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# PRAYER IN THE UK

A REPORT TO MARK  
GLOBAL POVERTY  
PRAYER WEEK 2007



PRAY



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# PRAYER IN THE UK

A Tearfund report to mark Global Poverty Prayer Week 2007.

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**Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency working with a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.**

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Back cover – (left) Marcus Perkins/Tearfund, (right) Tearfund.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, launched to mark the first Tearfund Global Poverty Prayer Week, November 12th-18th 2007, provides an authoritative insight into prayer in the UK.

Tearfund, a leading Christian relief and development agency, was founded nearly 40 years ago when local churches in the UK responded to disaster in Africa. In the decades since, Christians of all denominations from across the UK and Ireland have prayed faithfully about issues of poverty, campaigned against global injustices and entrusted millions of pounds through Tearfund to the work of churches tackling poverty in the developing world.

*Prayer in the UK* investigates praying in the general adult population as well as among those who are regular churchgoers. The report is based on a representative poll of 1,000 UK adults and an equivalent representative sample of 1,000 regular (at least monthly) churchgoers<sup>1</sup>.

### Nearly half of UK adults pray – 20 million people

Prayer is alive and well in the UK. Twenty million adults (42%) say they pray (outside of church/religious services).

- One in six adults (9 million people or 18%) prays every day
- One in four of us (12 million adults or 26%) prays at least once a week
- 13 million adults (27%) pray at least once a month.

London is the prayer capital of the UK with the highest proportion of people who pray (73%). Even among those with no religion, around one in eight (12%) pray sometimes.

According to other surveys prayer is flourishing worldwide. Across Europe 60% of people pray, while in the US the proportion is even higher.

### 1 in 3 says 'God watches over me'

One in three adults in the UK (16 million) agrees with the statement 'there is a God who watches over me and answers my prayer'. The same number of people agrees that 'praying makes me feel better'.

After praying, people most often feel:

- Peaceful and content (38%)
- Strengthened (30%)
- Close to God (22%)
- Reassured/safe (21%)
- Happy/joyful (19%).

### 1 in 5 believes prayer changes the world

Across the UK millions of people believe that prayer brings about positive change in the world.

One in four people (12 million adults) believe that prayer changes 'what happens in my life' and 'what happens to other people I know'.

- 6.5 million people (32% of those who pray) have seen the effects of prayer in their own lives
- 9.5 million people (47% of those who pray) believe that 'prayer changes what happens to the lives of people living in poverty in developing countries'
- 10 million people (50% of those who pray) believe prayer 'changes the world'; equivalent to one in five of all UK adults.

### What we pray about

When asked what they pray about, the 20 million UK adults who pray cited family and friends as their foremost topic, followed by gratitude to God. Worldwide problems such as poverty, wars and disasters were the fifth most popular topic for prayer.

The top prayer topics among the 42% of UK adults who pray are:

- Family and friends (68% of them)
- Thanking God (41%)
- Guidance (32%)
- Healing (26%)
- Worldwide problems e.g. poverty, wars and disasters (25%).

Among regular churchgoers, eight out of 10 pray for people living in poverty in developing countries, equivalent to 5.2 million people.



**20 MILLION  
UK ADULTS  
PRAY**

<sup>1</sup> This was drawn by screening 7,000 UK adults identifying a nationally representative sample of 1,000 who were regular (at least monthly) churchgoers

## FOREWORD

By Matthew Frost, Tearfund Chief Executive

**This report means a great deal to us at Tearfund in our mission to help to eradicate poverty.**

It demonstrates the prevalence and untapped potential of prayer. It is our aim to see that potential developed.

A previous report by Tearfund in April 2007, *Churchgoing in the UK*, shows that there is a substantial section of the population in the United Kingdom that still attends church regularly or occasionally during the year. It shows that Christians are not the tiny minority that some would have us believe. So it is uplifting to discover that prayer remains such a trusted and powerful element of life for so many.

Our way of life – fast-paced with few moments of calm – leaves many people searching for spiritual satisfaction and meaning. It is our responsibility to work with local churches to help provide that meaning and to empower them to meet the needs of people living in poverty.

One striking statistic from our survey reveals that 67% (two thirds) of regular churchgoers who pray believe that prayer changes what happens to the lives of poor people in developing countries. At Tearfund we see evidence of this in the committed praying and campaigning of thousands of churches as they support calls for fairer trade rules, quicker global progress towards halving poverty by 2015 and stronger action to tackle climate change.

