



A Call to  
United,  
Extraordinary  
Prayer ...





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A Call to  
United,  
Extraordinary  
Prayer ...

An Humble Attempt to promote  
Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of  
God's People, in Extraordinary Prayer,  
for the Revival of Religion and the  
Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on  
Earth, Pursuant to Scripture Promises and  
Prophecies concerning the Last Time



by  
Jonathan Edwards

**CHRISTIAN HERITAGE**





## Introduction

By David Bryant



For me, it began in January 1981, in bed, with the flu. While recuperating, I dipped into a recently acquired antique book by Jonathan Edwards, published in 1747, on a concept called ‘A Concert of Prayer’. It came with an amazing 145-word title (virtually its table of contents!). Thankfully, it is best known by its first forty-three words: *An Humble Attempt to promote an explicit agreement and visible union of God’s people through the world, in extraordinary prayer, for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom on earth, pursuant to Scripture promises and prophecies concerning the last time.* Over the past 250 years, its short-handle title has narrowed down, mercifully, to: *An Humble Attempt.*



Regardless of the title, its impact on me that cold wintry day, can be stated in just five little words: *It changed my life forever!* Let me tell you a bit of my story. Then, let me tell you the story of Jonathan Edwards and why *An Humble Attempt* could change your life as well.

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Above all, I want you to discover why this eighteenth-century prayer manual could not be more relevant to what God is doing with his people today. Finally, I want to invite you to read it - with prayer - and respond appropriately.

#### **How *An Humble Attempt* Shaped My Life**

First, fast-forward with me almost exactly twenty years later. In early spring 2001, I stood with pastors from all over the northeast United States at the grave of Jonathan Edwards, at the edge of the Princeton University campus (about twenty-five miles from my home), where he served as its second president. Climaxing my last plenary weekend conference on prayer and revival, I walked the entire delegation the five blocks from Miller Auditorium to the graveyard. There in the gathering dusk, we joined hands and prayed that the Spirit would fulfill Edwards' vision for a worldwide Concert of Prayer in our lifetime. We also prayed for the consummation of God's plan for the ages - the hope that drove Edwards to write *An Humble Attempt* in the first place. Finally, in the spirit of Edwards' treatise, we rededicated ourselves to return to our churches and communities to humbly attempt to foster such extraordinary praying among our people.

As I walked to my car that night, I reflected on the journey I've enjoyed those intervening twenty years. So much has happened with me because of the impetus of *An Humble Attempt* starting in 1981.

To begin, there were the previous ten years of ministry that prepared me to hear and heed Edwards' passion. In 1970, for example, I pastored a church through thirty days of intensive nights of prayer over our city, caught up in a violent revolution. Locally, years full of renewal and





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evangelism resulted. In 1975, having moved to the other end of our continent, I found myself in a weekly prayer group through which God launched one of the most significant missionary think tanks of our times. He did it from scratch, because we sought his face. In 1977, I spent a summer with a vibrant south Asian indigenous revival-and-missions organization. I learned from them the possibilities of major spiritual breakthroughs, when God works with poverty-stricken Christians given to unceasing, united prayer and fasting.

By 1980, however, I started grappling with something far less encouraging. As a minister-at-large for the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, I traveled to churches of all denominations, in many nations. To my grief, I found myself consistently uncovering a dangerous level of apathy and presumption towards Christ, marked by a prevalent spirit of prayerlessness on every side. What a contradiction this was to what I had read in graduate studies on the history of spiritual awakenings; or, to the role of corporate prayer I found recorded all through the Scriptures; or to what I had personally witnessed in seasons of united prayer in places like India. Something told me the current Christian movement, especially in the West, was in serious jeopardy unless concerted, kingdom-sized praying became high priority once again.

Enter Jonathan Edwards and his *An Humble Attempt* that January afternoon in 1981. Not only did his theological perspectives undergird my growing convictions, but he also clarified for me how one could think strategically and practically about *mobilizing* united prayer. For any who study my life, two decades worth of fruit from his call for a ‘concert of prayer’ are there for all to see.



