

Chapter 2

Beginnings in Thin Places

*When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought,
"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."*

Genesis 28:16

A holy place evokes an atmosphere of devotion. It invites prayer.

Ray Simpson¹

*When punk started it was so innocent and not aware
of being looked at or being a phenomenon . . .
you can't consciously create something that's important.
It's a combination of chemistry, conditions, the environment, everything.*

Siouxsie Sioux, lead singer of Siouxsie and the Banshees²

"Help! Please someone help us!"

The shout broke me out of my daydream. Across the square, only 100 yards away, I saw a man hunched over the apparently lifeless body of a woman.

"Help please, someone help! She's not breathing!"

My friend Pete "Wardy" Ward and I had driven 200 miles to the sprawling industrial city of Manchester, having felt God prompt us to visit the city to pray. We traveled around and prayed at key sites. Wardy had also felt even before we came that we needed to go to the Piccadilly area in the city center. He didn't know why, but we went anyway. As we wandered around and prayed, not much happened. As we prepared to leave for our journey home, Wardy went to use the restroom, and I heard the cry for help.

Even writing years later, the scene is still clear to me: I remember the blue color of the young woman's face. Her friend was kneeling over her collapsed body, terrified and talking in panicked sentences. He was in despair, and seemed to be suggesting that she had taken drugs. As he spoke to me, I could pick up the smell of vodka.

As I called an ambulance, Wardy emerged from the restroom. Someone asked him, “Do you know first aid?”

“No,” he said, “but I can pray.”

And with that, he placed a hand on the prone girl and began to pray. Almost immediately, she coughed and all the color came back into her face. I was on the phone with Emergency Services and nearly fell over in shock when life rushed back in front of my eyes. For the next 20 minutes, as we waited for the ambulance to arrive, I continued speaking to the lady on the emergency line and Wardy continued to pray. Three more times, the woman went purple – and three more times as Wardy prayed, she coughed and began to breathe again.

This extraordinary process continued until the ambulance arrived. Once it did, we slipped away into the crowd, amazed: Had God called us all the way to Manchester to pray for a young woman, a druggie, to keep her alive for 20 minutes? It sure seemed that way! After all, isn’t that the heart of the Good Shepherd, who leaves 99 sheep in safety to rescue just one? It seemed obvious to us that our pilgrimage to Manchester – on a whim and a prayer – had been for the sake of a young woman that most of Manchester didn’t care about. It seemed that on that day, God was in the business of giving breath to the breathless.

As we journeyed home, I felt compelled to carry on praying for the woman. I prayed as cars whooshed past on the motorway, and I found myself remembering the vision of Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones (see Ezek. 37). I had seen God give breath to a despised and forgotten woman on the streets of Manchester, and I wondered, Could He also give breath to a dying and spiritually breathless generation?

“Come on God,” I prayed. “Breathe life into these bones.”

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army (Ezek. 37:10).

Three A.M. in the Prayer Room

My breathing lessons had started a few months earlier, in our first little prayer room in Reading. Speaking honestly and with the benefit of hindsight, I realize that at that point in my life, I was overworking and hopelessly under-spiritual.

That wasn't my intention – in fact, I was very earnest in what I was doing and in what I believed. But it was all busyness, frantic activity. I hadn't learned how to *be* with God, how to breath in His new life.

When I entered our simple prayer room early that first morning, there was undoubtedly a tangible sense of God's presence, a heaviness. I caught my breath. God was with us. The Creator was hanging out in Room Two of Greyfriars Church Center at three in the morning! I was stunned.

I remember Nathaniel's grin as he explained what had been going on so far: Our young people had been really going for it in prayer. The walls were already covered with their heart cries, Bible verses and pictures. Everyone had remarked how natural it felt to pray.