Those who pray firmly believe that prayer makes a powerful difference and changes lives.

Many Christians are this month joining in prayer with others around the world as part of Tearfund's Global Poverty Prayer Week ([www.bepartofamiracle.org](http://www.bepartofamiracle.org)). A united, global faith-based response to poverty is, we believe, a positive force for change in the world.

I hope these survey results will be a source of encouragement for Christians in the UK and beyond as they continue to play a part in a global network of churches tackling material and spiritual poverty around the world.

### Matthew Frost

Chief Executive  
Tearfund

## INTRODUCTION

**Why do people pray? The answer isn't simple. Many sources agree, though, that one key theme is relationship, or establishing a connection with God.**

The need to pray is common to many world religions. Islam requires prayer five times a day, and this relationship means constant attention and concentration on prayer. Most forms of Christianity involve daily prayer, such as school assemblies and the daily mass of Roman Catholic churches.

Tearfund, one of the UK's leading relief and development agencies, has commissioned an in-depth investigation into prayer. This report draws primarily on a representative poll of 1,000 adults and a further 1,000 churchgoers to provide a definitive picture of the way people pray in the UK today, and the importance of prayer in our lives. In this report, we investigate some of the following questions:

- How many people pray and what do they pray for?
- Do people see the effects of prayer in their own lives?
- How does praying make them feel?
- Can prayer change the world?

Tearfund's Global Prayer Poverty Week, from 12-18 November 2007, focusses on helping people in the poorest communities of the world through prayer. Thousands of people are committing to pray via a special website ([www.bepartofamiracle.org](http://www.bepartofamiracle.org)).

Why is praying for issues of poverty important? Because, for example, in the next few years, much faster progress must be made in halving poverty by 2015; and the impact of climate change could cause at least 30 million people to go hungry. This report seeks to highlight the fact that prayer remains a strong component of a positive response to such global challenges.

## PROFILE OF THOSE WHO PRAY

**Tearfund's survey shows that prayer is a part of life for nearly half of UK adults. 42% of all UK adults ever pray to God outside of church or religious services (equivalent to 20.3 million adults).**

- 27% pray at least once a month (13.0 million)
- 26% at least once a week (12.5 million)
- 18% at least daily (8.7 million)
- 7% several times a day (3.6 million)
- A further 7% pray occasionally, 3% hardly ever and 4% in times of crisis.

But prayer is part of life even for some with no religious beliefs. Even 12% of those who profess to have no religion say they pray sometimes.

Among all UK adults:

- Half of women pray compared with a third of men (51% compared with 32%)
- Young people are less likely than their elders to pray; just a quarter (27%) of 16-24 year olds admit to ever praying, and the proportion rises steadily through the age bands to reach 51% of those aged 55-74 and peaking at 61% of over 75 year olds. It remains to be seen whether young people will begin to pray as they become older, or whether the non-praying habit is a sign of things to come
- London is arguably the prayer capital of the UK (see figure 3), as three-quarters of Londoners pray (73%). This may be due to the number of black and ethnic minorities, who show a higher propensity for prayer

- By social class, propensity to pray is highest among ABs (49% ever pray and 32% at least weekly) and lowest among C2s (36% ever pray and 18% at least weekly); again mirroring variations in churchgoing.

### Prayer is important for churchgoers

Prayer is an important part of life for regular churchgoers. Ninety per cent of regular (at least monthly) churchgoers pray by themselves, outside church services. Sixty one per cent pray daily.

- Daily prayer is significantly above average among regular churchgoers aged over 65 (68%) and below average among 16-24 year-olds (49%)
- By denomination, daily prayer among members of the Church of England is 55%, and the Church of Scotland/Presbyterians is 50%. Daily prayer among Pentecostals/New church members is 84% and for black majority churches the figure is 77%.

### Church attendance goes hand in hand with prayer

The profile of those who pray correlates with the profile of regular attendees at church. Tearfund research<sup>2</sup> has confirmed that women, older people, AB social class, Londoners and those of black ethnic origin are all more likely to be regular churchgoers than the average, and these demographic groups are also more likely to be praying. Personal prayer goes hand in hand with regular churchgoing as an expression of faith, and whilst the correlation does not conclusively prove that church attendance actually encourages prayer, this seems likely.

