

## We need to get prayer back at the centre of our lives...and that means seeing it as the most natural thing in the world. Steve Morris talks to Adrian Chatfield

The Simeon Centre for Prayer and the Spiritual Life was set up in 2007 at Ridley Hall and is something of a bold venture. It is a place dedicated to helping people learn to pray and to support others in their journey of prayer. And it is working at the heart of one of the most difficult areas for Christians – how do we pray? It can often seem that we are talking to ourselves and it is so easy to lose heart or fall into formulas.

I'm talking to Adrian Chatfield, the centre's director and he's on feisty good form. So I lob him a ready-made bomb. Why do evangelicals struggle so much with prayer?

"Well, we no longer have a tradition of setting aside a quiet time for studying Scripture on our own and praying. That has died out for many reasons, not least the plague of busyness. But it's a cultural sea change too. Also fewer and fewer people have grown up in a church, many are converts with no background in this kind of prayer time. Traditional patterns of prayer are no longer working."

Adrian also points to other reasons for a crisis in evangelical praying. For a start many evangelical circles have shied away from more liturgical prayer or what they see as ritual forms of prayer. This means that we have no ready-made resources to draw on and so prayer can become a huge and tiring effort. Why not just use some of the age-old prayers that are already available? Perhaps some evangelicals think this is cheating. But the alternative is prayer-exhaustion.

"Oh, and there's the charismatic renewal and a new musical culture in church. The emphasis is on musical worship and praying is equated with singing modern worship songs... but what do people do when the music stops?"

It all points to a somewhat troubled relationship with prayer and one that many of our readers could perhaps attest to. And the outcome of all this, Chatfield says is "guilt...guilt that we aren't praying enough and guilt that we aren't doing it properly."

Adrian changes direction. He links sentences and ideas together quickly and he's off on another trail. "Look, prayer *is* the vocation of the Church, it is as simple as that. Praying together in community is what we are here for...we have tended to think that praying in private on our own is the primary task, but perhaps we have got things round the wrong way..."

Ah, but what about the vexed issue of intercessions at church...I know how bad I am at them, and how soul-sapping and lifeless they can be... Does Adrian have any insights here? He chuckles:

"Yes, they can be dire...they are often disconnected from the real world. We want to pray for the world so we pick up on a couple of stories in the newspaper and then we want to pray for struggling churches so we pick a church in a faraway place that no-one in the congregation has any connection with. We must intercede for the church on location...pray for people in the work situations they are in, pray for what we know...Look, we need to be real. When I hear a guy asking the church to pray for him because he's struggling with lust...then I'll know we are really connecting with the real stuff."

What about our beloved Church of England? I wonder how Adrian reads the situation..

"The Church is in a very tired and stressed place for all sorts of reasons and so are its leaders... Even the good things that are happening - pioneer ministries for example – are prone to the same stresses and weariness, not least because of isolation.. We have to get back to the fact that our only energy for the Church is our relationship with God – reconciled through Jesus...standing alongside Jesus through the Holy Spirit..."

Now Adrian is a bit of a wise old owl...dare we say he even looks a bit like one. He's been a teacher and a priest and a husband and father. He also spent a good deal of time as a priest in Trinidad, so he knows a bit about things. So is there anything he wished he'd known about praying when he first started doing it?

"O yes. I wished I'd known that it is Ok that we all pray differently and don't have to feel guilty if we don't pray like someone else. I pray best when I'm moving, so I love to pray while riding my bike.. Look, prayer is about a life-long relationship with God. It is not about good prayer and bad prayer. We need to be less fretful and stop worrying that God is judging our prayer life. Prayer should be the simplest most natural thing in the world."