

*“Michael is one of Africa’s foremost evangelists and prophets. I fully commend his thoughtful offering to fellow travellers.”*

– **Moss Ntlha, General Secretary of The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa**

*“I wonder how this author could dig so deep. Surely, God, the Holy Spirit has given these insights.”*

– **Professor B. E. Vijayam, founder of Carmel University, Hyderabad**

*“What endears me to him more than anything is his passion for the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

– **Angus Buchan, author of Faith Like Potatoes**

*“I’ve learned that prayer involves listening as much as talking, aligning us with what God wants done in the world more than what we want God to do for us. Michael Cassidy’s life models that principle.”*

– **Philip Yancey, author of What’s So Amazing About Grace?**

*“Michael Cassidy has lived a life of Christian nobility, and numberless people are in the embrace of Christ’s love because of his faithful efforts. Don’t pick up The Church Jesus Prayed For if you are looking for quick fixes, shallow inspirations, simple formulas. Its reading will not be completed in a two hour plane flight. No, the book is the scholarship of a lifetime, and it comes from a man who has lived out what he has written. Cassidy is an author you can trust.”*

– **Gordon MacDonald, Chancellor, Denver Seminary**

*“I don’t know anybody as qualified to write with such moral force and biblical authority. Michael’s vision and courage were key contributors to mobilizing the church in South Africa to challenge and topple one of the most evil and divisive systems in the world, namely apartheid. This book is the product of a lifetime of dynamic leadership. Cassidy brings wisdom and hope for our broken world at a time when we long for unity.”*

– **S. Douglas Birdsall, Executive Chair, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization**

*“Michael Cassidy has put his heart, soul and mind into what might end up as a landmark study of John 17, arguably the greatest, deepest and most mysterious chapter in the whole Bible... I warmly commend this terrific book.”*

– **Lord Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury 1991–2002**

*“For more than 50 years I have observed Michael’s amazing achievements in evangelism, feeding the hungry, subverting apartheid, leading African Enterprise and bringing reconciliation throughout the continent of Africa. He is one of the spiritual giants of our day, and it is all sustained by prayer. This is a lasting contribution to the renewal of the church into what Jesus longed for it to be. It is profound but full of illuminating stories. It is a book to buy and to give away. Don’t miss it. It will be a classic for generations still to come.”*

– Canon Dr Michael Green, Oxford

*“Michael Cassidy brilliantly unpacks the wonders and mysteries of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 and opens our eyes to what the church is truly meant to be. This is Cassidy at his best: his theological analysis is incisive, his wisdom penetrating and his stories deeply illuminating. This is the writing of a true elder statesman of the faith and an absolute must-read.”*

– Rebecca Manley Pippert, Salt Shaker Ministries

*“Throughout the world, the church has often forgotten that she is called to model the very Trinitarian nature of God characterised by Truth, Holiness and loving Unity. Michael Cassidy has wrestled with precisely the same issues, especially in the context of South Africa. His exposition of John 17 is therefore a sharp reminder to Christians to get back to basics, so that the world may know the wonder of the Gospel and believe.”*

– Bishop Hwa Yung, The Methodist Church in Malaysia

*“I have known Michael and worked under his great ministry many times. His practical faith, deep knowledge of Jesus, his willingness to expend his life for the Gospel, and his many years of walking with Christ are all reflected in his work here on the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. This volume is a blessing waiting to be poured out like the oil of anointing. May God breathe on this book.”*

– Most Revd Henry Orombi, Archbishop of Uganda

*“In this book Michael cuts through the doubts and hesitations that often descend on us when in despair about the uncertain witness of the church. He points us to the amazing gift that the church continues to be – because Christ deems it so.”*

– Revd Dr Mvume Dandala, former Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and former General Secretary of the All-Africa Conference of Churches

THE CHURCH  
JESUS  
PRAYED FOR

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A personal journey into John 17

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Michael Cassidy

MONARCH  
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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Published by Monarch Books  
an imprint of

**Lion Hudson plc**

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,

Oxford OX2 8DR, England

[www.lionhudson.com/monarch](http://www.lionhudson.com/monarch)

[monarch@lionhudson.com](mailto:monarch@lionhudson.com)

ISBN 978 0 85721 330 3

e-ISBN 978 0 85721 380 8

First edition 2012

### **Acknowledgments**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, October 2012, LH27.

Cover image:

*For my Christian friends, both old and young,  
most supremely Carol, my best of friends  
– but also others in my family,  
in the work of African Enterprise,  
especially my late mentor Calvin Cook,  
plus many I'm privileged to know in the church across  
Africa,  
and around the world,  
– all of whom long and labour to see the advent of  
The Church Jesus Prayed For*