<sup>2</sup> Churchgoing in the UK – A research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK. Tearfund (April 2007)

## 'TOO BUSY NOT TO PRAY'?

Most religions involve prayer. Yet this commitment to pray is often at odds with the way many of us live our lives today. Several studies confirm that we are working more, sleeping less and living life at a faster pace than ever before:

- An international survey conducted in 32 cities around the world reveals that the pace of life is literally getting faster<sup>3</sup>. Walking pace has increased by 10% since the early 1990s
- Nearly three-quarters of Britons report that they are getting less sleep than they were five years ago
- The usual working week in the UK is higher than any other European Union country, at 43.3 hours compared with an average of 39.3 across the rest of Europe<sup>4</sup>.

Little time is left for rest, contemplation and prayer. In his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*<sup>5</sup>, American church leader Bill Hybels asks us to listen to God, respond to what is heard, and 'practice the presence of God'. While Rt Rev Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Reading, suggests we ditch the to-do lists, constant stream of emails and 24/7 culture in favour of stopping and enjoying pauses in daily life, in his book *Do Nothing to Change Your Life*<sup>6</sup>.

Prayer gives an opportunity to enjoy a quiet time and to reflect on life. Proof of prayer's calming effects is provided by the Tearfund study:

- After prayer people most often feel 'peaceful/content' (38%) and 'strengthened' (30%)<sup>7</sup>
- Others feel 'close to God' (22%), 'reassured/safe' (21%), 'happy/joyful' (19%), guided (16%) and unburdened/released (14%)
- The vast majority, 80%, of adults who pray report that praying makes them feel better<sup>8</sup>
- Most adults who pray also expect to hear from God, with 77% believing that 'there is a God who watches over me and answers my prayer'.

Prayer has many functions. It may make a difference when someone or something is prayed for (see pages 9 to 16). It provides a moment of reflection and it provokes positive emotions in the person praying.

**80 PER CENT  
OF ADULTS WHO  
PRAY REPORT THAT  
PRAYING MAKES  
THEM FEEL  
BETTER**

## BELIEF IN THE POWER OF PRAYER

Those who pray believe strongly that their prayers make a difference. Among 42% of UK adults who ever pray (20.3 million people), the proportions believing in the power of prayer are high:

- 57% of those who pray (11.6 million people) believe that 'prayer changes what happens in their life'. This is equivalent to one in four (24%) of all UK adults
- 32% of them (6.5 million people) have seen the effects of prayer in their own lives
- 59% of them (12 million people) believe that 'prayer changes what happens to other people they know'
- 47% of them (9.5 million people) believe that 'prayer changes what happens to the lives of people living in poverty in developing countries'
- Similarly, half (50%) or 10.2 million people believe that 'prayer changes the world'. This is equivalent to around one in five (20%) of all UK adults.

### Churchgoers' attitudes to prayer

Among regular churchgoers, the numbers of those believing in the power of prayer are even higher. Three-quarters of regular churchgoers believe that prayer changes what happens in their own and other people's lives.

- Just over half (55%) have witnessed the effects of prayer in their own life
- Two-thirds (67%) of regular churchgoers believe that prayer changes the lives of people living in poverty in developing countries. As 80 per cent pray for people living in poverty, many of them on a regular basis, this is a positive force for change.

### Youth and minorities committed to prayer

There is a youthful optimism about the power of prayer to overcome poverty among churchgoers.

- 75% of regular churchgoers aged 16-34 who pray believe that prayer changes the lives of people living in poverty in developing countries, including 42% who have witnessed the effects themselves. This is higher than in any other age band
- The proportion believing in the power of prayer over poverty is particularly high among those attending churches of black majority, Pentecostal/new churches and evangelicals (95%, 92% and 86% respectively).

<sup>3</sup> Study conducted in May 2007 measuring the adult speed of walking in equal conditions in 32 cities around the world, University of Lancaster

<sup>4</sup> Results from a survey of 1000 UK adults, May 2004, conducted by Travel Inn

<sup>5</sup> InterVarsity Press 1998

<sup>6</sup> Church house Publishing, 2007

<sup>7</sup> When presented with a list of 12 positive emotions these were the two most often cited.

<sup>8</sup> Tearfund Monitor, 2007, based on 421 UK adults who pray

# WHAT DO WE PRAY FOR?

The subjects of our prayers are many and varied, ranging from material needs and health, to prayers for those in distress.

