

Prayer and gospel team carries giant cross through Chicago



Pastor Phil Nelson, right, with his daughter Hannah, and the other two members of the team, Steve and Trish Whitaker.

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The idea came to Phil Nelson after preaching through the book of Jonah. If the prophet's preaching judgment on Nineveh made the whole city repent and turn to God, he wondered what would happen if someone preached not just judgment, but hope.

Nelson and a small team from his church in southern Illinois, Lakeland Baptist in Carbondale, ventured to Chicago – more than 482 km to the north – for a two-week prayer walk through the city.

Carrying a 3-metre-tall, 36 kg wooden cross, Nelson, his daughter Hannah and Steve and Trish Whitaker walked through some of Chicago's toughest neighbourhoods in May, stopping to pray with people and share the gospel.

“There is something about carrying a cross through the streets of a city that just causes people to stop and think about Christ,” Nelson said.

“When we decide to go out and become public about our faith, not in an abrasive way, but when we decide to make Jesus known and make Him famous, God sends people in our direction,” the pastor said.

No city too difficult for God

The team wore T-shirts with the words “Hope for the city” on the front and a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 2:36 on the back: No city too difficult for God.

As they walked, people saw the cross and came over to talk about it. People called out to them from car windows, Nelson said. A Chicago Tribune reporter came out to interview the team. They prayed at every public school, hospital, church and police station they passed. Some local Christians and pastors joined them as they walked a total of 120 km and saw six professions of faith.

The team stayed overnight in 10 different host churches. At the end of each day, the walkers went back to their host church for the evening and led a prayer meeting simulcast on Facebook, with up to 500 people joining them nightly online, Nelson said.

Rick Dorsey, pastor of Beacon Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago Heights, helped facilitate the walk in Chicago, enlisting host churches and posting updates on the Facebook page of the Chicago Metro Baptist Association.

Dorsey’s wife Cheryl, a prayer coordinator for the Chicago association, shared an encounter from day one of the walk:

“The very first interaction of the day came from a young woman who was surely sent by the Holy Spirit, because she said, ‘I saw your T-Shirts and the cross, and I came over because my

life is messed up, I'm troubled and confused, I want my life to change and be better, and I just need someone to pray for me,'" Dorsey wrote.

"We spoke with Cynthia for several minutes, tried to encourage her through her disappointments, shared with her the hope of the gospel, and we did pray for her. She said that she wanted to know Christ in her heart, and she said yes to the Lord, and gave her heart to Christ quite sincerely."



Prayerwalk team member Hannah Nelson, right, prays for a woman in Chicago alongside Marcello, a local youth pastor who joined the team for the day as they carried the cross through the city's south side.

Prayer should be connected to evangelism

The prayer walk reflected an important truth, said Phil Miglioratti, prayer ministries consultant for the Illinois Baptist State Association: Prayer should be connected to evangelism.

"Talking to God about people should always lead us to talking to those people about God," Miglioratti said. "[Nelson's] mission, coming from southern Illinois to Chicago, was tremendously encouraging to the hard-working pastors and

church leaders here in Chicagoland.”

For their journey’s second week, the team moved to the city’s north side, carrying the cross through several communities before traveling back to Carbondale.

As they met people along the way, Nelson said the response to their effort was similar, whether or not the person was a believer in Christ: “This is exactly what the city needs.”

“Whether they’re a believer or an atheist, they’re all in agreement that Chicago needs prayer,” Nelson said.

The pastor said he plans to continue leading Lakeland Baptist’s prayer walks and enlist local believers in other cities in the years ahead, beginning with Springfield, Illinois, then St Louis; Louisville, Kentucky; and Memphis, Tennessee.