**Also by Michael Cassidy:**

*Where Are You Taking The World Anyway?*

*Prisoners of Hope*

*I Will Heal Their Land (ed)*

*Facing The New Challenges (ed)*

*A Passion For Preaching*

*Together in one Place*

*Thinking Things Through*

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*Christianity For the Open-Minded*

*Getting to the Heart of things*

*What on Earth Are You Thinking for Heaven's Sake?*

*So, You Want To Get Married?*

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# About African Enterprise and Michael Cassidy

African Enterprise (AE) was founded by Michael Cassidy in 1961. It is a non-racial, interdenominational and Pan African ministry sprung from African soil which firmly believes Africa will become the fulcrum of world mission some time in the twenty-first century. AE's aim of "Evangelising the cities of Africa through word and deed in partnership with the church" is contributing, via citywide evangelistic campaigns, to spiritual renewal and the transformed lives of thousands who have been brought to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

However AE seeks also to demonstrate the love of Christ in powerful, tangible ways. In addition to preaching the gospel, AE's peacemaking work has been ongoing in formerly violence-wracked countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and (Congo) DRC since the mid-1990s. Thousands of widows and orphans of the 1994 Rwandan genocide have been assisted and ministered to. Prostitutes and street children are discipled and given job training in Ghana, while Foxfire youth evangelists in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe impact the lives of countless young people, equipping them – among other things – to live according to biblical sexual standards, thus enabling them to avoid the ravages of the HIV / AIDS epidemic.

Among the more remarkable contributions of AE were its pre election endeavours in South Africa in 1994, when AE founder Michael Cassidy played a crucial backstage role in bringing in the Kenyan diplomat, Dr Washington Okumu,

who – with others – facilitated the political breakthrough which averted near-certain civil war.

African Enterprise has sought, in the spirit of John 17, to be a unifying force among Christians by spearheading the largest Christian interdenominational leadership gatherings in Africa over the last generation: at the South African Congress on Mission and Evangelism in Durban (1973); the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly in Nairobi (1976 and 1994); the South African Christian Leadership Assembly in Pretoria (1979 and 2003); and the National Initiative for the Reformation of South Africa (NIRSA) in 2008. Michael also led and chaired the Marriage Alliance of South Africa.

AE has ten teams based around Africa in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, (Congo) DRC, Ghana, and Ethiopia, as well as a number of support offices around the world.

Michael Cassidy is a Christian leader, an internationally respected evangelist, the author of many books, and the founder of African Enterprise. In 2012 he was made the Honorary Chairman of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization, succeeding the late John Stott. He was educated at Michaelhouse, the University of Cambridge, and Fuller Theological Seminary and holds an honorary doctorate from Azusa Pacific University. He was also made the Distinguished Alumnus of Fuller Seminary for 2012. He and his wife Carol have three married children and eight grandchildren, and live in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

# Foreword

Michael Cassidy has been writing this book for fifty years. For a long time he did not know he was writing it. He was in fact living out the theme of the book – he was living John 17. John 17 contains Jesus' prayer for his church and it is this that Michael had embraced as the basic text for his life. He lived it for thirty-seven years before he even started writing. Then thirteen years ago he put pen to paper and has now completed what you now hold in your hands: *The Church Jesus Prayed For*.

I am not acquainted with anyone more qualified or with better credentials for writing a book on the church and Jesus and prayer. African Enterprise, the evangelistic mission that Michael founded and has given leadership to, has provided a major Christian voice throughout the continent of Africa, developing communities of Christians among the many African countries who have been making a difficult transition from colonialism to independence. It is hard to imagine a more difficult environment in which to establish a mature Christian witness than in Africa with its many languages, and so many tribal and spiritual elements – many inimical to the Christian gospel. But African Enterprise has been tireless, persistent, and imaginative in gathering thousands of men and women, primarily in the larger African cities, into “the church Jesus prayed for”.

At the same time, Michael, as a citizen of South Africa, was living in a nation that was crippled by apartheid. This political legislation divided the population into black and white and resulted in enormous oppression and suffering.

But apartheid was also firmly entrenched in the church, with many Christians in consequence worshipping in segregated congregations. As a result, Michael, alongside others in the South African church, worked diligently and quietly behind the scenes for many years, mediating gatherings of leaders from black and white factions of the church and government until apartheid eventually crumbled thus allowing the church Jesus prayed for to eventually be free to work at becoming “completely one” (John 17:31).

Michael Cassidy’s influence was not confined to Africa; in fact it penetrated the world church. Michael and I, for instance, first became acquainted when together we led a week-long gathering of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, a church that had struggled for decades with the “Troubles” of post 1963. I heard and admired the gentle and gracious way he made present and possible the church Jesus prayed for among Christians who had been for so long pressurised by divisive leaders.

A couple of years later Michael and his wife Carol spent a few days with me and my wife, Jan, at our home in Montana. That was when I first learned of Michael’s intention to write a book on John 17; this long prayer of Jesus that he had been participating in for so many years in his preaching and teaching and travel. As he left he asked us to pray for him in the writing of this book.