Family and friends, thanking God and seeking guidance are the top three subjects of prayer. This is followed by prayer for healing. Praying for worldwide problems such as poverty, wars and disasters is the fifth most common topic, ahead of several other issues.

The top five prayer topics among the 42% of UK adults who pray are:

- Family and friends (68% of them)
- Thanking God (41%)
- Guidance (32%)
- Healing (26%)
- Worldwide problems e.g. poverty, wars and disasters (25%).

Other prayer topics included:

- Themselves – their relationship with God or their needs (19%)
- Confession (18%)
- Praising and worshipping God (17%)
- Work of your local church (10%)
- Others to come to faith (10%)
- UK issues e.g. the government, society (8%)
- Material needs (8%).

Among regular churchgoers, the rank order of prayer topics was very similar, with the same top five topics<sup>9</sup>, albeit with higher proportions citing each issue:

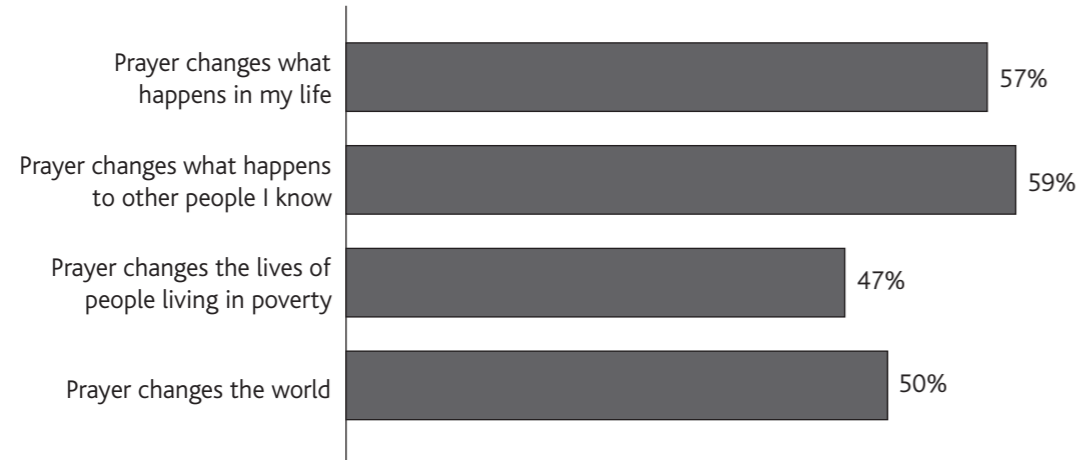
- Family and friends (81%)
- Thanking God (64%)
- Guidance (47%)
- Worldwide problems e.g. poverty, wars and disasters (40%)
- Healing (39%).

When asked directly whether they personally pray for people living in poverty in developing countries, 80% of regular churchgoers said they ever did so – which is equivalent to 5.2 million people.

- 47% of regular churchgoers pray for people living in poverty in developing countries at least once a month (3.1m)
- 41% pray at least once a week (2.7m), and
- 19% pray for people living in poverty every day (1.3m).

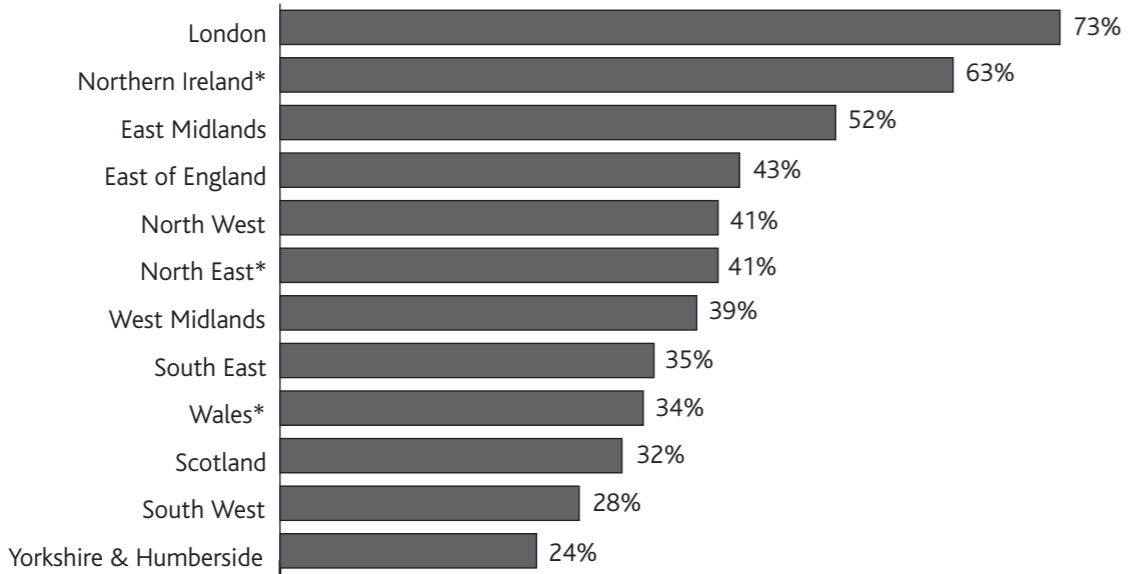
<sup>9</sup> Except with worldwide problems 4th, just ahead of healing 5th