As I prayed with Nathaniel and Dan (who was also still there even though his slot ended two hours before), I mused about what was going on. I recognized that I had never experienced God's presence so heavily. I had seen some pretty amazing stuff on my 12-year road as a Christian. I had experienced God meeting with me personally. I had been in meetings where God had done amazing things. But here, now, was a space where God's presence seemed to be residing. My theology didn't lead me to believe in special places or buildings. So what was going on?

I began to dream. What might people who didn't know God make of this place? How might such experiences draw followers to Jesus? He was present and on the move in our prayer room, of that I was certain. As I prayed, I remembered something I had read a while ago about the Celtic Christians. The Celts had talked about "thin places," places where the divide between earth and heaven was thinner, places where it was easier to meet with God. Had I stumbled into a "thin place"? Had our night-and-day prayer shifts with crayons and coffee-cups somehow brought heaven a little closer to earth? It was only seven hours into our first 24-7, and already I was in brain-melt.

Our first weekend of 24-7 prayer will live long in my memory. The room was packed with people wanting to pray – *all the time*. We had young people and students coming from all over town. As we prayed together, I discovered that God had already been calling many others to pray. I found a girl named Ruth who had already begun organizing a round-the-clock prayer rotation. I found students who felt called to pray for the university. I found out that many of our own young people, rather than having an aversion to prayer, had a passion for it.

As that first weekend ended, we immediately planned an entire week of 24-7, and things just took off. We moved into a bigger room at Greyfriars Church and people kept coming. Prayers were answered and young people drew closer to God—it was an amazing time. As we prayed, the idea of the presence of God in a room kept nagging me.

Smelly Rooms, Prayer Pictures and Bad Ankles

One distinctive of our first few weeks in prayer was the smell.

No, it wasn't the unwashed smell that can emerge in a busy room—it was the smell of incense. The prayer room reeked of the stuff. On Day Two of our first full prayer week, I spent at least an hour checking all the candles in the room, looking for a rational explanation for the heady aroma pervading the atmosphere. But I hadn't bought any scented candles! Day after day, the scent of incense returned, deep and heavy. What's more, the aroma returned every time we prayed through the weeks of that year. Unable to locate any source for the scent, we simply concluded that our prayers smelled. The Book of Revelation's description of the prayers of the saints rising to heaven like incense was a physical reality in our room (see Rev. 5:8). We laughed when Chris, one of the teenagers in our group, drew a cartoon of God's nose on the wall one day, depicting our prayers like incense rising up to His nostrils.

As we prayed and prayed, this strong awareness of God's presence, the physicality of prayer conveyed in the smell of incense, the writing on the walls and the surprising stories of answered prayer attracted many visitors to our prayer room. We had scrapbooks full of emotional prayers, photographs of beautiful artwork and stories of miracles large and small. Girls from one local school came in almost daily to pray. I remember grinning as I studied a large picture they had drawn, asking God for lives to be changed, for people to be saved, for healings and for a change in the atmosphere in specific areas of their school. Several months later, when we launched another season of prayer, that picture came out again and a simple phrase was written across it: *All answered.*

I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name . . . ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:23-24).

I had heard a few stories on 24-7's website of people becoming Christians in prayer rooms, but I was amazed when this began to happen in our room, too. I remember praying one morning that salvation would come to the room that day. By evening a young girl came in asking, "How do I become a Christian?"

I need to be clear that running a 24-7 prayer room for young people was not always easy. Many times we were exhausted or close to despair, wondering how we could possibly fill another day with prayer. Malc, Ian, Richard and Penny sometimes prayed for three or four hours at a time on successive evenings in order to fill those punishing nighttime sessions. But as we persevered in prayer, things kept building. Prayer weeks were scheduled in. The venues moved, and God kept visiting with us.

One Sunday in May, as we were holding a 24-7 at the launch of a week of social action outreach, Dan came into the room to cover the afternoon shift. Dan was in his early 20s and had just run the London Marathon in three hours and 23 minutes. His time was doubly impressive because he had badly twisted his ankle three miles into the race when he stepped on a water bottle. Twenty-three miles further, his ankle was mangled and swollen. He went to one of the London hospitals, was bandaged up, given some crutches and told to rest. It was unlikely his ankle would ever regain its previous strength.