That was thirteen years ago. From time to time, throughout these thirteen years, I would remember Michael’s request and pray for him and this book. As I did this I would say, “Lord Jesus, it’s time to join Michael in the ‘John Seventeen Prayer Meeting’.” The more I did that the more I have come to realise how important and timely the “John Seventeen Prayer Meeting” is for the church worldwide and for the political culture in which we live today. I have also been inviting others to join me.

Two things stand out in this completed exposition of *The Church Jesus Prayed For*. The first is tone: gentleness; ease; compassion; dignity; and respect permeate these pages. This

is unusual. The prevailing climate in so many quarters is accusation and complaint. "I love Jesus but I hate the church" has achieved mantra status in many areas. Well, Jesus certainly didn't hate the church.

And then there is this: praying for the church involves us in many interlocking acts and understandings, theological insights, and biblical contexts. Becoming and praying in the church Jesus prayed for involves an immersion in a highly intricate and complex communion of saints and sinners and all the operations of the Trinity. Everything contributes to the being of everything else, enabling everything to be what it distinctively is. Every person has to do with every other person. There are never one or two things that will accomplish Jesus' prayer. There is no "solution" offered here, no oversimplification provided. All (whether they know it or not) are involved, whether in submission or in resistance to the Holy Spirit. A new generation of baptised sinners enters the ranks of church every thirty years or so and calls forth new acts of obedience and faith and worship. Ten marks of the church Jesus prayed for are identified, but we cannot pick out two or three and specialise in them – they are all happening at the same time. The reality of church is highly complex and cannot be hurried or coerced. Attentiveness and patience are required.

But in this masterful exposition, written out of a lifetime of faithful living in and serving the church, there is no idealism, no romanticism, nothing naïve. No. In Chapter 1, Michael tells us that "another reality was constantly running through my soul and that was a deep sense of perplexity that generally speaking I couldn't see around me (by and large) the church Jesus prayed for, though isolated congregations here and there approximated."

It is understandable that many survey this sorry track record and decide to leave the room where Jesus is praying and take matters into their own hands. Some Christians, impatient with what they perceive as the inefficiency of Jesus' prayer, attempt to solve the problem by coercion, imposing unity and

truth by an authority depersonalised into an institution. Any person or congregation who refuses to conform is excluded: anathematised, excommunicated, or shunned. Church is depersonalised and prayer is stifled.

Other Christians who are also impatient with Jesus' prayer solve the problem by reducing the scale of church to what can be managed by gathering men and women of like mind and spirit and then split off, reducing church to something more like an exclusive club. The repetitive urgency with which Jesus prays that we be one just as He is one with the Father, exposes this reduction as something more like an act of defiance, defying Jesus in the cause of Jesus. But such defiance doesn't prevent Jesus' prayer from finally doing its work – slowly, incrementally, marvellously.

When we stay in the room with Jesus as He prays for us, we will eventually acquire a readiness to embrace all who are baptised as brothers and sisters. It may be slow in coming, but the prayer Jesus prayed for His church will have its way with us. Jesus is our master in prayer; He is also our companion in prayer. He says to us "I'll pray for you..." – and does it. His promise to pray for us is not lost or overlooked in a vast heavenly clutter of petitions and intercessions, confessions and thanksgivings, ascending in a cloud of incense to His altar. It defeats our imagination to understand how this takes place, but we have it on good authority that it does.

In this masterful, comprehensive, and timely book Michael Cassidy keeps Jesus' prayer for His church current, contemporary, local, and personal. We are immersed in a Jesus-relational prayer in which we are included – every one of us.

**Eugene H. Peterson**

Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology  
Regent College, Vancouver, BC

# Preface

This preface has a story because it has two parts: a “then” part, and a “now” part. Both parts were written during “solitude” retreats. The “then” part was written thirteen years ago on the West Coast of Canada. The date and place, says the sign-off at the end, was “March 1999, Jabulani Cabin, Sunshine Valley, British Columbia”.

The “now” part is January 2012, in Shambala Cottage, owned by my son-in-law and daughter, Gary and Debbie Kirsten, on the Breede River in the Western Cape, South Africa. Both are brilliant places of solitude and quiet, the one midst mighty mountains, the other on a restful riverbank. And the God of heaven and earth and of mountains and rivers owns and presences Himself in both places. That is very special.

So, the “then” part.

\*\*\* \*\*

I pen these words from the silent solitude of a wood cabin in the Coastal Mountains east of Vancouver, Canada. My dear friends and colleagues in African Enterprise, David and Lesley Richardson, have loaned me this piece of paradise for some days of retreat and quiet and for seeking the Lord’s face for myself and for this book. Total silence reigns outside. The ground is covered with that purity of whiteness which only freshly fallen snow can bring. A log fire burns and the only sounds are those of the licking of flames and crackling wood. Outside it is several inhospitable degrees below zero. Inside I am warm and cosy.