**Figure 1: Proportion of adults who ever pray agreeing with statements about prayer**



Source: Tearfund Monitor, February 2007.  
Base: 421 adults who ever pray (from a representative poll of 1,000 UK adults).

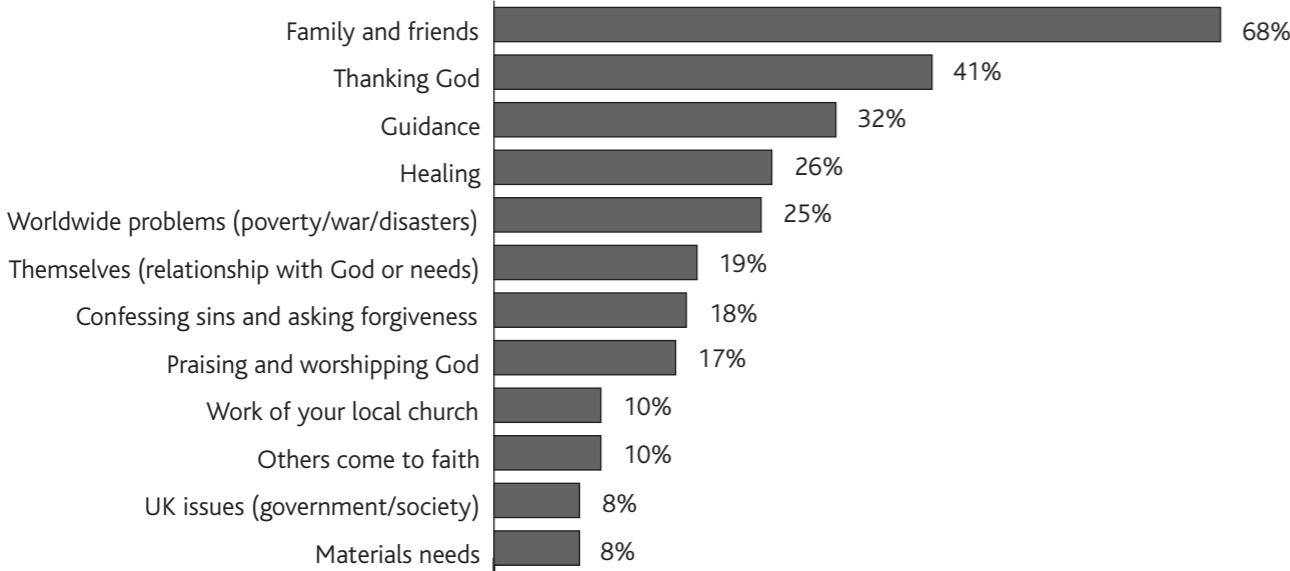
**Figure 2: Proportions who ever pray, by Government region**



Source: Tearfund Monitor, February 2007, representative poll of 1,000 UK adults.  
\*Caution: very low bases in N.I., N.E. and Wales, each with less than 50 respondents. Other regions have between 50 and 150 respondents.