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Here are a few examples:

1. Using the term coined in Edwards's day, I immediately began a monthly 'concert of prayer' in my hometown of Madison, the capital city of Wisconsin. The first night six people showed up from three churches. Eventually, twelve years later, we had over thirty churches involved, with literally thousands who had joined in the once a month Concert of Prayer. Leaders have often told me they see this sustained local initiative as the fountainhead of thousands of other Concert of Prayer gatherings taking place all over the world today.



2. In 1984, serving on the program committee for the first-ever International Prayer Assembly For World Evangelization (IPA) (held in Seoul, Korea, and sponsored by the Lausanne Committee and the World Evangelical Fellowship), I introduced other leaders to Edwards' book and theses. As a result, his primary text of Zechariah 8: 20-23 - describing citywide and nationwide united prayer initiatives - became the IPA's theme passage. Furthermore, his vision took shape in our motto: 'Seeking God's Face for A Movement of Prayer for the World'. Happily as well, his unrealized longings for a worldwide prayer movement began to unfold throughout the nations, as nearly three thousand delegates returned to mobilize concerted prayer everywhere. Even as I write this paragraph, I'm headed to South Africa to join a three hundred strong council to plan for a global conference marking the twentieth anniversary of the IPA in 2004. At that time leaders worldwide will gather (probably in Thailand)





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to hear the reports of how Edwards' vision is unfolding at this moment in the greatest international prayer movement in church history.

3. Personally, I sought to implement throughout the 1980s *An Humble Attempt* in ways Edwards may not have envisioned. For example, we rented civic centers and sports stadiums in many cities to gather multitudes of believers for evenings of worship and intercession. We called them 'Concert of Prayer Rallies'. In these unusual convocations, every emphasis of Edwards' forty-three word title found expression across denominations and ethnicities: we enjoyed explicit agreement, visible union, for revival, for advancement, based on kingdom promises and focused on a fresh revelation of the consummate glory of Christ in our generation. I remember one Concert of Prayer Rally where a wealthy businessman rented twenty-five billboards on major highways across his state, to 'advertise' the event and invite everyone to come. Edwards would have rejoiced at such an 'attempt' to 'promote' extraordinary prayer. And I remember over 70,000 students gathered in the Olympic Stadium in Korea in 1975 in a driving rainstorm, huddled under umbrellas for hours in what they called 'A Concert of Prayer'. It was a sight no Puritan in 1747 could have imagined.

4. Working with over 160 leaders in America's National Prayer Committee (which I've chaired since 1995), we began to help churches walk out Edwards' vision back into local congregations. Over the past fifteen years, dozens of interdenominational resources





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(like the *Praying Church Sourcebook*) and networks (like the National Association of Local Church Prayer Leaders) have continued to empower the process. As you'll discover reading it, *An Humble Attempt* was ultimately about prayer at the congregational level - as Edwards might say it today: 'unite globally but pray locally'.

5. Finally, I felt accountable to God to start recording my discoveries gleaned from prayer mobilizers throughout the Body of Christ - insights both theological and practical. But even then I couldn't stray far from Edwards - I titled one of my books: *With Concerts Of Prayer: Christians Unite For Spiritual Awakening And World Evangelization!* It was followed by other works, like *The Prayer Pacesetters Sourcebook: How To Ignite And Sustain Community-Wide Prayer*, that came out of conducting over twenty-five urban prayer consultations in fifteen nations. But through it all, *An Humble Attempt* remained my compass; it hovered in the background.

