

Praying for a baby

Women pool their power and seek divine intervention

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For nearly two years, she prayed for a baby, but that was nothing compared with the length of time other women in the room had spent longing for one.

Jan Studdard of Atlanta knew that, and it made her feel good — good the way you feel when everybody else feels the same way, when misery should have packed to leave long ago.

Studdard knew the women's pain. They knew hers.

About 6 million women, doctors estimate, can't conceive after more than a year of trying. That's one in six couples who are affected by infertility, said Dr. Mark Perloe, medical director of Georgia Reproductive Specialists in Atlanta.

Besides Studdard, about 10 others had come for prayer one October night. All of them — Catholic, Jewish, Baptist — had the same request: a child.

Some had received their wish. Studdard hoped she would be next.

While there are no definitive studies on the effect of prayer, doctors say people gathering under a common belief and hope, caring and supporting one another, is very powerful in ways that we don't fully understand.

"I could very much imagine that women who are trying to get pregnant,

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IF YOU WANT TO GO

The prayer group meets at 6:30 p.m. the first Tuesday of each month at Peachtree Presbyterian Church, 3434 Roswell Road, Atlanta. A second prayer group has formed in Douglasville and more are being planned. Contact Karen Cross at 770-949-6032 or kcrossm@yahoo.com.



CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / Staff

At Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, **Karen Cross**, a minister, prays with women who have had fertility problems. She puts her hands on **Allison Betzer's** stomach after anointing her with oil. Betzer is pregnant and has learned her baby has a heart defect. Next to Betzer is **Jan Studdard**, who has now conceived.



KIRSTEN LUCE / Special

Jan Studdard (left) and obstetrician Samantha Anderson-Fowler look at ultrasound pictures.

Baby: Women tap the power of prayer

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praying for one another, that that would have results," said Dr. Harold G. Koenig, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University Medical Center.

In search of support

Lisa Graham, a 39-year-old former schoolteacher from Atlanta, started the gatherings in 2003 after two failed pregnancies and five years of trying.

She had joined a national support group. Talking about her anguish helped. She made a lot of friends, but Graham said of the experience, "It lacked God." She was giving up. She didn't laugh like she once did. She and her husband, Alan, were considering adoption.

"I just wasn't a happy person anymore," she recalled. "I knew I wanted to be a parent, but I was at the end of my rope."

One night, over dinner, a friend suggested Graham start a prayer group.

It was January 2003. Graham sent an e-mail to everyone she knew trying to have a baby. She invited them to her home to pray. She told them to invite the people they knew.

Then she called Karen Cross, the woman she'd heard about, the one who'd made it her life ministry to pray for women wanting to conceive.

"I really want to have a baby," she told Cross. "Can you pray for me?"

Graham's request was "like waving a red flag in front of a bull," Cross recalled later.

She invited Graham and her husband to her home in Douglasville for prayer. Graham told her about the prayer group she was forming.

"Would you come?" Graham asked Cross.

"I got so excited," Cross recalled. "My spirit was jumping."

Late in January, seven women gathered at the Gramhams' home. They shared their stories, their struggle to conceive, the miscarriages. They cried.

Cross, a licensed minister and member of the non-denominational the Church at Mirror Lake in Villa Rica, told them that if it was in their hearts to conceive, God put it there. She told them that his timetable is different from theirs; that even though it looked like nothing was happening, God was working in the background.

The three hours together felt like 30 minutes.

"I was happier than I had been in years," Lisa Graham said. "She gave me God's word to stand on."

Graham resumed fertility treatments, which include injections, and the group continued to pray.

On March 12, 2003, Alan arrived at Lisa's job with news from her doctor's office. The unexpected visit scared her.

"You're pregnant," he said.

It was a great moment, but naturally Graham was reserved. She wouldn't relax until she could hear her child's heartbeat.

On Nov. 17, 2003, their prayers were answered. Graham's daughter arrived — one day early but not a moment too soon.

"It was wonderful," Graham recalled. "I could feel the presence of God in the room."

Since their first meeting,

the number of women seeking help has grown to as many as 30 each month. About half of those meet for dinner each month. They stay in touch via e-mail. Sometimes they ask for prayer for themselves, sometimes for family members. Other times, they simply give thanks for the support, God's gift until they conceive.

To date, more than 20 women have conceived. Six, including Studdard, have gotten pregnant without medical assistance. A few have adopted, said Graham.

