

LET US PRAY

A session for those working with children in the parish context, looking at creative and participatory ways of praying with children

AIMS

- to formulate some principles of good practice in prayer for all ages
- to relate some established forms of spirituality to children's prayer
- to explore some children's prayer activities
- to share experiences of successful prayer activities for children

INTRODUCTION

PATTERNS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Children are a gift to the Church. The Lord of the Church sets them in the midst of the Church today, as in Galilee, not as objects of benevolence, nor even as recipients of instruction, but in the last analysis as patterns of discipleship.

(John Pridmore in 'The Child in the Church' BCC 1976 –
quoted in the introduction to 'Sharing the Good News with Children:
The Church of England's Children's Strategy', General Synod 2003)

This quotation presents us with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to try and envision what a church would look like that seriously sought out and responded to 'patterns of discipleship' in its children. The opportunity is to make the church a better place for all its members by making it a better place for children. So often if we succeed in making the experiences of being a church member relevant and accessible to children we can find that we reach a deep bedrock of meaning which enriches the experience of God's children of all ages gathered in his Church. We should not be 'dumbing down' to reach children, but *diving* down to the depths of our faith. The poet Charles Causley once said that a good poet expresses complex things simply whilst a poor one takes simple things and makes them sound complicated. In ancient times the poet and the priest were one and the same, and Causley's comment about poets could equally be applied to 'the priesthood of all believers' which is the Church: how often do we express things in such complex ways that even the adults struggle to chew out the spiritual nourishment that lies inside; and how often, having done so, do the adults ask themselves if the result was worth the effort?

In the spirit of seeking 'patterns of discipleship' from our children, I'd like to begin our consideration of 'how to pray with children' by asking what children themselves can teach us about the matter. Some years ago I read a description of a child's response to God and his creation which has stayed with me, and I have used it on a number of occasions. It goes like this: a mother is watching through the window as her young child plays in the garden; suddenly the mother sees the child take hold of one of her prize tulips and races out, assuming the child is about to rip it to pieces; however, the mother pulls up short on seeing that the child is engrossed by the huge flower and is handling it very gently; the mother has the presence of mind not to disturb the scene and is rewarded by hearing her child say, 'Well done God!'

- What are the defining characteristics of that scene?
- If we accept that the child was praying, what do the characteristics of the scene tell us about how children naturally pray?
- What stories do you have to tell which give insights into how children pray?

TEACH US TO PRAY

The first disciples very sensibly asked Jesus for advice on how to pray. We, too, might benefit from considering the words and practice of Jesus, together with other scriptural material when asking how the children of God might pray to their Father. Here are some passages to think about (NRSV unless otherwise stated).

After saying farewell to (the crowd, Jesus) went up on the mountain to pray.

(Mark 6:46)

David danced before the Lord with all his might ... David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and the sound of the trumpet ... Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.

(2 Samuel 6:14-16)

When the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things (Jesus) did and the children shouting in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant. 'Do you hear what these children are saying?' they asked him. 'Yes replied Jesus, have you never read, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise?"'

(Matthew 21:15 & 16 [NIV] – Jesus is quoting Psalm 8:2)

(The whole congregation of Israel) shall eat (lamb) roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread.

(Exodus 12:8, 14 & 15)

While they were eating, (Jesus) took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many... When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

(Mark 14:22-24 & 26)

The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

(Jonah 3:5 & 6)

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

(Matthew 6:7-8)

Praise (the Lord) with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

(Psalm 150:3-6)

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you should care for them?

(Ps 8:3 & 4)

Going a little farther, (Jesus) threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'

(Matthew 26:39)

- Can you think of any other passages of scripture which might broaden our understanding of how to pray?
- Have you experienced any creative forms of prayer which reflect insights from the passages above, or other passages of scripture?
- Do any of the passages suggest a prayer activity to you?

HOW IS IT FOR YOU?

Having considered what children and scripture can teach us, it is time to look to our own experiences. Has your practice of praying changed over time? Have some guiding principles emerged for you over the years? Have you been surprised into prayer by any experiences and activities? The following are some quotations and stories which might help you reflect on different practices in prayer.

Pray as you can, not as you can't

(from 'Spiritual Letters' by Abbot John Chapman)

You need not cry very loud: he is nearer to us than you think.