Now two weeks later, this lovely man was in our prayer room, spending time with God while the rest of us fixed up gardens or cleaned streets. Three hours later, Dan left the room without his crutches. He was able to walk again easily and painlessly, and soon his ankle was completely healed.

How could this be? No one had laid hands on Dan. No one had prayed for his ankle. Even Dan hadn't been praying for his ankle. It was almost as if he had forgotten he needed crutches, and then realized what God had done: his badly damaged ankle had been healed by the presence of Jesus. I guess cynical people will propose other explanations. All I know is that Dan went into the prayer room on crutches and he left without them.

Since becoming a Christian, I'd been taught that the kingdom of God was marked by salvation, healing and the occasional miracle, but all that theory had suddenly become thrillingly immediate. Could the simple presence of God bring about healings like this? Could people be drawn to a "thin place" to find faith? Could our prayers on the streets really save lives? I needed to find out more.

Holy Places, Thin Places

The Holy Place, a place of meeting with God, is a major theme running through the Bible. It begins in Genesis in the Garden of Eden when God walked with Adam and Eve. The patriarchs, such as Abraham, set up altars to mark places of divine meetings. Jacob dreamed at the place he later named Bethel (in Hebrew “the house of God”) and he woke to declare, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it” (Gen. 28:16). He called that piece of desert “the gate of heaven,” and commemorated his encounter with God by building an altar.

In the desert, God called to Moses from a burning bush, a physical symbol of the presence of “I AM” (see Exod. 3:1-6). As Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the people were instructed to set up a “tent of meeting” – the Tabernacle – where God came to reside, His presence like a cloud. For the Israelites, this wasn’t like a group hug or having a “pet god”: It was a personal, brooding, awesome Presence that descended deeply on people as they worshipped. As Jack Hayford has said, “The Tabernacle is not a great hall for the assembling multitudes, but a place of personal encounter, where worshippers bring their covenant offerings.”³

When the Israelites made it to the Promised Land, the Tabernacle became the Temple, a permanent place of prayer and worship. God called for the Temple to be “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa. 56:7; Matt. 21:13).

In the explosive beginning to his Gospel, John wrote that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, *ESV*). Eugene Peterson brought us the same verse in a different way: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (*THE MESSAGE*).

The holy places of the Celts were sometimes called “thin places” because they believed that the seen elements of earth and the unseen dimensions of heaven were more closely connected in such locations. Thin places could be any place of prayer, from a hermit’s hut to a rugged cliff or beautiful seascape. The designation of certain places as sacred was not rooted in a pantheistic impulse to worship the location itself, but rather in a desire for a personal encounter with God in particular environments. As Susan Hines-Brigger notes, “The hills, the sky, the sea, the forests were not God, but their spiritual qualities revealed God and were connected to God.”⁴

Now many of us might balk at the suggestion that place matters at all. Isn’t God omnipresent? Doesn’t “sacred space” sound a bit New Age? We must

remember that throughout Church history, the idea of the sacred or holy place is recurring – not “new” at all. In many Christian traditions, buildings can be consecrated. In the Anglican Church, a bishop stands outside a new church building and hammers on the door three times after praying these powerful words:

Almighty God, we thank you for making us in your image, and to share in the ordering of your world. Receive the work of our hands in this place, now to be set apart for your worship, the building up of the living, and the remembrance of the departed, to the praise and glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁵

Places can also be special for their familiarity, connecting with us because of their beauty, their peace or the memories we’ve created there. Ultimately, the “thin place” for all of us is the heart, and sometimes being in a place of sacred beauty can soften our hearts to encounter God. Marcus Borg writes that “a thin place is anywhere our hearts are opened.”⁶

Within the Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem was a giant curtain that separated the people from the Holy of Holies, where the presence of God lingered. When Christ breathed His last on the cross, the curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom (see Matt. 27:51-52). Then and there, the divide was broken – God could “tabernacle” with His people, and the place He would dwell would be our hearts.