6. Then, in 1988 I began a ministry called Concerts of Prayer International (COPI). Shortly after, I moved to New York City to base my labors out of the prayer movement there. What I've watched unfold in the Big Apple (first as a department of COPI and then under the leadership of Mac Pier and Concerts Of Prayer Greater New York) is utterly unprecedented. Without a doubt, it is the most significant urban prayer movement anywhere in the world. Edwards would be thrilled at the results. Take, for example, our 'humble attempt' to mobilize a twenty-four hour prayer watch,





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incorporating over one hundred churches from all backgrounds. Praying unitedly over the city for nearly a decade, we call it 'The Lord's Watch'. But, as you're about to discover in reading *An Humble Attempt*, this effort is precisely what Edwards and others meant by a Concert of Prayer. The recent tremendous advances of the gospel in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, are clearly and directly related to the concerted prayers of hundreds of pastors and thousands of believers in New York, not only for our city but for the nations.

7. And I wonder what Edwards would think of *this*? Once a year (since 1993), on the evening of our National Day of Prayer in the States, the 'Nationally Broadcast Concert of Prayer' (from the National Prayer Committee) gathers millions of intercessors into prayer for revival and kingdom advance. For example, last year from Constitution Hall in Washington DC, with uplinks from New York City and elsewhere, a live, three-hour Concert of Prayer was telecast on over seven hundred television outlets, to thousands of church sanctuaries via satellite dishes, and by over one thousand radio stations. Simulcast in Spanish, it also blanketed every nation in the Western Hemisphere and parts of Europe, by TV and radio. Streamed live on the Internet, it was literally available to Christians worldwide. Would Edwards endorse this? As you read *An Humble Attempt*, you'll discover (in the words of Dr. Robert Bakke, producer of the Nationally Broadcast Concert of Prayer, and an historian of prayer movements): 'So taken was Edwards with the vision of a unified Church literally covering the earth





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with harmonized praying that he dedicated much of his energies throughout the last ten years of his life to promoting it.'

#### **The Timing For Edwards' Book Could Not Be Better!**

And the beat goes on. The world's leading Christian demographer, Dr. David Barrett, has concluded from extensive research that worldwide there are nearly 200 million Christians committed to praying every day for the vision *An Humble Attempt* fosters. Of these, at least 20 million believe this is their full-time ministry for Christ, and over 10 million weekly prayer groups meet across the globe to focus on (as Edwards put it) "the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth, pursuant to the scriptural promises and prophecies..."

The 'river of revival' may not be here yet. But there are many 'feeder streams' - of which Edwards could only dream - such as national days of prayer, global prayer networks, prayer walking of neighborhood streets, youth prayer clubs, pastors prayer summits, weekly concerts of prayer in thousands of churches, etc. And talk about amazing 'attempts to *promote*' united prayer today! Think about this: books on prayer have become New York Times bestsellers. Websites on prayer abound (like all of those listed at [www.nationalprayer.org](http://www.nationalprayer.org)). **PRAY!** Magazine (the voice of the National Prayer Committee, from NavPress) has succeeded in circulation where secular periodicals have folded. Also, for the past fifteen years, Christians in America have been united from coast to coast in a daily radio broadcast for revival praying (over three hundred stations) called 'National Concert of Prayer'.

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If (as Edwards believed) all this activity is a gracious gift from God, and if Christ's universal glory is its passion, then surely the river of revival cannot be far behind!

Therefore, this is a perfect time, in the midst of international ferment for prayer, to revisit Jonathan Edwards' wisdom and pragmatism captured so powerfully in *An Humble Attempt*. It is especially auspicious that Christian Focus Publications has reissued it on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

So let me take a moment now to reintroduce you to one of my favorite 'mentors'. Then we'll make a quick survey of the book that changed the course of the church.

### **Meet Jonathan Edwards and His Heart for Prayer**

American church historian Perry Miller proclaimed Edwards to be 'the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene'. Even neo-orthodox scholar, H. Richard Niebuhr, turned to the Puritan giant to help the church understand the true devastation of World War II and how Christians should respond.