The name of this cabin is “Jabulani” – Zulu for “rejoice” or “sing for joy”. And I do rejoice. In fact this afternoon I walked and talked and rejoiced before the Lord as I stomped over snow and ice in the blessing of being alive and well. I rejoiced in and thanked God sequentially and chronologically for all He had done for me these last sixty-three years in giving me marvellous parents, a wonderful wife, a precious family, grand friends, amazing work colleagues, and an astonishing richness of experiences and Christian ministry across the years. I rejoiced too, and blessed Him, for those who first put me on the road to faith and finally led me to Christian commitment.

As it happened, I also asked the Lord to touch my heart afresh with His love for the church of Jesus Christ and all who are in it, in spite of the many weaknesses and failings in both institution and individuals. For while there is so much that is both lovable and laudable in so many in the church, there is also much that is both damning and deplorable. Not only do I see this dichotomy in others, but more depressing personally is the fact that I also see it and know it most acutely in myself. Yes, I see the enemy in the church. And it is I.

That’s why when I got back to Jabulani Cabin this evening I first listened to a worship tape for an hour to fix my soul on the Lord and His holiness and majesty. Then I spent a long time searching and seeing so many wicked ways in my own heart. Then I confessed them sequentially to God, claiming His forgiveness and cleansing.

How else but with worship and confession could one start to write a book on the Christian church, first as it is – and then as it is meant to be, according to the prayer Jesus prayed in St John’s Gospel, chapter 17?

\*\*\* \*\*

That was then. At which point I went on to narrate how I got interested in this John 17 chapter – material which I have now put into Chapter 1 of the book.



In fact at that point (1999), I went on to write about half of the book as first visualised. But it wasn't really coming together satisfactorily. And I got discouraged, as well as over-busy and unduly preoccupied with other pressures and challenges in our ministry. So the book went into cold storage for some ten years before a mix of conscience and the Lord's Spirit, I think – and hope – prompted me to get it out and underway again in a major rework.

The final fruit you now have before you. If truth be told, I feel OK about the delay, because what has now come forth is in my view a better product – hopefully more mature and more deeply considered.

Now as I sit here at “Dad's Writing Desk” (as Debbie calls it) in Shambala Cottage, I look out on pristine South African riverine and the breathtaking beauty of the Breede River, two-and-a-half hours north of Cape Town.

The early evening sky is bathing the river in pink and the mountainous bank and outcrop opposite has a warm, orange glow.

It's an ideal place to do some final topping and tailing, plus adjustments here and there, with a few last minute additions.

For sure, it has been an adventure grappling with this most major, arguably most important and certainly most mysterious of chapters in all the Bible. I am acutely conscious of only having touched the hem of its garment. I imagine in another lifetime and upon another shore I will reach a fuller understanding.

But if in the meantime what I here set forth can in even modest measure challenge the Lord's people in many places to strive in new ways after the church Jesus prayed for, I will feel well rewarded, and will surely say a *Jabulani* or two. Most assuredly does this tired old planet need this church Jesus prayed for as maybe never before.

As to how the book may be read, studied, or used in groups, please note the suggestions that follow this preface.

Inevitably, there are more people to thank than I can

possibly enumerate adequately. But pride of place must go to my indefatigable and amazing secretary Brenda Harrison, whose vast typing labours and endless patience with my seemingly endless edits must earn her numerous feathers in caps, jewels in crown, and mention in despatches. Then my editorial assistant, Megan Whatley, and executive assistant David Rees have put in sterling labours of note. Thank you, you are both serious stars. And, Megan, I especially bless you, dear one, for your huge labours on the bibliography and index. My late and most esteemed mentor over fifty-one years, Calvin Cook, counselled me all along the way, prayed fervently for the finalising of the text and gave such wise encouragement when I most needed it. How I miss his counsel and friendship! I hope that in heaven he is happy with the final product. I also had a lovely team of editors who in November 2011 went over the volume page by page, secured hard-fought cutting (I hate murdering my darlings!) and challenged me to think through better on assorted chapters. Heading this list are my long-time friends Philip le Feuvre and Hugh Wetmore whose theological acumen saved me again and again from bad slips or poor thinking. Others in that editorial team were Peter Veysie, Paul Culwick, Nellis du Preez, Lunga Dlungwana, Linda Grant, and Darien Khlentzos, the latter having done an amazing job in converting many of my RSV quotations to NRSV, which numbers of friends finally thought would be more feasible. Thank you, brother. My sister Olave Snelling and former colleague Abiel Thipanyane made useful suggestions for the chapter on Protection from Evil Supernaturalism.