Early last year, a group crowded into the family room of Tara Spolan in Tucker. Their backgrounds were varied. Some are Christian, some Jewish, a few agnostic.

Desperate, they will try almost anything — even praying to an unknown God — to conceive.

One by one, they speak. Tara, whose husband is Jewish, is pregnant with the son she longed for, and the couple has chosen a Hebrew name, Benjamin.

"Everything is great," she says, gently rubbing her belly. "My praise is for this group always."

Studdard reports that her intrauterine insemination failed. "It just wasn't time," she said. "We're going on vacation next week. It's going to be in the snow," she added, laughing. "Maybe we'll get snowed in."

"I never know where to start," says Jordana Heaven. "I've had five IVF [in vitro fertilization] cycles between June and February. The doctor told me that I should think about moving on, to consider an egg donor, but I don't want to give up."

"I know you will be a mom," another woman stops her. "Just don't give up. I had a baby last year. It took seven years. I nearly changed my name to Job."

Since 2000, researchers have conducted at least 10 studies of the effect of intercessory prayer. One highly publicized study, published in 2001 in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, found that women undergoing fertility treatment who had been prayed for by Christian groups were twice as likely to have a successful pregnancy as those who had not. However, the credentials of the authors have been discounted and the results largely discredited.

The lack of research, though, doesn't mean it doesn't work, reproductive specialist Perloe said.

"It may be that the right studies haven't been done," he said, "or that this is an issue that isn't amenable to quantitative research."

Perloe and Koenig agree there are many benefits to prayer that may not be directly related to that for which one is praying.

In Cross' group, to avoid offending those who don't believe in a deity, Cross has recently avoided praying "in the name of Jesus."

But after a rough few months in which there were several miscarriages and failed treatments, she believes it was a mistake.

"We're not trying to convert anybody," she tells them, "but we believe when Jesus said he'll do something, he'll do it."

She quotes Psalm 37:4: Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart; and Psalms 113:9,

he makes barren women joyful with children.

She distributes a list of these and other Scripture and begins prayer.

"Make alive the things that are dead. Create new eggs in the name of Jesus. We receive our babies by faith ... in the name of Jesus."

Cross, 48, has been praying for women to conceive since 1987.

It started because she wanted a child and her husband didn't. Cross believed in the concept of sowing and reaping, and that if she denied herself and prayed for other women, she'd reap the benefit.

"Every woman I saw in the mall, the grocery store, I began to pray for them," she recalled. "For a healthy baby, a good pregnancy."

Then one night her husband suggested they not use birth control.

"I knew that night in my heart, I had conceived," Cross said.

Even after her son was born in 1989, Cross continued to pray for women. Word of her ministry spread, and she received requests from all over the country.

"I don't go pushing this on anybody," she said. "When they call me, I know that they are ready to receive God's miracle."

The medical route

When the time came that first night for Studdard to share her story, frustration spilled forth. Studdard cried. The others offered names of specialists and hope.

She made an appointment with Dr. Dorothy Mitchell-Leef and underwent a battery of tests at the offices of Reproductive Biology Associates to determine the cause of her infertility. Everything — blocked tubes, hormonal problems, disease, physical abnormalities — was ruled out. Mitchell-Leef suggested beefing up her egg production and prescribed Clomid, a popular fertility drug.

In subsequent visits, doctors did an intrauterine insemination in the office. It failed. They tried a second time. It failed. Twice more, and they both failed. Because Studdard had a cyst, the fifth and final round was canceled.

In July 2005, on a day nearly two years since her first prayer meeting, Studdard began to feel strange, like she was doing something she shouldn't. It was the first time she'd felt like crying in a long while.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she asked herself. She'd grown up in a God-centered home. Her parents taught her to pray about everything.

The prayer group had guided her back there. She prayed constantly.

"Driving, I'm praying," she said. "Typing e-mails, I'm praying."

Studdard remembered what Cross always told them. "It's not our timing. God has a plan."

"Once I realized that, that's when that calm started setting in," she said. "I just let it go. I felt like I could walk on clouds. It was amazing."

Several weeks later, she noticed she was ovulating.

"You have to be home early the next three days," she told her husband. Weeks later, a home pregnancy kit tested positive.

"It was surreal," she remembered. "We were both dumbfounded."

The studies about the power of prayer might be inconclusive, but the results at the Studdard household are clear.

"God had answered our prayer," she said "Brian and I were pregnant."

The baby is due May 13.