# PRAYER AROUND THE WORLD

**Figure 3: Prayer topics among all adults (prompted list)**



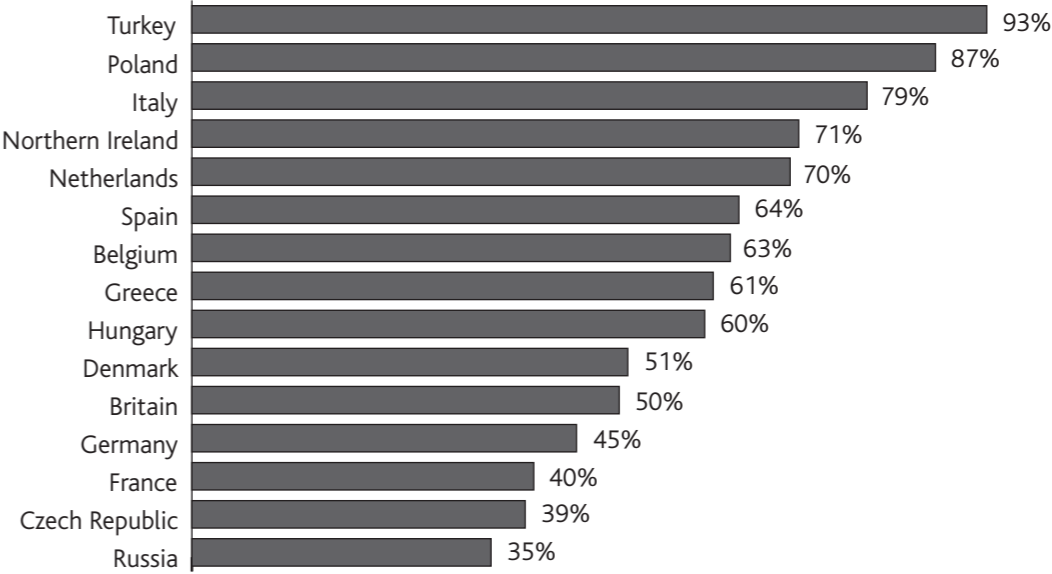
Source: Tearfund Monitor, February 2007.  
 Base: 421 adults who ever pray (from representative poll of 1,000 UK adults).

The European Values survey in 1999/2000 asked representative samples in 33 countries whether they take moments of prayer or meditation. Overall, 61%, as many as three in five people do so, but the results reveal striking differences between countries.

Tearfund's survey shows that 42% of the UK adult population pray outside church/religious services. By contrast, around 90% in Turkey and Poland take moments of prayer, while the proportion is 79% in Italy and 71% in Northern Ireland. Russia, the Czech Republic and France reveal themselves to be the most secular nations, well below the prayer average.

The US was not a participant in this survey, but other research suggests that the proportion that prays is high; one recent survey found 84% have prayed in the past week<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 4: Proportions who take moments of prayer or meditation**



Source: European Values Study, 1999/2000.

<sup>10</sup> The Barna Group, April 2005



## IMPACT OF PRAYER ON HEALTH

The idea that praying for someone else can affect his or her health has long been controversial. One study conducted by the Duke University Medical Centre found a drop of a quarter in 'adverse outcomes' including death, heart failure or heart attack among heart patients who were being prayed for by Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist prayer groups. However, this trial involved only 150 patients.

The study was repeated among a larger sample of 700 patients undergoing heart operations at nine hospitals in the US. Again, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist prayer groups prayed for a group of patients under controlled, carefully designed conditions. However, this time, the patients who were prayed for showed no difference in their outcomes than those who were not prayed for. The researchers acknowledged that it was impossible to make any firm conclusions because of the difficulty of studying prayer<sup>11</sup>.

An editorial in *The Lancet* said it would be premature to rule out the use of such therapies in modern medicine.

*'The contribution that hope and belief make to a personal understanding of illness cannot be dismissed so lightly. They are proper subjects for science, even while transcending its known bounds.'*

It seems that praying fosters positive emotions, as described earlier (page 13), which help the body's healing mechanisms. The support of a community can increase positive feelings, again more likely to result in beneficial outcomes. But praying for strangers is a more contentious area, and one it seems which calls for more research.