I also in 2010 had a group of about fifty friends come to AE for a conference on the John 17 chapter and they were both long-suffering and gracious enough to let me teach and lecture through the chapters while they gave creative critiques plus a bucket-load of good suggestions.

Nor must I forget those I listed at the end of the preface of 1999, so many of whom gave major counsel or provided me during that sabbatical with havens and shelter where I could read, study, think, and write. I think of Frank Brock,

then President of Covenant College (Lookout Mountain, Tennessee), Don Page, then President of Trinity Western University (Langley, British Columbia), Jim Houston, then at Regent College (Vancouver, BC), Graham Cray, then Principal of Ridley College (Cambridge), and Alister McGrath, then Principal at Wycliffe College (Oxford). Eugene Peterson, in our stay with him and Jan at Lake Flathead, Montana in February 2009, always had wise words and such warm encouragement and was also wonderfully affirmative about the volume from the very inception of the idea. And I also bless him with all my heart for his warm and gracious foreword to the book. Thank you, dear friend. David and Lesley Richardson lent Jabulani Cabin, and Gary and Debbie Kirsten lent Shambala Cottage. Such blessings. Thank you, guys. Canadian intern Lori Hargreaves and my former PA, the late Yvonne Whitton, dug out material from dozens of commentaries. And my secretary back then, the splendid Colleen Smith, put in huge labours on my very first draft manuscripts. I am thankful to Derryn Hurry, who also helped me in times gone by with a couple of my other books, for thoughts and insights given me along the way. I must not forget the SA Board of African Enterprise who sanctioned that 1999 sabbatical and the Canadian AE Board and David Richardson who made my stay in British Columbia not only possible, but also so pleasurable and restorative.

Special gratitude must also go to Monarch Books, and most especially Tony Collins who graciously believed in this volume and then steered it so capably through all the publishing processes. I am so thankful also to Miranda Lever and Jenny Ward for their meticulous and very professional work on all the final details of the final text. A huge task.

Most certainly are there numbers of people left out to whom I owe gratitude for encouragement and help. Please forgive my amnesia for any such omissions.

But I can't and won't leave out my beloved Carol who, in this writing venture as in others, always stands back of me with prayerful support and astonishing patience. At times she must want to cast these writing ventures to outer darkness,

but she refrains and just keeps the encouragement going. Thank you, darling.

It's now dark over the Breede River and time for me to terminate this preface and entrust this volume to the Lord's tender care. May He prosper what reflects His mind and Spirit and forgive all places of error, of which I suspect there are a good many.

Michael Cassidy  
Dad's Writing Desk,  
Shambala Cottage,  
Lemoentuin,  
Breede River,  
Western Cape  
January 2012

# Using the book in groups

My suggestions for using this book in groups would be along these lines:

1. First of all, let each member of the group individually, and privately, read the first five chapters beforehand to get the setting, key ideas, outline, and flow of the prayer. Maybe each person could even photocopy for ease of reference a couple of the diagrams outlining the chronology of events and the prayer's major headings.
2. Then as the group assembles, start in on Chapter 6 ("Truth"), the first of the ten marks that Jesus prayed for, with this, as with the others, having been read privately ahead of time by each group member before the group session.
3. Then take the mark to be studied (such as truth, joy, or mission) and discuss in the groups how each person, initially at least, feels they or their church would score out of ten. Honestly. I mean honestly. Ten is full marks. Nine is brilliant. Five is poor. Three is dreadful. If, for example, struggling with truth is only average in you and your congregation, then score yourself five. Likewise, if you have no real mission(s) programme, or no serious grappling with protection from evil supernaturalism, then score yourself or yourselves zero and begin doing something about it. And so on.

At the end of the study course it will be instructive to work up your or your church's overall percentage score. Then ask – where from here? How can I or we fix this? How

can we become more truly like the church that Jesus prayed for?

If we are not that, then courageous honesty must acknowledge it, bring forth repentance, and work on change.

4. While the group reads the chapter ahead of time, the leader can draw forth out of his or her own ingenuity several key discussion questions. For example:
  - How did this chapter speak to you?
  - What points brought a particular challenge?
  - How does our home group, church, congregation or para-church organisation measure up against this particular mark? (e.g. Truth? Holiness? Mission? Prayer? Love? Unity?)
  - What could be done to change this? Or improve things?
  - What could or should each of us do to make practical progress, for example, in:
    - » Prayer?
    - » Joy?
    - » Mission and witness?
    - » Facing evil supernaturalism?
    - » And so on.
5. End up praying together about how the mark under discussion can more fully be embraced by each individual and each congregation.
6. Homework: The group leader then reminds the group that each individual should read the next chapter (next mark) ahead of time and be ready to discuss it when the group meets again.

## Chapter 1

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# A Thirty-five-year Itch

### The Story of the Birthing of an Idea

“As for my next book, I am going to hold myself from writing it till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear: pendant, grand, asking to be cut or it will fall.”