Born on October 5, 1703, and graduated at Yale University, from 1726-1750 Edwards served as the pastor of a congregational church in Northhampton, Massachusetts. It was the largest and most influential church outside Boston in all of New England. During his tenure, he had a personal experience with genuine revival on two occasions (for which his predecessors at Northhampton had sought God for decades): (1) on a more local community level from 1734-35, and then (2) in the First Great Awakening in the colonies, especially during the early 1740s. All of this laid the groundwork for *An Humble Attempt*.

In fact, on the eve of the Great Awakening, he wrote



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a seminal theological discourse, based on a sermon series, called *A History of Redemption*. In it he traced the evidence from Scripture and church history for how times of extraordinary prayer are linked with advances in Christ's kingdom and the work of redemption. Gradually, this vision became a consuming passion of his final years of ministry.

In truth, *An Humble Attempt* was composed because, after two remarkable movements of God in revival, Edwards sensed the spiritual momentum was waning. The saints needed to urgently re-engage prayer. In fact, he already suspected that the next wave of awakening would not surface until a new generation of leadership was in place, most likely years after his call for a Concert of Prayer. Unfortunately, he was not far off the mark. *An Humble Attempt* did not catch on (except in a few places, like Princeton in 1757) until the latter part of the 1700s, when it became fuel for the Second and Third Great Awakenings. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

*An Humble Attempt* had a practical mission. It was Edwards' response to a document from Scottish pastors called a *Memorial*. Here's the story. Rising out of scores of prayer societies already functioning in Scotland around 1740, especially among young people, by 1744 a committee of ministers determined it was time to do more. They decided to try a two-year 'experiment', uniting all prayer groups and praying Christians in their nation into a common prayer strategy. They called for focused revival prayer on every Saturday evening and Sunday morning, as well as on the first Tuesday of each quarter. By 1746 they were so gratified by the impact of their experiment that they composed a call to prayer to





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the church worldwide, especially in the colonies (*Memorial*). However, this time the ‘concert of prayer’ was to be for *seven* years!

Five hundred copies of *Memorial* were sent to Boston for distribution. One fell in Edwards’ hands. He was initially attracted to it, he says, because it was anonymous – none of the ministers were trying to promote themselves in the effort. He was also taken with their methodology, with its potential for mobilization, and its inherent value for holding Christians accountable to the work of prayer. He mentions all of this in the opening pages of *An Humble Attempt*.

But Edwards also felt he could assist the initiative by providing additional theological foundations for the *Memorial’s* vision, and by answering a variety of objections he was sure it would face. No one else was better qualified to do so. Let me give you a quick overview of his treatise, before you begin to digest it for yourself.

### **What Was Edwards Trying to Say?**

In 1712 British Christians called for intensified prayer for a Protestant, not Catholic, king to succeed Queen Anne. Their foundational text was Zechariah 8:20-22. Edwards returned to that passage (it’s written out at the top of page 35) to anchor his endorsement of a Concert of Prayer. And for good reason. It underscored as well as any other text the attitude, agenda, impact, and ignition of any prayer movement. Despite where one might place the passage on an eschatological timetable, *in principle* it describes exactly what Edwards knew it would take to sustain and quicken the fruits of the Great Awakening.

Clearly over the past 250 years, the church has experienced ‘intermediate fulfillments’ of Zechariah 8



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just as Edwards predicted we would, when he writes on page 47:

There shall be given much of a spirit of prayer to God's people, in many places, disposing them to come into an express agreement, unitedly to pray to God in an extraordinary manner, that he would appear for the help of his church, and in mercy to mankind, and pour out his Spirit, revive his work, and advance his spiritual kingdom in the world, as he has promised.

This disposition to prayer, and union in it, will gradually spread more and more, and increase to greater degrees; with which at length will gradually be introduced a revival of religion and disposition to greater engagedness in the worship and service of God, amongst his professing people.... In this manner religion shall be propagated, till the awakening reaches those that are in the highest stations, and till whole nations be awakened.