At His ascension, calling His disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, Jesus promised, “I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, *THE MESSAGE*). In fulfillment of that promise, the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost to Jesus’ followers, who were gathered in a particular place (see Acts 2). We have no reason to believe that a disciple who had chosen to be elsewhere that day would have been baptized with the Spirit – *the place mattered*. Jesus Himself had told them as much when He instructed them to wait in Jerusalem (see Acts 1:4-5).

Paul declared that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19). Right now, Jesus knocks at your heart’s door, longing to come in and dwell. And His dwelling is the key. Holy places are not about buildings or structures – they are about relationship. They are about a God

who, from the beginning of time, has longed to be with His people. Is it so hard to contemplate that the God who became a man “and moved into the neighborhood” should still want to work in our lives and our world? Is the “thin place” such a difficult idea to take in?

Incarnation

In my background as a youth worker, I had heard a lot about “incarnational ministry.”⁷ The idea goes something like this: Jesus chose to come and be among His people to care for them and to save them, and He did so by becoming a man. It follows that ministry done in Jesus’ Name shouldn’t be from a distance, but should be at the heart of culture, in communities where people live, in the places where they hang out. We should live life with people. The wonderful Eden Project in Manchester is a great example of the incarnational approach: Team members have moved into the toughest places in town, because how could they work with young people there without experiencing something of what their lives are like?⁸

As I reflected on what was going on in the prayer rooms, I began to wonder again about John 1. A new question emerged in my mind: What if God wasn’t just asking our “ministry style” to be incarnational? What if He was asking us to move *our prayers* into the neighborhood, to “pray open” a thin place for people to encounter His presence? As I tried to make sense of all that was going on, I knew that our places of prayer would need to keep connecting with the world outside the church walls.

God Reads My E-mail

It was becoming clear that our prayer room experiences were not unique. The 24-7 idea of night-and-day prayer was multiplying around the world. The word “movement” gets overused, but 24-7 truly was a movement, and it was becoming a major part of my work, my faith and my life. God was calling us to pray, and by being obedient to that call, we were seeing wonderful growth and blessing. God was doing something, and I was determined to hang onto His cloak to see where He was going.

In a moment of enthusiasm I sent an email to one of the people at the heart of the escalating 24-7 movement, telling her about our latest prayer week in Reading. Without really thinking about it too much, I ended the email with this line: “This is what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

God must have also been online that day, snooping in my mail. He has kept me to that throwaway promise ever since.

A Stupid Idea

After a few prayer weeks, people began to ask, “Why don’t we have a venue like this all the time?” In a way, it made perfect sense: We had enough people to pray and the churches were supportive. Yet I have to admit that I resisted. I actually told some people it was a “stupid idea.” The idea of 24-7 prayer *all the time*—working long hours, focusing all my energies—was it worth it? I resisted for a quite a while.

Secretly, though, I couldn’t deny something was happening. I had begun researching Reading’s history and discovered its prayerful past, including a Benedictine abbey that had been the center of the town for 400 years before being destroyed by Henry VIII. In conversations around town, prophetic words about continuous prayer in Reading kept popping up—a man with a proven prophetic ministry even prophesied the beginning of “a new monastic order” in Reading. There was a feeling of momentum in these days, even though we didn’t know where it was leading.

The Puzzle Takes Shape

Then one Saturday in January, we trooped off to Chichester (where the first prayer room was born in September 1999) to hang out with others who had been doing 24-7 prayer rooms and to hear from God. The first speaker was Pete Greig, the rather reluctant leader of 24-7 with whom I’ve written this book.