Virginia Woolf

“Now write what you see...”

Revelation 1:19

This book comes from the convergence of three impulses:

- *Firstly* a thirty-five-year-old itch to write a reflection on John 17 and the church Jesus prayed for;
- *Secondly* to explore my perplexity in not often seeing the church Jesus prayed for around me;
- *Thirdly* the urging from a number of friends to tell the story of my own persevering experience to see the church Jesus prayed for become more of a reality in this tired and troubled old world.

### Impulse 1: A thirty-five-year itch

In 1974, the epoch-making International Congress on World Evangelization took place in Lausanne, Switzerland. One year later, the Continuation Committee met in Mexico City and formed the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE). Bishop Jack Dain of Sydney, Australia, was our

chairman, and evangelical leaders from a score of countries were present. John Stott took us through our Bible studies each day and one of his themes was that of John 17. In his lucid and inimitable expository style he explored four marks that Jesus prayed would characterise the church – namely truth, holiness, mission, and unity.

I had of course read this chapter of John's Gospel many times in my life, but that day it lit up for me as never before and I came spontaneously to conclude with the great bishop, J. C. Ryle, that this chapter "is the most remarkable in the Bible. It stands alone. And there is nothing like it."<sup>1</sup>

As I began to explore the chapter further and to preach or lecture on it I saw and appreciated more and more why others had reached similar conclusions to Ryle.

The Reformer Martin Luther once wrote of the chapter: "It is so deep, so rich, so wide, no one can fathom it."<sup>2</sup>

Philip Melancthon, another of the Reformers, said in his last lecture before his death: "There is no voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or on earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime, than this prayer offered up by the Son to God Himself."<sup>3</sup>

John Brown, in *An Exposition of Our Lord's Intercessory Prayer*, put it this way: "The seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John is, without doubt, the most remarkable portion of the most remarkable book in the world."<sup>4</sup> Archbishop William Temple once reflected that "it is perhaps the most sacred passage even in the four Gospels".<sup>5</sup>

John Stott himself wrote:

*John 17, without doubt, is one of the profoundest chapters of the Bible. Whole books have been written to expound it. There are depths here we will never fathom; all we can do is paddle in the shallows. Here are heights we cannot scale; we can only climb the foothills. Nevertheless, we must persevere. For if the upper-room discourse (John 13–16) is the temple of Scripture, John 17 is its inner sanctuary or holy of holies. Here we are*



*introduced into the presence, mind and heart of God.  
We are permitted to eavesdrop, as the Son communes  
with the Father. We need to take off our shoes, since this  
is holy ground.*<sup>6</sup>

But the fascination with this chapter is not simply a preoccupation of the past. A friend of mine said she had googled John 17 and found 25 million references!

For myself I began to see that everything to do with the church's life is here in this text – its authority, its characteristics, its lifestyle, its mission, its inner dynamics, plus both its heavenly and its earthly purpose. Nothing seems to be missing.

Beyond that there seemed to me to be special poignancy in the fact that here we were seeing Jesus not as public instructor or teacher, *but as private intercessor*. Here was our Lord not instructing the disciples, but pouring out His heart to the Father for what He wanted the church to be and do. Here were, and are, the longings of His heart, the anguished desire of His soul. This continues to strike me as something very special.

From then on the idea began to live with me that I would like one day, when ready to do so, to write a reflection on this chapter and my interaction with it. So I left it all to germinate a few more years. In fact for three and a half decades!

## **Impulse 2: Real perplexity about the reality of the church compared to the prayer**

Anyway, during this time another reality was constantly running through my soul, and that was a deep sense of perplexity that generally speaking I couldn't see around me (by and large) the church Jesus prayed for, though, isolated congregations here and there approximated.

Why was this? Slowly the conviction took shape: both the people of precept and the people of practice in the church, in

fact all of us, fall short for just this reason – that we constantly miss the delicate balance of imperatives present in John 17, the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.

Suddenly it was clear. One could not just write idealistically and theoretically about what Jesus prayed for in all its positive glory and ignore the negative fact that the church in reality seemed light years from the patterns our Lord longed for. Somehow there seemed something slightly dishonest about that. Should one not therefore grapple with the reality of, and reasons for, this discrepancy?

I also recognised that my experience and ministry had given me exposure across a pretty wide landscape to the different facets of the church universal in many parts of the world, albeit from a layman's vantage point. This meant of course that I would be limited to the extent that I had never had experience of the mysterious inner workings of things like church synods and assemblies, and I had never been a big shot like a canon, archdeacon, or bishop; none of these offices (as it happens) having ever fallen remotely within the realm of my own aspirations.