Towards this vision, *An Humble Attempt* breaks into four major sections:

Part I - Response to the *Memorial* itself

Part II - Discussion of promises for latter-day glory

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Part III - Review of motives for united prayer

Part IV - Answering objections to the call to prayer

Of all the contributions that the book makes to individual and corporate prayer life, nothing can surpass how Edwards built his strongest case based on the *hope* one is praying *towards*. He knew this to be the key for igniting and sustaining the work of prayer.

Without necessarily agreeing with his 'post-millennial' eschatology, one cannot ignore his apologetic that 'it is natural and reasonable to suppose, that the whole world should finally be given to Christ as one whose right it is to reign'. Thus Christians must not permit themselves, pleads Edwards, to ever pray for less than this as the goal of all intercession, and of every single prayer. In fact, if we forego millennial discussions altogether for the moment, and simply concentrate on what might better be termed the *Consummation*, can any of us fail to embrace Edwards' appeal when he writes:



Such being the state of things in this future promised glorious day of the church's prosperity, surely it is worth *praying* for. Nor is there any one thing whatsoever, if we view things aright, for which a regard to the glory of God, a concern for the kingdom and honour of our Redeemer, a love to his people, a pity to perishing sinners ... would dispose us to be so much in prayer, as for the dawning of this happy day, and the accomplishment of this glorious event?

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With such a comprehensive vision, Edwards argued that prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, with all the ramifications biblical promises suggest, was by far the highest prayer agenda Christians could wage in this present age. In that direction, he urged, lies every reason to expect great success in any Concert of Prayer. As he concludes at one point: 'For, undoubtedly, that which God abundantly makes the subject of his *promises*, God's people should abundantly make the subject of their *prayers*. It also affords them the strongest assurances that their prayers shall be *successful*' (italics his).

Among the *motives* for concerted prayer, Edwards reasoned quite clearly that *unity* in prayer is both God's means to the Consummation, as well as an end in itself. In other words, although praying unitedly furthers Christ's reign, it also forges the very result for which God calls us to be *joined* in prayer - to foster the visible unity that can convince the world Christ is who he says he is.

To that end, Edwards was open to all theological camps to come together - even those who opposed the Great Awakening - as long as their shared passion was for the advancement of Christ's kingdom through all of Christ's church in answer to our united prayers.

Interestingly, many of the *objections* Edwards anticipated I have watched surface repeatedly in modern prayer movements. That's why his responses are so relevant for us. For example, he confronted charges that the Concert of Prayer was merely a form of superstition; or that it was an encouragement to pharisaicalism; or that it misrepresented God's timing, making the effort premature and unnecessary; or simply that it revealed the predisposition of some towards novel, and dangerous, ideas that had no basis in how God normally works. In





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addition, there were extended sections where Edwards tried to answer various eschatological controversies of his day, that he believed had the potential of derailing the movement. Bottom line: *An Humble Attempt* warns us that mobilizing Christ-exalting prayer will come at a price.

### **Were Edwards' Labors in Vain?**

As I said earlier, *An Humble Attempt* met with meager success in Edwards' lifetime. Three years after he wrote it, he was dismissed from his church (over debates about administering the Lord's Supper) and sent to a little congregation in Stockbridge, on the colonial frontier.

Seven years later, trustees at Princeton University prevailed on him to take over its presidency, where he died five weeks after coming into office (due to complications from an experimental smallpox vaccination, taken to help scientists test it for use with the larger population). Interestingly, in that same year (1757) a Concert of Prayer was raised up by Princeton students, and resurfaced repeatedly the next one hundred years on that campus, resulting in multiple student awakenings.

However, it wasn't until it was republished in England in 1789, that Edwards' 'attempt' began to bear real fruit. Embraced by the fledgling prayer movement across the land, and adopted and promoted by William Carey and his little prayer band, it eventually became a major manifesto for the Second Great Awakening. Space does not allow a thorough report on how *An Humble Attempt* was reissued in subsequent generations, and the impact it had on other awakenings (including the Third, beginning around 1857 - exactly one hundred years after Edwards's death).





