

## **Boiler Rooms and New Monastics**

### ***Andy Freeman***



It's 4.15 am and I'm sitting in a room, about 20ft by 20ft. I can see bright stars in the night-sky through the skylight and I know it's a cold night, having just walked in about fifteen minutes before. I had regretted not putting on a coat.

I begin to scan round the room. Artwork is quite literally dripping from the walls and ceilings. Pictures of God, pictures to God, passionate prayers, Bible verses, questions and doubts can all be found on these scraps of paper that have formed intercessions of the marker pen or paintbrush.

'Be still and know that I am God' is written in crayon above my head. To my left, someone's written a letter to God, crying for help.

I fix my eyes on the candles in the corner of the room, and the small icon of Jesus. The Sigur Ros track on the stereo drifts over me. I focus on Jesus and begin to pray, inviting him to be with me, in a little room, in the night.

Welcome to one of the many 24-7 prayer rooms which are taking place all over the world. Even as you slept last night, people were in similar rooms praying - in the UK, in Europe, in North America, in Asia and in Africa - people praying.

And this has been going on for eleven years now. In September of 1999, the first 24-7 prayer room in Chichester (on the south coast of England) sparked into life - people prayed there continuously for 3 months, and kick started a movement which has now affected people in 60 countries. And for many people, their story is much the same as mine - that God has changed the course of their lives through these funny, intimate and deeply holy little prayer rooms.

It was January 2000 and I was a Youthworker at Greyfriars Church in Reading. Greyfriars was a growing, but also reasonably typical Church of England church, on the evangelical side of things. Although things looked OK, we were frustrated, feeling our youth programme wasn't having that much impact. So the team had all taken time off work to attend a youth leaders' conference and we were expectant that God would show us some new kind of strategy or idea. Then we read the flyer.

It read '24-7 Prayer' and had the headline 'Epidemic warning' across the bottom. It called on people to set up continuous prayer-rooms and spread a virus of prayer.

'Prayer?' Was that it, God? Was that what you wanted to say to us? I have to admit I was a little disappointed to think that this was God's blinding flash of light to us. "Here is my great strategy: you should pray more." But as we chatted, we realised that although we had worked hard and tried lots of great ideas, we hadn't spent too much time praying. We certainly hadn't spent time praying simply because we wanted to hang out with Jesus. "Prayer it is, then."

Within a month we had organised a weekend of 24-7 prayer. A room was set aside and decorated. We sorted out a rota, dividing the day into hours and getting people to sign up for different slots. Then, on a Friday night at the end of February 2000, we opened.

My first slot was 3 a.m. on the Saturday. I remember going to sleep that night feeling slightly worried that I might not wake up and slightly upset that I'd have to get up in the middle of the night. But at 2.45 a.m. my alarm went off, I jumped in the car and set off. Arriving at the door to the Church Centre, I was a bit concerned. It looked dark and no one was answering the bell. I took out my key, opened up and wandered down to the prayer room. I could feel my heart sinking at the thought of finding the room empty or finding someone asleep. Then Nathaniel put his head round the door, smiled and called to me to come in. "You won't believe what's been going on..."

Little did I know that that night was going to change the direction of my life completely.

I remember Nathaniel's grin as he explained what had been going on that first night. 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 easy it had been to pray.

As I prayed with Nathaniel, and with Dan who was also still there (even though his slot was due to have finished two hours previously), I began to dwell on what was going on here. I can safely say 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 was a space in which God's presence seemed to be residing. I didn't think my theology was meant to believe in special places or buildings. What was going on?

Our first weekend of 24-7 prayer will live long in my memory. It was followed by many other prayer rooms, resulting in salvation, in healings and in many answered prayers, as well as many unanswered ones too. But those nights of prayer started something in our hearts too. People started saying "why can't we have a prayer room all the time?" As people met with Jesus, there was a

longing for something longer term. The Boiler Room in Reading opened in 2001 and my life changed forever.

A Boiler Room is 24-7's attempt at a modern day monastery. Hopefully, many of you reading might find some familiar aspects of this. We operate a simple rule of life, have daily rhythms of prayer, we're committed to live out our prayers in the lives of the poor and needy. We practise community.

But the Boiler Room project in Reading has taken on many shapes. First we gathered in a disused pub, welcoming pilgrims, caring for the excluded teenagers in our city, and praying - praying a lot. We then spent time without a home, as a mobile movement - then found a new venue - and lost it again. Now we operate as a mobile community, fixed to a rule and way of life - and committed to Jesus and each other. We are now called 'Reconcile' and are part of a wider Boiler Room family - thirty 24-7 monasteries around the world, often in the most unlikely of settings - East German villages, drugs and prostitution tolerance zones in Mexico, amongst clubbers in Ibiza, with the Salvation Army in Liverpool.

And people often ask, What is this? What's going on? For me the answer is simple. It's about Jesus, about centering on him through prayer.

We have been deeply influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his dreams of new monastic communities. But much of what Bonhoeffer wrote expressed a simpler and more basic desire. "Jesus is the only significance. Besides Jesus nothing has any significance. He alone matters."

In the prayer room we began to find Jesus. We shaped rhythms of prayer that helped us to spend time with him. We lived our prayers out practically because we saw that Jesus did that too. We valued relationship, just as Jesus did and does, and so communities developed.

I'm tired of strategies, of keys to growth or models of building church. I'm tired because they usually don't work. I'm tired because they put me and others in boxes. I'm tired most of all because they're centered on us and not on Christ.

When we began our first prayer room I didn't know much about devotion or about prayer. If I'm honest I was overworked and my spiritual life had little or no depth. There was much in terms of good intention and of passion - but it outworked itself in my strength and ultimately in my activity.

As each day goes by I become more passionate about my dream to see God move in our world and bring about change. But as time goes on I also become more and more convinced that this will happen through a movement of prayer.

'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' (Galatians 6:14) *f*

*For more information visit [www.24-7prayer.com](http://www.24-7prayer.com)*

Andy Freeman is married to Karen. They have five kids and live in Reading, England. Andy was part of the team that pioneered 24-7's first Boiler Room community. He is now an ordinand with the Church of England and is working with others to plant the Reconcile Community, a 24-7 Community which is an Anglican Fresh Expression. He is involved with Just 24-7 and also writes for Christian Socialist Movement ([www.theccsm.org.uk](http://www.theccsm.org.uk)) You can continue to dialogue with Andy on his blog.