## POTENTIAL MOMENTS OF GLORY

Actually once or twice in my life I have missed potential moments of episcopal glory – once when, though a layman, I was asked to let my name go forward as an episcopal nominee for a South African diocese that, in desperation, was scraping the bottom of the barrel to find candidates for their new bishop! Knowing they had lost their mind I was determined not to lose mine and after overnight prayer politely declined. No doubt it was a mighty deliverance for the diocese concerned.

The other time was when in some fit of folly I was nominated from the floor to be archbishop, if you please, of another city, this time overseas – the first layman, I was told, to be nominated for an archbishopric since the twelfth century or something like that! It seems my nomination lasted all of ninety seconds before sanity was restored to the gathering as I

was cast to archiepiscopal outer darkness. Oh, well, you can't win 'em all!

So by two mighty divine interventions I remained a layman with a layman's limitations. Or maybe advantages!

But might one not nevertheless explore meaningfully how the discrepancy between the church Jesus prayed for and the reality around us was the consequence not of poor praying by Jesus, but of poor theological, moral, and missiological obedience by the church?

The fact is that every Christian should be faced daily with the distinction between the ideal and the real in terms of the church's nature, life, and character. Thus theologian P. T. Forsyth could write "the church of Christ is the greatest and finest product of human history... the greatest thing in the universe".<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Thomas Arnold, once Professor of History at Oxford, affirmed, "The church as it now stands no human power can save... When I think of the church, I could sit down and pine and die."<sup>8</sup>

Then Philip Yancey, writing in his book, *Disappointment with God*, says that in reality the contrary problem is God's disappointment with us. "The church's obvious defects would seem to be the greatest cost to God."<sup>9</sup>

## ORDINARY

When contemplating the church, Dorothy Sayers concluded that, "In an awesome act of self-denial, God entrusted His reputation to ordinary people."<sup>10</sup>

Actually that word "ordinary" played a great part in my own call. Not long after my conversion at university in October 1955 I was introduced to John Pollock's inspiring little classic, *The Cambridge Seven*, about seven young Cambridge graduates who went out to do missionary work in China. On the last page of that book Pollock says: "This is the story of *ordinary* men, and thus may be repeated" (my italics).<sup>11</sup>

I fell on that word "ordinary" like a beggar pouncing on

a morsel of bread and said: "Lord, oh, I thank you! Because if it's 'ordinary' people you can use, then I as one of the more ordinary around can qualify." And there and then I offered myself for Christian service.

So midst all the failings of the church we celebrate that God can use *even* us – the most ordinary of the ordinary, and perhaps birth the extraordinary.

It's an interesting and antiphonal interplay of notions. The real and the ideal. The dream and the nightmare. The mountaintop and the valley. The very ordinary and the extraordinary.

So why not explore these and share how or why? No doubt I am not alone with my perplexities. All of that was "idea" and "Impulse 2".

Oh yes! One other thing. I felt such an exploration could create a sort of thermometer by which churches and individuals could take their temperature and see how well or unwell they were!

## A POWERFUL QUESTION

I also came to realise that I couldn't and shouldn't write on the church with judgment, because I was subject to the same judgment.

In January 1999 Carol and I had been with Eugene and Jan Peterson of *The Message* fame at their lovely lakeside home on Lake Flathead in Montana. Eugene said to me one afternoon while out hiking in the hills: "Will your book be a rebuke and challenge to the church?"

"Eugene, I am in no position to rebuke anyone," I replied, "but I do hope the book will challenge the church. However what I *can* say is that Jesus' prayer for the church in John seventeen *has* deeply challenged me. Beyond that it has in fact also deeply rebuked me personally in terms of my own shallowness of faith and shabbiness of witness."

In fact once when studying this chapter I found myself almost in tears and crying out in my heart, "Lord, Jesus, if

you still pray this prayer, as I imagine you do as the Great Intercessor, then please pray it again for me RIGHT NOW. And not just today but every day.”

Yes! – that’s probably the need for all of us reading these pages.

### **Impulse 3: I have a story to tell**

Impulse three focused in on the part about telling a story. This came from several quarters.

Following Mexico City’s 1975 hosting of the LCWE, and with it the amazing group of leaders from every continent, Jesus’ prayer continued to grip my spirit and imagination. Then in 1978 – during the so-called “Rhodesian Bush War” when the Church of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was rent asunder by divisions as to whether one was pro Ian Smith (and the white government) or pro the Freedom Fighters and the black Liberation struggle – I took this chapter as the basis for a series of five well-received lectures.

My interest in the chapter thereafter deepened and I used it at other times and in other places.

Thus for “The Sadleir Memorial Lecture” series I was invited to deliver in October 1991 at Wycliffe Theological College in Toronto, Canada, I chose John 17 for my theme. Being in a theological environment I was of course ever so keen to be ever so theological and ever so impressive! – you know, trotting out little bits of Hebrew or Greek here or there or riding in with the fearsome trio of Barth, Brunner, and Buber! And if that didn’t impress then toss in a touch of Tertullian, Tyndale, and Tillich!

