

Prayer at old slave market in Charleston, SC

Sam Harley
September 1, 2017



Of course, prayer was one of the main things we did in the Unification Church. I was into meditation when I joined, and I prayed quietly, preferably in the grassy green hills of Booneville. My first ‘prayer shock’ was when I joined the Actionizer program and the morning after I got there was the first of the month, so we did pledge service, and then headed to the holy ground.

There I was in the darkness before dawn, part of a huge circle of people, all of whom were praying loudly and passionately. It was like being in a vat of boiling beans, hot words and cries bubbling up all around me. I was shocked. I had never experienced such a ‘prayer storm’ before.

This was no tranquil, mirror-surfaced pond of contemplation. This was 80 people throwing hot rocks into a seething cauldron.

We did all kinds of prayer conditions, national, local, personal. This often meant we ended up looking for the nearest quiet place to pray, which one sister claimed was usually the dumpster in back of some store. Didn’t matter. We didn’t have to have pretty places to pray.

There was a condition known as Il Jeung, which a prayer from midnight to 4am, every 40 days. When I was state leader of South Carolina, our handful of members would gather. Rather than stay in one place, we went to different holy and unholy places in our city. In Charleston, we prayed at the City Hall, then prayed in a park where men circled around in their cars looking for anonymous sex. Finally we went to the site of the old slave market, marked by a historical plaque.

We were expecting a bitter, miserable atmosphere. To our surprise, when we sang holy songs at the slave market, we felt surrounded by harmonious and grateful spirits. We prayed in a circle there, in the middle of the night, with the feeling of hundreds of years of history around us, while the city slept.

But I think one of my favorite ‘prayer moments’ came when I was in Washington, DC. Late one night I went by myself to the holy ground in Ellipse behind the White House. I found my way to the center, closed my eyes and began to pray. Suddenly a loud voice shouted “Hey! Can I help you?”. There was a homeless guy standing next to his bedroll on the grass. Apparently he thought I was too close to his sleeping spot. But it was his choice of words that got to me. In DC, even this homeless guy used official sounding, supposedly polite phrases. Of course, the way he said it, “Can I help you?” sounded like “What the %\$#@! are you doing here?”. But still.

It made me think of all the variations of “Excuse me, sir...” that I heard while fundraising.

What stands out from all the times you prayed?