PRAYER WALK FOUR (A SITTING ALTERNATIVE)

If your church, or your church plant mission zone, is in a densely populated area, you might want to try choosing a location and just sitting and observing the people who walk by. This is also an option if you have persons for whom walking is not possible. Choose a park bench, or put some lawn chairs on the corner outside your church, and do the exercises listed in one of the Prayer Walks above.

NEXT STEPS AFTER THE PRAYER WALKS

Prayer walking is a spiritual practice that encourages us to open ourselves to God's leading, and to pay attention to our neighbors. Over time, many established churches lose touch with their physical neighbors. New churches, predictably, need to understand the mission context in which they want to plant a new ministry. Prayer walking is an amazing tool that allows us to open ourselves to see and hear and be led by God toward the ministry opportunities that God has in mind for us.

I encourage you in your Prayer Walks not to jump too quickly to ministry planning. We need to take time to listen, and dream and to discern. Once we have done these things, when the time comes for some goal setting and strategic planning, I suggest a church be intentional about moving to this next step. Be clear that you are now moving from the "prayer and discernment" stage to the "ministry development stage." Of course, we pray all along the way, but we need to be clear about which stage we are in. This will help us not to move too quickly from the listening stage to the action stage.

When you are ready, move to the action stage, and develop a ministry plan around what you have learned from your Prayer Walks. Of course, you can return to Prayer Walking or continue Prayer Walking at regular intervals to strengthen your ministry along the way. Prayer is always a good practice!

In Conclusion: THE POWER OF PRAYER WALKING

I close with a personal word of encouragement. Some of my richest days of prayer walking started in the autumn of 2007. I was beginning to feel the nudge of God to wrap things up at the church where I had been pastor for many years. I had no idea at the time, but God was preparing me to take the leap of being a church planter. I took long prayer walks that September and October all over my neighborhood and the downtown area of Toledo Ohio. Several times, I turned a corner and God said clearly to me: "No, not here. This place is toxic." "No you can't hold on to this place any more. It's time to let go and move on."

Then I began to walk in another part of the city. I began to dream dreams and see visions. By the spring, summer and fall of the next year my heart raced with visions of new ministry ideas for what would eventually become The Village Church. It took years before The Village Church

would launch weekly worship and become the community it is today. Back in 2007 I had no clue. God could not show me The Village Church all at one time. I could never have comprehended it. I had to take that first step, and the next, and the next, while prayer walking with God.

The Village Church is now a vital community of people, and most of them were not going to church anywhere before the Village became a church. The Village would not be a church, if another Jesus-follower had not encouraged me to try Prayer Walking. So now I am encouraging you to give it a try. In time, God's dreams will come true through you too. I'm sure of it. May God bless you, as you walk, pray, and listen for God's nudges for you.

***Cheri R. Holdridge** is a Church Planter and Pastor of The Village, a partnership of the United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church in Toledo, Ohio. The Village began weekly worship in 2009, but really started during Cheri's Prayer Walks in 2007. Cheri was ordained an elder in the West Ohio Conference, UMC in 1992. She is a graduate of Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and grew up in Abilene, Texas. Cheri and her husband Kurt Young have two children: Rebecca and Jamie. Kurt and Cheri dream of a world for all children where diversity is celebrated and every child knows they are a beloved child of God.*