(Brother Lawrence)

An old priest, coming to the end of his life was asked for advice on helpful prayers. The enquirer had pen and paper ready to take down a list of recommendations, but the list was very short. 'As I've got older,' the priest said, 'I've found that I've needed less and less in the way of prayers. Now, I find that The Lord's Prayer is all that I need.'

(recollected from the introduction to an old book on The Lord's Prayer)

(Dora) had never in fact been able to distinguish religion from superstition, and had given up her own practice of it when she discovered that she could say the Lord's Prayer quickly but not slowly.

(from 'The Bell' by Iris Murdoch)

If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer At first we communicate with God through words which may be dispensed with later on The silent prayer which has moved beyond words must always spring from everyday life, for everyday life is the raw material of prayer.

(from 'Prayers of Life' by Michel Quoist)

An old man was a regular attender at church. He didn't come to the Sunday services, but during the week he often came to sit in silence in the pews. One day, the priest decided to talk to him and asked what he did as he sat in church. The man said he just stayed silent. The priest asked what happened in the silence. The man replied, 'I listen to God, and God listens to me.'

(recollected anecdote)

Prayer is a constant inner music which is playing within us and within the created order. We need to rediscover this music. There is within each one of us a space where this music can be heard, a silence within which it is played.'

(Melvyn Matthews, in 'Advent and Christmas')

The most beautiful sound I ever heard – 'Maria'. 'Maria' – say it loud and there's music playing. Say it soft and it's almost like praying. 'Maria' – I'll never stop saying 'Maria'.

(Stephen Sondheim in 'West Side Story')

Also in the revelation (our good Lord) showed a little thing, the size of a hazel nut in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: 'What can this be?' And it was generally answered thus: 'It is all that is made.'

(from 'The Revelations of Divine Love' by Mother Julian of Norwich)

- Which of these passages speaks most clearly to your own experience at the present time?
- Do you have any anecdotes or quotations which express your own insights and experiences into the nature of prayer?

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Is it possible from all the foregoing material and considerations to put together some guiding principles for 'good practice' in prayer that apply across all ages? If so, how far is this good practice to be found in your own experience of prayer in the church? How far is it to be found in our prayer with children in a church setting? If we can encourage this good practice with children and when children and adults worship together, might it improve the prayer life of the whole church community?

ACTIVITIES

A NEW LOOK AT THE OLD

Sometimes we can feel that we are being asked to go in completely new directions when we are asked to reassess our practices in the Church. But often we can find that what is being suggested is just a new look at a practice that is centuries old. We have already seen that dancing was one way that King David expressed his response to God and so we could perhaps see the use of our bodies in worship as following in a 'Davidic' tradition of spirituality. Other Christian traditions of spirituality are: Benedictine which centres on the Office of the Church as a unifying feature of our faith community; Franciscan, which draws on the natural world; Ignatian, which makes use of the imagination; and Celtic, which is inspired by everyday life. Can we see any connections between the principles of good practice identified above and these spiritual traditions?

DAVIDIC SPIRITUALITY

THE SENSES

(NB – there may be a need to watch out for allergies in some activities involving the senses)

- **Touch** – use a cross shape made out of sandpaper to 'feel' the harshness of the crucifixion, perhaps during the relevant part of the eucharistic prayer. A wooden 'holding cross' can be held during intercessions to give a contrasting sense of the comfort of something to 'hang on to'.
- **Sight** – for some, a lot of things to look at can be a distraction, but for others visual stimulus is a way in to prayer. Can we make more use of colour, symbol and movement in our prayer? A small booklet of coloured paper could be given out and children asked to choose a colour which best expresses their mood today, or the mood of the particular part of the service, or the bible reading.
- **Taste** – for those who receive communion, taste is a regular part of their worship. Can we use taste elsewhere? The contrast between bitter and sweet is basic to our sense of taste. Children could dip a bread stick into some lemon juice to 'taste' the bitterness of sin, and into honey to 'taste' the sweetness of God's forgiveness.
- **Smell** – incense is an ancient adjunct to worship, but can we draw attention to the fragrance of flowers in church or use perfume, or maybe herbs in oil to anoint?

- **Hearing** – children will hear a lot of words and music in church; they may hear a sanctus bell; but can we also make use of the sounds of the natural world? A sound effects CD, or recordings you or the children themselves have made of natural sounds or even traffic or the playground can help bring the world into the church for our prayers.

