

Prayer and OD

I am constantly surprised and often mystified by prayer. One time in Malawi, the Director of a development agency from my own church said to me: 'You don't mind if we reduce the strategic planning workshop to just the afternoon? We wanted to spend the morning praying together as staff'. Actually I did mind – the meeting had already been reduced from my suggestion of three days to just one day. But I did not have much choice. So I turned up at lunchtime feeling the pressure of limited time. As it turned out, the afternoon went like a dream. People were energised and engaged. Difficult questions and choices were quickly agreed on. What I had estimated would take three days, we covered in less than three hours. It appeared that investing time praying had ultimately saved time and led to a better outcome than I expected.

But prayer and OD do not always seem to mix well. Prayer in OD processes often gets limited to a quick opening prayers and perhaps a 'devotion' at the beginning of the day. Then professional facilitation takes over, until we close at the end with another short prayer. Prayer is like an add-on, rather than the core of our OD approach.

Part of our reticence to integrate prayer may be because we are keen to avoid the potential abuse of prayer. We know instances of leaders misusing prayers to give the impression of divine sanction for their own opinion. Prayer can be used as a power tool to manipulate others. We may also be trying to avoid inflicting our own beliefs and traditions in prayer on others.

Yet we know that it is the height of foolishness and arrogance to think we can change other organisations in our own strength. We need God's Spirit to change the churches and Christian organisations we work with. How much we pray for our churches/clients is a revealing indicator of two things:

where we really put our faith – in our own strength or in God's?

how much we really care about and have compassion for the church/client we are working with

So how does prayer work in OD?

I do not know. There are thousands of books written about prayer over the centuries and the Bible talks unceasingly about prayer. And yet I personally still find it a mystery. I believe that, like the example from Malawi above, prayer is about bringing us into line with God's will. It helps us get into the right space to hear God's word for a situation and allow his presence to transform it. And yet some of the OD work I have prayed most about has ended in apparent disaster, as the story 'Creating Space for Greed' in the September 2009 newsletter related. God is not a simple vending machine where you put in the prayer like coins, punch in the numbers and the desired answer always drops out the bottom. And yet that is how I subconsciously expect prayer to work. Perhaps that is why I am often baffled.

But what I do know from experience is this: *prayer has accompanied my most powerful experiences of organisational change in OD*. The time I was facilitating an extremely difficult situation with an umbrella body of evangelical churches in Africa (where members were burning each others churches and I was threatened with deportation), and then the Bishops on the board repented, I found out later that a small group of women had been praying fervently. They had been having regular prayer

meetings for some time and sent a team to the workshop venue for a weekend three weeks before the workshop to pray for the event.

So how do we pray in OD?

Again, I am no expert in prayer. My own prayer life is usually pretty pathetic. But on some occasions at least I have tried to intentionally integrate prayer in my OD. These are some of the things that worked for me (though I am aware that people pray in different ways and different churches have different traditions of prayer).

The examples below are a mixture of intercessory prayer (talking to God about a situation) and more listening prayer for direction and conviction. This mix is not a problem. In any relationship there should be a mixture of talking and listening.

Praying before the OD intervention

When I am asked to do some OD work with churches or Christian organisations I now try and stop and think about how we can ensure people are praying for it. It may not ever again have reached the extent of a team praying for a whole weekend at the venue in advance, but in discussion with the church/client I try and find out what groups and opportunities for intercession exist. Some Christian NGO clients have sent prayer requests for all their country offices to pray for the meetings on certain days. Others have specific intercessory groups they can mobilise. One time in Zimbabwe I felt the work was so vital and I felt so out of my depth that I asked for prayer from my church before I went and throughout my trip. At the very least, it is important to pray during any planning meetings. With one client, this meant our Skype conference calls were all started by prayer.

I also have found it useful to intentionally try to listen to God about a piece of work beforehand. While these have not often led to voices from burning bushes, I remember in that Zimbabwe example I was really asking God for his leading and was questioning whether God was really in this difficult church situation. On the Sunday before the workshop started I was visiting a church and someone gave me a welcome leaflet with verses so pertinent and powerful for me and for the donors that I could only describe it as a prophetic word from God.

Forget the former things:

Do not dwell on the past.

See I am doing a new thing

Now it springs up: do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland

Isaiah 43: 18-19

Praying during OD workshops

Starting the day with some form of 'devotion' or prayer is fairly common in my experience of churches and Christian organisations. These should not be treated as simply decorative Christian ritual, but are a potentially important session in an OD process – if not the most important session. It was a devotion on God's forgiveness and grace that catalysed the repentance of the Bishops in that African evangelical fellowship. These devotions offer an important opportunity to focus on God and his will for the organisation at the start of the day.

Another time the Christian organisation I was working with started with an exercise for us to share in pairs the burdens and gifts that we were bringing to the event. They then got each of us to pray for the other. It set the spiritual tone for the sensitive discussions that were to follow.

I have often found it useful to stop and pray before leaping into discussions. Whether in board meetings or church strategy events, I have found that trying to listen to God about a situation before getting into cerebral discussion has been valuable. Sometimes this time of listening has been limited to just five minutes, but one occasion with my church, this listening process lasted for six months!

Often during workshop (as Joyce also mentions in her story, *The Power of Forgiveness*), I find myself so concerned about what will happen next that I resort to prayer. When I send people off into discussion groups this provides me with great opportunity to pray for them. At one time, the Christian organisation I was working with suggested that as they went off to discuss the practicalities of restructuring, I took a group off just to pray and listen to God about the same. I was surprised (again!) by what we felt we heard.

At other times I have found it really important to pray after a particular session. I remember after a one visioning exercise in Africa leading the participants in a prayer march around the room for this vision to become reality. The Chair of the Board said the surprise of a reserved Brit leading African Pentecostals in loud prayer had been pivotal in him recognising the need to change. At other times, particularly after sessions that surface peoples' fears about a particular change, I have found it helpful to ask someone to pray about these fears.

Perhaps the most obviously powerful prayer times have been when I have asked people to listen to God about a particular situation and ask God 'How have I contributed to this situation?' Joyce also uses this prayer exercise in her *Power of Forgiveness* story. It is like when David says in the Psalms: 'Search me O God' - or something akin to St Ignatius 'Examen' process. The paper on *Facing Fears and Taking Responsibility* (see June 2009 letter) described how these listening spaces that allow the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and repentance, can lead to forgiveness and changed individual behaviour – and can be at the core of organisational change.

How much do I pray?

Prayer must be central to our OD work. Its form will certainly differ between denominations and personalities. While it is important that our prayer fits the culture of the church we are working with, it may be worthwhile pushing ourselves and our church clients to experiment with forms of prayer outside of our and their tradition.

Prayer is a paradox. How, when and why it works is a mystery. The temptation is to ignore or downplay what we do not understand or what we have seen misused. In doing so we may be forfeiting the most important power for change in OD with churches. Ultimately prayer is what sets us apart as Christians. It is the best indicator of where we have really put our faith. It is a good indicator of the extent of our love and commitment to the church/client.

We need to constantly challenge ourselves:

Where does prayer fit in my current OD work?

How much am I praying for the churches and organisations I work with?