This chapter will propose a focus for a sociology of prayer, which has been relatively little studied and whose further exploration could yield valuable theoretical and practical benefits. I propose that a sociology of prayer could study the prayer forms engaged in by groups, not by individuals. By a “group,” I mean the standard sociological definition of a collection of at least four or five persons who interact on a relatively regular basis and who see themselves as belonging together in some way. Such a group is not the same as a “category” (e.g. women, African Americans, the middle class) who share a common characteristic but do not all pray together. Examples of praying groups might include a church congregation, a Pentecostal prayer meeting, pilgrims traveling together to a specific holy place, or a spiritual self-help group. It might also include what sociologists call an “aggregation” – a temporary collection of hitherto unconnected individuals attending a large religious gathering such as a Promise Keepers rally or a World Youth Day – at least during the time that they are praying together at the event.

I believe that one could construct a sociology of prayer that compares the varied prayer forms and activities engaged in by different types of group, and studies the effects that these variations have on the life and functioning of the group. Note that this is not the same as studying the effects which such prayer activities might have on the individual in a group, a topic which has already been addressed, to some extent, by psychologists and social psychologists. Nor am I interested in reviewing the multitude of studies for which frequency of personal prayer is merely one of several independent variables possibly impacting a given dependent variable. Finally, I will not discuss the large existing literature on whether different age, ethnic, or social class categories of individuals are more or less likely to engage in a given type of prayer. Instead, I hope to review systematically the relatively small body of research that describes and

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1 Simmel (2009:53ff.) points out that there are special dynamics that apply to dyads and triads. Therefore, it would follow that a group should be larger than two or three persons.
classifies types of group prayer and maps the different kinds of praying groups which engage in each type, in order to explore the results that a given form of group prayer may or may not have for those groups which engage in them. To structure and inform my review, I will use as a model the already existing, relatively large, body of psychological literature on individual prayer.

A Conceptual Road Map: Studies on the Psychology of Prayer

In 1991, Margaret Poloma and George H. Gallup Jr. published Varieties of Prayer: A Survey Report (Poloma and Gallup 1991). In their introduction, they noted that, prior to 1985, only sixteen researchers had ever attempted to analyze prayer. Most of these had conducted psychological and medical studies on the development of prayer concepts in children, on individual motivations for prayer, or on the mental and physical benefits which individuals experienced from their prayers. Although Poloma and Gallup were both sociologists, their own research, too, described almost exclusively the practices, motivations, and experienced results of individual, private prayer. In their chapter on “Prayer and Forgiveness,” for example, they cited only psychological writers on this topic. Their summary path diagram for the variables impacting forgiveness includes five different dimensions of individual spiritual practices, but only a single, unidimensional, “Public Religion” variable at the group level (Poloma and Gallup 1991:103).

Research on Types of Individual Prayer

In the years since Poloma’s and Gallup’s report, numerous psychological studies have appeared to remedy the lacuna they had observed. Most of these studies, however, continued to focus on individual prayer, exploring and expanding on the richness of that concept. Competing typologies were advanced for the types of individual prayer and how to measure them, and comparative research has since weighed the relative

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2 All 56 references in this chapter are to psychological articles.
3 See, for example, Francis and Evans (1995) and Francis and Astley (1996) for review of this literature.
5 See, for example, Dein and Littlewood (2005).