Hundreds of Clergy Pray Together Regularly for L.A., Their Churches

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VAN NUYS —

A little-known movement of hundreds of evangelical ministers in the Los Angeles area meets four times a year to pray for one another, their churches and a city notorious for an overabundance of natural disasters and urban crises.

The Love L.A. clergy coalition was started in 1989 by a Hollywood pastor who is now the U.S. Senate chaplain and by the high-profile pastor of a Van Nuys church. About 900 ministers are regulars, attending at least two or three gatherings a year that now routinely cut across racial, ethnic and denominational lines.

As 340 clergy met Thursday morning—aptly on the National Day of Prayer—two Love L.A. leaders answered the question of what good such sessions do when the city has been hit with a riot, earthquake, brush fires and gang warfare in the 1990s. Their reply: Imagine how much worse it might have been if not for the group’s prayers.

“God is a God of mercy, but there are also times of justice when God can bring down a city,” Bishop Charles Blake, senior pastor of the 15,000-member West Angeles Church of God in Christ, told the Love L.A. meeting this week at the Church on the Way.

“Some say if God doesn’t bring down Los Angeles, then he will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah,” added Blake, referring to the cities the Bible says were destroyed because of their sinful residents. “God does what he wants to,” he said, but people can know only that “L.A. is permitted to go on.”
In interviews, Blake and the Rev. Jack Hayford, who co-founded Love L.A. with Senate Chaplain Lloyd Ogilvie, said they believe that Los Angeles’ tribulations were alleviated by the prayers of pastors and their relief and reconciliation network.

Hayford said he realizes that many people naively look to prayer as a way to “wave a wand” to effect change.

“People want the Red Sea to open,” he said, but the true sign of divine intervention may be the relationships formed in the group that affect “the climate of the city.”

Blake said one major benefit of the fellowship “is that we don’t have to get acquainted and try to come together during a crisis.”

When the 1992 riots struck African American and Korean American sections of Los Angeles, Blake--whose church is predominantly black--said that “Jack Hayford’s church was able to call me and pump resources into the community, and other inner-city churches also benefited from churches outside the area.”

Likewise, the Love L.A. ties facilitated quick relief efforts after the 1994 earthquake, Hayford said, including donations of food, clothing and cash to stricken church members.

Hints of a miraculous response to the group’s prayers may have been seen in 1993, Hayford said, when a group of four trapped firemen survived that year’s brush fires. Hayford said he was told by one participant at a firefighters’ prayer breakfast on Wednesday, “I know that it was more than human protection.”

Even the fact that Love L.A. has thrived over eight years is unusual, suggested Blake.
“Our geography and the weight of our local church responsibilities tend to keep us separate,” Blake said. “And we normally associate with people of our own race, but this organization has been very effective in getting us to break out of our shells.”

Hollywood Presbyterian Church has been the most frequent meeting site, especially when co-founder Ogilvie was the pastor there. But the ministers have also met at Crenshaw Christian Center’s huge FaithDome, Young Nak Presbyterian Church near Chinatown and other churches.

At Thursday’s meeting, the Rev. Harold Helms of Angelus Temple in Echo Park and the Rev. Michael Wenning of Bel Air Presbyterian Church also led portions of the 2 1/2-hour prayer meeting. They addressed the worries of pastors trying to deal with problems in their own churches’ lives--another feature of the Love L.A. coalition.