As he spoke, he asked a simple question; “What next?” Where, he wondered, was God leading us? He shared an idea about “third millennium monasteries” where people would pray 24-7 and where the poor would be served, the gospel shared and arts and hospitality would be practiced. He talked about the ancient Celtic Christians who had evangelized Northern Europe with

such communities and wondered if we should try it again in our postmodern age. He imagined people traveling from around the world to come, stay and pray. He envisaged 50 of these communities worldwide, all praying 24-7-365. As Pete shared his heart, I got goose bumps.

The people who had gone with me were pretty enthusiastic, too. Was this what God was saying? The monastery idea? I remembered what the prophetic guy had said about a new monastic order. I thought about the foundations of our city – like so many across Europe – as a community of prayer.

I met with Pete (rather nervously) a few days later to talk about this crazy idea of establishing a modern-day monastery in Reading. We met, chatted and came up with the name “Boiler Rooms” in about 30 seconds – it seemed to describe the hidden power we saw these communities generating. At the end of the meeting, I went and sat in the car and just stared into space for ages. What was going on?

As I sat, jigsaw pieces began to fall into place. The idea of thin places – maybe a Boiler Room would be a place for God’s presence to reside? Reading was an abbey town – perhaps it was in our historic DNA to be a place of prayer, justice, mission, the arts, hospitality? Could a “third millennium monastery” be a renewal of what was there long ago?

Then I began to think about my life, my journey. I knew that God had been affecting a change in my life – the era of constant activity with no prayer was over. I knew that God wanted me on my knees. Yes, it was great to watch a prayer movement developing, and yes, the ministries I was involved in were changing – but deep down, I knew that God was reordering my life.

I was a little scared. My life seemed to be careening out of control. I felt like Sandra Bullock trying to take corners at 50 M.P.H. in that out-of-control bus in the movie *Speed*. These sharp bends were approaching and I felt totally unprepared to get round them.

I put the key in the ignition and set off for home.

First Steps

So off we went.

Seven of us gathered in Malc and Penny’s garden one night to start plotting a Boiler Room in Reading. Things quickly began coming together. How

could such a weird idea seem so wonderful, energizing and inevitable? Money was coming in, plans were coming together and people were getting excited about the idea across the city – Christians and non-Christians alike were enthusiastic about the plans. Prayer weeks were becoming prayer months. We prayed for the whole of April 2001.

Our problem was location: Where should the Boiler Room be? We had no place to house the new Boiler Room community. We spent weeks scanning the streets and the papers. Empty buildings, church halls, rental spaces, offices – we looked at everything. In my mind I knew the sort of place we needed, but it seemed simply not to exist.

Then one July night (in a fair amount of desperation), we met once more to pray at McIroy Park, a hill above Reading that had become a special place to pray – we could see the whole city below. We gathered there hoping to see some sign, some cloud formation or giant finger that would lead us. Nothing . . . so we sat down to chat. Malc shared that a prayer group in the north of Reading had been praying for us and one lady there had felt God speak about a venue:

“The answer,” she said, “is in the Abbey. It’s staring you in the face.”

Maybe we should go to the old abbey ruins to pray? To be honest, I was up for anything at this point, but felt a certain amount of despair. Was a “scavenger hunt” evening ahead of us, with no clear answers in sight?

We drove down to the abbey ruins and started praying. A few features of the original layout survived Henry VIII’s anti-Catholic campaigns: A *hospitium* is used as a daycare and as part of the museum. A brook that once brought water to the monks still runs through the town, and there are a few ruined walls of the main chapel, the treasury and the dining hall. That’s where we went to pray: An ancient, ruined holy place among shining office blocks in the heart of Reading’s financial district.

As we prayed in the ruins, I glanced over a wall and noticed a large pub with grates over the windows. Walking out of the ruins, we found ourselves standing in the only other remaining part of the original abbey: the south gate, where the last abbot was beheaded. As we stood there, the boarded-up windows of the cavernous Forbury Vaults Pub filled our view. How had we not seen it before? The old lady had been right: The answer was in the Abbey. It was staring us in the face.