But to my considerable interest, alarm, and surprise, the audience (consisting of theologians both budding and budded) pleaded with me after the first lecture to tell more stories: “We want to hear more stories of your experiences in Africa with the principles coming out of the High Priestly Prayer. We’ve loved the few stories you’ve told. Tell us more.”

That set me thinking. Keep it reasonably simple. Tell the stories.

Then there was my friend Tom Houston – then Executive Director of the LCWE. During a phone conversation with him in the UK in October 1992 he asked me if I was doing any more writing. I told him of the John 17 possibility.

“Great idea, Mike. But tell the stories,” said Tom simply, abruptly, and unprimed. “And tell yours.”

So I decided to write and to try and put down something of my adventure with this chapter. Yes, I would seek to share the story of my love affair with this poignant prayer – of my perplexity that most of the time I do not see around me the answer to it, but also of my persevering determination to try and make just a little bit of a contribution to the answer coming in – “one day”!

Thus it was that I decided that if I ever did write a book on this extraordinary prayer of Jesus, I would ground and contextualise it in real-life situations by mixing in stories, personal experiences, and the anecdotal along with the chapter’s more obviously theological material.

My prayer for the book then – as now – is that its reflections will indeed challenge, bless, encourage, and yes, if need be here and there, rebuke – as it has done to this author – all who might take up its pages to read. Especially the thinking layperson. And the average pastor.

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## A quiet read

So then, let’s quietly, deliberately and prayerfully read the prayer that is found in John 17 – twice. First in the NRSV and second in Eugene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*.

### NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

(1) After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify

*your Son so that the Son may glorify you, (2) since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. (3) And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (4) I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. (5) So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*

*(6) "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. (7) Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; (8) for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (9) I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. (10) All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. (11) And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (12) While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. (13) But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. (14) I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. (15) I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. (16) They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. (17) Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (18)*

*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (19) And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

*(20) "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, (21) that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (22) The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (23) I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (24) Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

*(25) "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. (26) I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

## **THE MESSAGE**

*(1) Jesus said these things: Then raising his eyes in prayer, he said: "Father, it's time. Display the bright splendor of your Son so the Son in turn may show your bright splendor. (2) You put him in charge of everything human so he might give real and eternal life to all in his charge. (3) And this is the real and eternal life: That they know you, The one and only true God, And Jesus Christ, whom you sent. (4) I glorified you on earth By completing down to the last detail What you assigned me to do. (5) And now, Father, glorify me with your very own splendor, the very splendor I had in your presence*



*Before there was a world.*

(6) *"I spelled out your character in detail To the men and women you gave me. They were yours in the first place; Then you gave them to me, And they have now done what you said. (7) They know now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, That everything you gave me is firsthand from you, (8) For the message you gave me, I gave them; And they took it, and were convinced That I came from you. They believed that you sent me. (9) I pray for them. I'm not praying for the God-rejecting world But for those you gave me, For they are yours by right. (10) Everything mine is yours, and yours mine. And my life is on display in them. (11) For I'm no longer going to be visible in the world; They'll continue in the world While I return to you. Holy Father, guard them as they pursue this life That you conferred as a gift through me, So they can be of one heart and mind (12) As we are one heart and mind. As long as I was with them, I guarded them in the pursuit of the life you gave through me; I even posted a night watch. And not one of them got away, Except for the rebel bent on destruction (the exception that proved the rule of Scripture).*

(13) *"Now I'm returning to you. I'm saying these things in the world's hearing So my people can experience My joy completed in them. (14) I gave them your word; The godless world hated them because of it, Because they didn't join the world's ways, (15) Just as I didn't join the world's ways. I'm not asking that you take them out of the world but that you guard them from the Evil One. (16) They are no more defined by the world Than I am defined by the world. (17) Make them holy – consecrated – with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth. (18) In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. (19) I'm consecrating myself for their sakes so they'll be truth-consecrated in their mission.*

(20) *"I'm praying not only for them But also for*

*those who will believe in me Because of them and their witness about me. (21) The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind – Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, So they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. (22) The same glory you gave me, I gave them, So they'll be as unified and together as we are – (23) I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, And give the godless world evidence That you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me.*

*(24) "Father, I want those you gave me To be with me, right where I am, So they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, Having loved me Long before there ever was a world. (25) Righteous Father, the world has never known you, but I have known you, and, these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. (26) I have made your very being known to them – who you are and what you do – and continue to make it known, so that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them."*

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Well, there you are! The prayer Jesus prayed. And the church Jesus prayed for.

I end this introductory story with a personal and deeply felt prayer from a hymnwriter of yesteryear, William C. Dix:

*Intercessor, Friend of Sinners,  
Earth's Redeemer, plead for me  
Where the songs of all the sinless  
Sweep across the Crystal Sea.*