

Take a Hike, Change a Life

Who knew that taking walks through your neighborhood could change lives and help grow your church? It turns out, if you're strategic with your walks, and you couple your walk with prayer, you can make a great impact on your neighborhood.

People have been praying while they walk for millennia; however, as far back as the Middle Ages the practice of intentionally going on a walk to pray became "a thing." Some made long prayer walks as pilgrimages from their homes to a holy destination. Others prayer walked labyrinths in European cathedrals. It seems that from these practices, some gentle souls began taking their personal prayer time from their homes out into the streets.

Although there are many "styles" and focuses of prayer walking, I want to advocate for what seems to me to be one of the most effective prayer walking practices, at least in terms of its potential to reach your neighbors. This prayer walking focus should appeal equally to both introverts and extroverts – a win-win for all concerned! (That's a nice way to say, "You've got no excuses!")

To go on a prayer walk takes little preparation and you can get out there in almost any weather ... just remember to dress appropriately and take an umbrella if rain is threatening. You might want to take some of your church business cards (chapter 4) with you, just in case. The biggest decision you'll have to make as you leave your home and reach the sidewalk is "Do I go left or right?"

What To Do As You Walk

The point of a prayer walk is to pray while you walk, so don't treat your walk as a speed walk for exercise – you're going for mindfulness with each step (more on that momentarily). I also recommend *not* cluttering your mind with music or podcasts, so leave your phone's playlists off so can give your prayers your undivided attention. Of course, keep your eyes open so you don't trip or put yourself in an unsafe situation. And finally, if possible, try to make your prayer walk a habit. This does a couple of things. First, it will help deepen your prayer life as it becomes an ingrained habit. But second, it makes you visible to your neighbors. When a neighbor randomly walks past your house, it may register in your brain, but it's unlikely you'll consciously remember it later. If a neighbor walk past your house every Tuesday and Friday around 4:30, you'll notice. And if you notice ... well, keep reading and in the Walk Alertly paragraph I'll expand.

Walk Mindfully

Mindfulness gets a lot of play with folks who do yoga, are into meditation, or have a knack for Zen. Overall, though, mindfulness seems to be a foreign concept in American Christianity. In a nutshell, mindfulness is focusing your mind specifically on what you're doing and on your surroundings. Sometimes this focus gets confused with "emptying your mind," which is in fact the antithesis of mindfulness. On the other hand, when you're being mindful, you *are* trying to

empty your mind of all those random thoughts that so often turn into active thinks. You're "tuning in" to your walking and to your praying and tuning out of mindlessness.

When it comes to prayer walking, mindfulness means being aware of every step you take. It's not just knowing you're walking, but being mindful ... of focusing on ... your back foot coming off of the ground and being planted in front of you. Feeling the pressure on the ball of your foot, the pivoting of the ankle as you lean forward, the subtle adjustments of your toes as they keep you balanced. It's also sensing what's around you. The movement of the air on your face. The hues of the tree leaves and the colors of the sky. The sounds of the birds, the breeze, the traffic. It's being fully focused on being who you are, where you are, when you are, and what you're experiencing.

Walk Prayerfully

Once you've got yourself focused, it's time to begin praying. I tend to begin by dedicating the time to the Lord. "God, this is your time. Open my eyes, my ears, and especially my heart to what you have to show me." Then begin praying about what's around you. As you pass the neighbor's house, pray for them. If you know them, pray specifically about what's going on in their lives. If you don't know them, there's much you can deduce from their home. Bikes, balls, and swings in the yard? Pray for the family and the children. Wheelchair ramp and empty oxygen bottles in the carport? Pray for health and wholeness. And of course, pray for them to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and to be drawn to the goodness of Christ. As you come to each house, shift your prayers to address the needs and the hopes for each.

Walk Alertly

Finally, be alert and available as you walk. If your neighbors are out in the yard, bid them good day. If you pass someone on the sidewalk, make eye contact, smile, and greet them. If someone starts a conversation with you, press Pause and take the time to chat. And when a neighbor who's seen you walk past their house every Tuesday and Friday at around 4:30 asks what you're doing, you'll have the opportunity to say something like, "I'm praying for my neighbors and their families when I walk. How can I pray for you?" It's moments like these ... moments you'll have if you will prayer walk consistently ... that offer the best chances to help grow your church. I mean, besides the ongoing intervention of the Holy Spirit into the lives of those for whom you're praying.