The Vaults was a huge pub that had been empty for a very long time. The building included a bar area, conservatory, two levels of meeting rooms and two

adjacent apartments, one on either side. When we first saw it, an eviction notice for squatters was taped to a lamppost in front of the main doors. With mounting excitement, we copied down the owner's address as Malc prayed and anointed the building with oil. We felt certain that we had just found our home in a condemned old pub.

The next day, I wrote to the owners, explaining our vision for 24-hour prayer room and pointing out that it would mean 24-hour security for them! A few weeks later, we got the call: The building was ours, rent-free for at least three months—maybe more—until the time came for it to be demolished.

God had given us a building. But there was more.

I was away when the team first got to go in and look around. On my return, Wardy and Malc excitedly showed me the rooms and the potential. Then they told me where we were: "The pub was built on the site of the Abbey's millhouse—*we're actually within the Abbey's original grounds.*"

With coy grins, Malc and Wardy led me outside to another office building on the corner, also empty. There in front of me was a giant archway. This was the wheelhouse of the mill! The arch itself was not complete, but it was beautiful, even with weeds growing out of the bricks. We stood and looked through to a small stream just beyond. "And this," said Malc, "this is the Holy Brook, the waterway built by the monks to provide water for the Abbey."

God had provided us a building—a thin place—on a significant slice of Reading's spiritual real estate: a Benedictine monastery where people had prayed for centuries before.

I needed to sit down.

For Further Thought

Consider going on a pilgrimage to a "thin place" that is important to you. It could be a manmade place—a church where you were baptized, for example, or a place where God called you in a specific way. Maybe it is a natural place—a forest, a mountaintop, a beach. If it's possible you, could pilgrimage to a recognized "thin place" from Celtic or other ancient Christian traditions. Set aside some time to meet with God.

Ask yourself: How could your prayer life become more incarnational? Are there ways that the prayers you pray could be "earthed" more in your

neighborhood or workplace? Consider tithing your prayer times: What about spending every tenth hour you set aside for prayer to serve the poor or volunteer at a homeless project or visit an elderly neighbor? In this way, you may become God's answer to someone else's prayers.

Liturgy

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.

Isaiah 61:10

Leader: God's plan of redemption is at work in our world. He brings bouquets of roses instead of ashes.

Silence for all to offer their own prayers for redemption.

Leader: He sends messages of joy instead of news of doom.

Silence for all to offer their own prayers for the broken.

Leader: He seeks a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.

Silence for all to offer their own prayers for the local and global Church.

Leader: God, rebuild the ancient ruins. Renew the ancient paths.

All: Bring renewal to the broken. Bring refreshing to the desert. Bring redemption to the lost.

Leader: Son of Man, can these bones live?

All: Lord, You alone know.

(Liturgy based on Isaiah 61 and Ezekiel 37.)

Notes

1. Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).
2. Siouxié Sioux, quoted in Simon Goddard, "Interview: Siouxié Sioux," *Uncut*.
http://www.uncut.co.uk/music/siouxie_sioux/interviews/32 (accessed February 2007).
3. Jack Hayford, cited in Gerard Kelly, *Spring Harvest Study Guide* (Sussex: Spring Harvest, 2003).
4. Susan Hines-Brigger, "Finding God in the 'Thin Places,'" *The American Catholic*, March 2001.
<http://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/Mar2001/feature1.asp#F3> (accessed January 2007).
5. "Consecration and Dedication of a Building," Portsmouth Anglican Diocese.
http://www.portsmouth.anglican.org/info/bishop/liturgy/diocesan_liturgical_resources/consecration_and_dedication_of_a_building/ (accessed January 2007).
6. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).
7. I first read about incarnational youth ministry from *Youth Work and the Mission of God* by Pete Ward (London: SPCK, 1997). The idea may have been some else's, but I have to credit Wardy for helping me with this.
8. Eden Project, Manchester, part of the ministry of The Message Trust.
<http://www.message.org.uk/edenproject.cfm> (accessed January 2007).