### Reports of prayer effectiveness

Although regular churchgoers are more certain of the power of prayer than a cross-section of adults including non-church attenders, substantial proportions (representing millions of people) are convinced of the power of prayer and have seen its effects. Anecdotally, many churchgoers will cite illustrations of the power of prayer not dissimilar to that reported in a regional newspaper about a baby named Elijah from the north of England. An ultrasound scan in the womb showed a huge, potentially fatal cyst, or cystic hygroma, on the back of his neck. His mother and grandparents and other family and friends prayed for his healing. A scan six weeks later showed the cyst had disappeared, and Elijah is now a healthy happy baby. His mother said:

*'I think in this day and age people tend to forget about churches, prayer and the power it has, especially in numbers. Even if it doesn't produce miracles, the fact that you have got people supporting you helps you cope with your daily lives.'*<sup>12</sup>

The power of religious observance and in particular prayer to produce changes has been the subject of scientific scrutiny, particularly in the US. The starting point is the contention, held by some medical professionals that people who attend religious services are in better health and less likely to be depressed than people who do not.

Harold Koenig<sup>13</sup>, of Duke University Medical Centre in Durham in the USA, says that his studies show that people who attend religious services on a regular basis may have stronger immune systems than their less religious counterparts. They are hospitalised less often, have healthier lifestyles, have about one third the rate of alcohol abuse and are about a third less likely to smoke. And they are less likely to commit suicide.

A study conducted at Duke University Medical Centre also found that prayer affected blood pressure. The study revealed that those who pray often and who attend religious services on a regular basis, especially those between ages 65 and 74, had lower blood pressure than their counterparts who neither prayed nor attended services.

Another study adds to evidence that older people who regularly attend religious services are healthier than those who do not. Among 1,174 highly functioning men and women in their 70s, those who went to a church, synagogue or mosque at least once a week had a significantly slower decline in their lung function over the following years than their peers who did not go to services regularly<sup>14</sup>. The research states that the religious attendance provides a supportive community, which wards off loneliness and depression. Praying and singing provides more benefits<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The Lancet, July 2005, reported in [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

<sup>12</sup> Published in the Accrington Observer

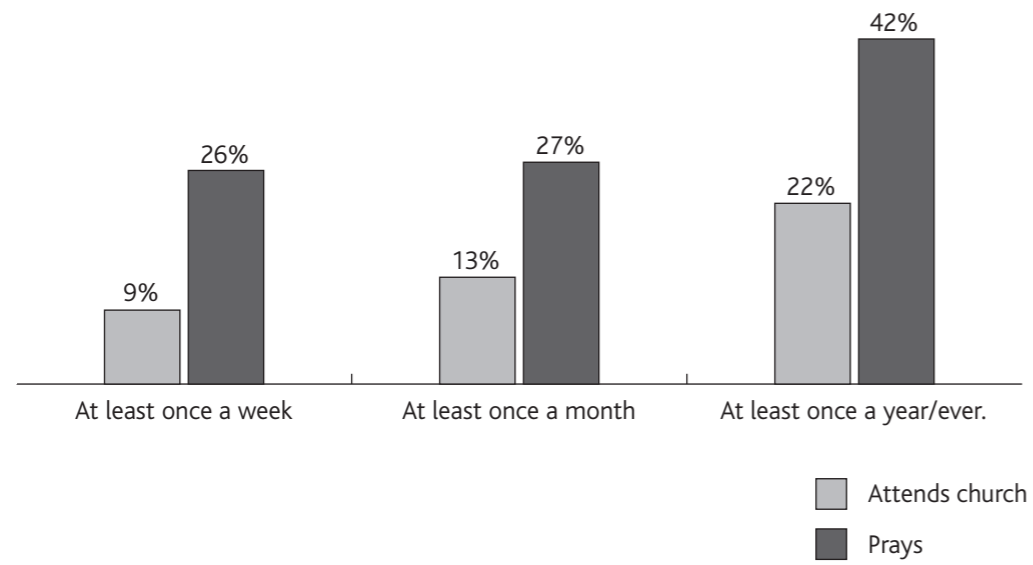
<sup>13</sup> Director and founder of the Centre for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health, in addition to holding posts in psychiatry and medicine at Duke University

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Joanna Maselko, now at Temple University in Philadelphia, and her colleagues report

<sup>15</sup> Source: *Annals of Behavioural Medicine*, November 2006

## CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND PRAYER

Figure 5: Frequency of church attendance and frequency of praying



Source: Tearfund Awareness Monitor, February 2007.

Base: Representative poll of 7,000 UK adults for churchgoing data and 1,000 UK adults for praying data.

22% attend church at least once a year. 42% ever pray – which includes prayer: 'at least monthly', 'occasionally', 'hardly ever' and 'in times of crisis'.