

Testimony: A ministry of prayer

How James Alexander spends four hours each day praying for his church and his community

As the Vicar of this small village just outside Cambridge, one of my great joys in my work is my ministry of prayer, that is quality time spent with Jesus, and intercession for our church and village.

I suppose this ministry had its beginnings in my teenage years. Jesus is a figure of glory, love and power, an immensely attractive figure: the pearl of great price, in fact, and I wanted to spend time with him.

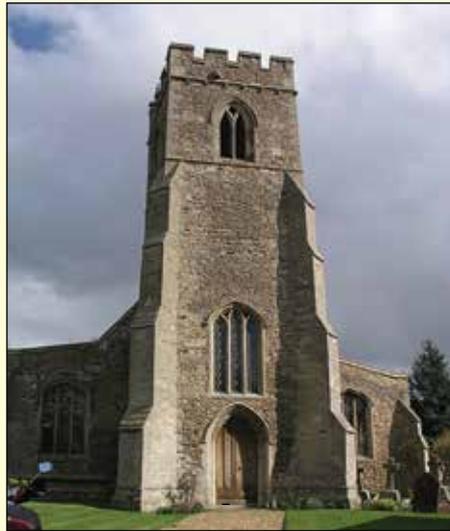
So every day in term time at my school, I went into the chapel for half an hour before supper. No one was ever there and in the winter it was pitch black. But I didn't mind – no use putting on the lights, it would have attracted attention. I didn't know what I was doing or exactly what to do, but I stayed there anyway. I think there was just enough glory in that time to keep me enthralled.

The aim is simply to practise the presence of God. I do not put any lights on. Anyway the darkness has its beauties and I don't wish to attract attention.

I found theological college inconclusive and uncondusive to this and the habit lapsed. In fact I found the whole academic liberal approach to training for the ministry inconducive. So when I arrived in my parish, I got an awful shock. My training had left me totally unprepared in this artisan community and no one was interested in or could relate to my academic approach to theology.

At this point my habit of prayer re-started, largely out of panic, and began to escalate. I was more than mindful also, as I had been for some time, of the urgent need for prayer in the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament.

In the early years of my ministry my prayer life expanded under the direction of the Holy Spirit: a chance word from a neighbouring vicar, a weekend retreat, various experiences, the emerging pattern of work here. In these and my Bible readings I discovered God's voice speaking to me. So much so that for the last 30 years or so I have set aside five hours daily for prayer



St Andrew's, Oakington where James Alexander starts his prayers at 4.30am

and Bible study, firstly, to spend time with Jesus specifically and then to intercede for our church and village. This has gone on day after day (except on days off) summer and winter, year in and year out. This may seem an awful lot of time to spend requiring too much discipline. But, despite the occupational hazards of snoozing and day dreaming, I have virtually never found the time boring. I look forward to it for, as I said, there is a glory in it.

And this is how it works. My alarm goes off at 3.45am and I aim to be in my church by 4.30am with a cup of tea and a biscuit. I find the early morning both summer and winter beautiful. There is no phone, no doorbell and my mind is not entangled in the day's programme. Also when I enter the church I find it full of Jesus' presence. The first hour is given over to meditation on the Lord's Prayer, and is divided into four sections. The aim is simply to practise the presence of God. I do not put any lights on. Anyway the darkness has its beauties and I don't wish to attract attention.

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At 5.30 am I return home and read the Bible until 7am (more tea). Sometimes members of our church join me for reading and discussion. This is a specially fulsome time. Then from 7 to 7.30am there is some kind of service in church: prayer, Communion/

mission support, Finally from 7.30 to 8.30am comes my first period of intercession when I pray for every member of the village by name over the period of a week.

The final period of intercession is from 5.30 to 6.30pm when I pray daily for each church member by name and for our corporate life. Any time left is spent brooding over serious services if I'm preaching on the following Sunday.

What is the fruit of this ministry? It is rather difficult to compute. Anyway that's not the reason for engaging in it. The fruit is known to God and even if there appears to be none, I still think that I should honour God in this way.

But I have noticed various things which I attribute to prayer: or rather to God as a result of prayer. Over the time of my ministry our church has been completely viable. An almost £1 million fabric bill has never bothered us. The work has been done and we have been able to honour financial obligations. We have also been a 'sending' church. On average every two years someone from our church has gone out into full-time Christian service.

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The church is always moving. There have been good times and growth, splits and walk outs, but all under God. Nowadays there is no negative tension and a spirit of holy love prevails and the presence of Jesus is palpable at our meetings.

God has provided a stream of people with strategic ministries and nearly everyone in our church is aware of and active in their ministry. Hence I am able to spend this time on my prayer ministry. The core of our church are lovers of Jesus and among the bewildering array of imperatives assailing the modern day our aim is always: what are you doing, Jesus?

We are not a large church – about 100 in church over a Sunday. But I praise God for our Life. Faith has proved valid.

The Revd James Alexander is the Vicar of Oakington, a small village of about 1500 people just outside Cambridge. He has been there 43 years.