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This happened not only on the home fronts, however, but throughout many mission fields. For example, in 1897 upon returning from a nine month trip to visit chapters of the Student Volunteer Movement For Foreign Missions in nearly forty nations, the general director, John R. Mott, made a curious notation in his journal. He wrote that the vitality of each chapter could only be explained 'by the Concert of Prayer going on in each one'. From that prayer movement alone came nearly 20,000 missionary recruits, with another 70,000 in the Laymen's Missionary Society to send them. Edwards' vision was at the core of the focus, the commitment, the sacrifice, the harvest, and the intercession behind it all.

So how did Edwards handle heaven's delays in his lifetime? When Edwards' initial 'attempt' seemed to stall, would he have been discouraged? As the years passed without another glorious visitation of Christ upon his church, would he have despaired over unanswered prayer? Seeing so little visible unity, or extraordinary praying, or passion for the Consummation, would he have been embittered in his last years? Not if he heeded his own concluding words in *An Humble Attempt*. All of us would do well to listen to this man 'abounding in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:13). Reflecting, in his final paragraph, on what should happen if, at the close of the seven year experiment, there would still be little change, he admonishes:

But let it be considered whether it will not be a poor business, if our faith and patience is so short-winded that we cannot be willing to wait upon God for seven years, in a way of taking this little





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pains, in seeking a mercy so infinitely vast. For my part, I sincerely wish and hope *that there may not be an end of extraordinary united prayer*, among God's people, for the effusions of the blessed Spirit ... and that extraordinary united prayer for such a mercy will be *further propagated and extended ...* God has not said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain ... But whatever our hopes may be in this respect, we must be content to be ignorant of the *times and seasons*, which the Father hath put in his power; and must be willing that God should answer prayer, and fulfil his own glorious promises, *in his own time* (italics his).



### **So, What Do I Take Away With Me from *An Humble Attempt*?**

Beginning that January afternoon in 1981, *An Humble Attempt* has impacted my thinking on prayer, and especially concerted prayer, over and over. What Edwards has shown me I've never regretted learning, constantly applying it everywhere I go. Here are six lessons to get you started:

1. Prayer is *co-working* with God - he has ordained the end and also the means of prayer towards that end. It is proactive. It allows us to participate directly in God's plan for the ages. It can even become (as Dr. David Wells defines it) 'rebellion against the status quo'.





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2. The biblical emphasis on prayer is primarily *corporate* in nature. As I've documented elsewhere, about 90 per cent of what Scripture teaches on prayer comes down where Edwards came down – it's about concerted prayer.

3. Praying together increases *awareness* of, and heart *commitment* to, the purposes and mission and ultimate victories of Christ, the way little else can. It is a great way for God to recruit laborers, too.

4. There is value in *appealing* for prayer and in *promoting* prayer, as long as it is done in a humility that says: 'I need you to come with me, because I cannot do this alone. Also, I need the answers as much as anyone else who prays with me.' Prayer mobilization is a very Christ-honoring work.

5. The single greatest secret for igniting and sustaining individual and corporate prayer is to help Christians get clear on the *hope* we're praying towards. And we must be sure that that hope is somehow directly tied into the overarching prospects of the Consummation itself.

6. To increase awareness of and desire for prayer, far more important than our teaching on prayer is our teaching about *Christ*. Prayerfulness is the natural response of a heart that is fully caught up in all Christ is to us and for us, over us and within us, through us and before us and upon us. Christ defines our agenda in prayer. Christ opens up the door to heaven to present our prayers. Christ gives us unity in himself even as we pray. Christ is the ultimate answer to all our prayers. In other words, prayer and the supremacy of Christ must forever walk together.





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I don't enjoy the flu. But that was a time, twenty years ago, when being sick was truly a blessing! Now, without the flu (I hope!), it's your turn to encounter the life-changing vision of *An Humble Attempt*.

DAVID BRYANT

*Chairman, America's National Prayer Committee*

*March 2003*

