

A PRAYER WALK IS A LOVE WALK

– a first-hand experience as described by Ruth MacNeil, Bedford NS

God always invites us to see and share in what He is doing in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. Many of us, if not all, have stories about how God has personally touched our lives, and transformed them in deep and meaningful ways. Imagine God showing you, how you can show that same love to others through a journey of prayer, a walk in your community taking with you all that you know about it, discovering those things that you didn't know by praying, listening and seeing where His Spirit is leading you, your group, or your church to join in the neighbourhood.

I would like to share my experiences with prayer walks that I took in a small town (officially a city) in the Niagara region of Ontario where I lived and worked before moving to Nova Scotia.

My friend Hilda, a founding member of *the Village Church* in Thorold, ON, whom I had come to know and share ministry with through several ecumenical events and projects, asked me to join her in a prayer walk one day, which she had begun to practice on her own. We both had a heart for reaching families in Thorold, and felt the need to partner in faith and prayer, and be open to what God was doing in our city. I had no idea what a prayer walk was, and how it would affect us and our community until we began. This walk became walks, as we journeyed together in prayer sometimes weekly, other times bi-weekly.

Hilda and I would begin our walks talking about what was going on in our lives personally, and in ministry, as we both worked for our respective churches in lay ministry. She was their community liaison worker, and I worked in children, youth and family ministry. We prayed with and for each other for our personal concerns, and lay them to rest with God, asking him to open our eyes and ears, and our hearts and minds to where he would lead us on our walk.

Sometimes we determined what route we would take, other times when we had more time, we would wander where the Spirit was leading us. It always made me think of Jesus' words that where two or three are gathered He would be there with them. Hilda loved singing, and we interspersed our prayers with songs of praise as we walked, sometimes stopping to talk with those we encountered.

Thorold's downtown is small, compact and centered around where the Welland canal once flowed. The Battle of Beaverdam's park is centrally located with one of Thorold's public elementary schools on one side, and low-income apartment buildings on the other. Regularly we would walk the park paths praying for families of children who attended Prince of Wales school; for parents who struggled to make ends meet, and struggled to provide loving parenting as they grappled with their own emotional and physical needs. We prayed for the teachers in the school, whose hearts ached with the knowledge of their students' struggles, and who needed spiritual encouragement. We asked God to show us how we could make a difference in these lives.

Across the street from Beaverdam's Park is the downtown core, and we wandered the two, sometimes three blocks, reflecting on what we knew of the residents, businesses, community services and their needs. As community liaison for her church, Hilda had established many intentional relationships in this community, and we were not only able to include these relationships in prayer, but also knowledge of what was going on socially, economically and politically. Knowing the community and listening for what

the Spirit was saying to us as we prayed gave us moments of inspiration and ideas to consider for sharing in ministry. We prayed for the businesses on Front Street that struggled to make ends meet. We prayed that the downtown core would change to one where people would not fear to walk at night – that the number of bars, and the presence of drugs would decrease, and that the number of businesses and organizations truly serving the needs of people would increase. We prayed for the homeless, the unemployed, and those needing to use the food bank. We prayed for the students of Brock University that lived downtown, that they would be supported and served by the churches in the community.

We prayed for God to open doors to partnerships in what he is already doing in Thorold – such as connecting in deeper ways with Thorold’s branch of the St. Catharines’ Community Care food bank, the local high school, the firefighters, the families that make the hockey rink their homes, but especially the churches, their clergy, and ministerial. We prayed for the churches and leaders to come together to support and get to know one another better. We prayed for what God was already doing through them, and for what partnerships could be built.

Out of all of this, we listened to dreams that started to build in us, for what could be started, for the direction to where God was pointing us. We looked for opportunities to have the conversations with the manager at Community care to seek out new ways of supporting them. We connected with the principal and teachers of the public school to partner with them to bring a program to the school called ‘Light Up Your World’. Pastors, ministers and lay leaders of several of the churches started to meet weekly for a time of fellowship over coffee weekly, and as I left to move to Nova Scotia they had begun gathering for worship monthly, and started to partner in initiatives such as an ecumenical Messy Church held at the local community centre; supporting the local Youth Unlimited (YFC) organization to raise funds for a new facility and to support their volunteer leaders. Individual churches began to experiment with missional initiatives with the support of other churches.

The most amazing things occur when we pray! My friend Hilda introduced me to the idea of keeping a prayer journal. Keeping track of the things you pray for, and waiting to see what God does, in his way and in his time. It is a record of God on the move, and an invitation for us to participate.

Other things we saw:

- Downtown began to have a facelift through investment.
- I participated in a Team of facilitators in the ‘Light Up Your World’ program presented at Prince of Wales P.S. and encountered how much children and adults (teachers) need affirmation of worth, and to know that they can connect with the people and community around them in life affirming ways that value everyone’s worth and spread ‘Light in the World’. This two-year program was initiated in two schools.
- Several churches began celebrating an ecumenical Stations of the Cross Walk in the City and sharing worship on Good Friday.
- The Mayor’s Canada Day picnic became an event where Churches took part building relationships with neighbours.
- One church pastor began a small group ministry for members of the police force.

Background: Thorold has a long history as a community situated along the Welland Canal at Lock seven, which is on top of the Niagara Escarpment where ‘ships climb the mountain’. It is fifteen minutes away from Niagara Falls on the back roads, and boasts a mostly rural landscape with its small downtown just up the hill from St. Catharines. It is five minutes away from Brock University, and has quickly grown in recent years with new subdivisions that commuters in the GTA call home. It hosts the site of Battle of Beaverdams that took place during the war of 1812, and is part of the terrain Laura Secord crossed to get to warn James Fitzgibbon and the British at DeCew house from Queenston to warn of an American attack. Niagara region has become the next frontier for rapid development.