BREATHING

The regular rhythm of breathing is one of the rhythms of life itself in our bodies and has been used throughout the centuries by many faiths and traditions as an aid to meditation. Children can imagine taking in the positives of our faith such as God's love and forgiveness or the Holy Spirit as they breathe in, and letting out the negatives in their lives – actions or feelings – as they breathe out.

TENSION AND RELAXATION

Again these contrasts in muscle state are used in many contexts. In worship they can be a way of thinking about the way we cling on to the things that keep us from God, and the relief of letting these things go. In a Kyrie confession children could grip their hands tight whilst saying 'We have not loved you with our whole heart' then open and relax their hands when saying 'Lord have mercy' and finally turn their hands over, palm up, to receive the absolution.

GESTURE AND POSTURE

Turning the hands over is a small gesture. We can develop a vocabulary of gesture and posture to enable us to pray with our bodies. We already have the rudiments in putting our hands together (or opening them wide) to pray, and kneeling (or prostrating). The beauty of signed prayers can give us the inspiration for a physical vocabulary. Try taking a well known prayer such as the Lord's Prayer and asking the children to think of a gesture that expresses their understanding of each idea (not necessarily each word) in the prayer.

DANCE

Liturgical dance has added visual stimulus to worship, but for those dancing it gives them – as with King David – a way of responding to God with the whole of their being. Composing the dance can in itself be a deeply meaningful experience for the children, not to mention the choice and/or performance of music or rhythmical accompaniment.

INDIVIDUALITY

'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps 139:14). Our bodies are a reminder of the individuality which is ours and is precious to God. A prayer of thanksgiving for ourselves, or the dedication of our individual gifts to God's service can be enhanced by looking at our hands, or our reflection in a mirror, or a drawing someone has done of us.

Fingerprints are a universally acknowledged indicator of our individuality – by leaving their fingerprint on a picture or poster, a child can show that they are making that situation their personal concern in prayer.

PILGRIMAGE

We can make our church buildings places of little pilgrimage if we move around them during our worship. We can gather at each point of the compass to pray for the whole world – North, South, East and West. We can gather round the font when considering the work of the Holy Spirit, or praying for the Christian community. Prayer stations can be set up in different locations and a part of a service taken up with visiting these for prayer and reflection. The use of labyrinths as a way of taking a walk of pilgrimage within a confined space is another ancient tradition has been revived in recent times.

SYMBOLIC ACTIONS

Our gestures and movement can be highly symbolic. We can combine this with the use of physical objects to extend the range of symbolic actions. Scattering and gathering are rich symbolic acts – scattered pebbles can be scooped together, or gathered pebbles scattered; broken pieces can be glued together or scattered bricks built into a structure. The washing of feet is a symbolic act that goes back to Jesus and is often re-enacted on Maundy Thursday – can it have a role at other times of the year? Pilate ‘washed his hands of the whole affair’ – can the children use washing their hands as a more positive symbolic act – an ‘ablution’ for the ‘priesthood of all believers’? The children can also select physical objects that are representative of themselves, or some concern of theirs and use these in symbolic acts such as taking them to offer at the altar and receiving them back transformed by the act of having been laid before God.

BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY

Refers to St Benedict of Nursia, the ‘founder’ of western monasticism (c480-c550)

TRADITIONAL PRAYERS

Benedictine spirituality emphasises our place in a community of faith, and for Anglicans that community identity is partly defined by our practice of ‘common prayer’ which can be expressed in the structures of ‘Common Worship’ but also in the common texts found there and in BCP. Learning and learning to value some of these texts is important if our children are to have a full experience of Anglican prayer, but can we find ways to give them a better access to the spiritual heart of them?

We used gesture and mime to explore the meaning of sections of the Lord’s prayer – can we do this with other well known texts that we want children to explore? Another way to encourage reflection on each section of a well known prayer is to make it ‘responsive’ by encouraging the children to write a line in response to each section of the prayer: the leader then reads a

section of the prayer and pauses for the children to respond with the line they have written eg

Leader *Our Father in Heaven*
Children ***We are all one family because
you are the father of us all***

Alternatively children could create a small book devoted to a single well-known prayer. A section of the prayer would be written on each left hand page, and on the right hand page the children could draw or write their response. The book could then be used when the prayer is being said in their group or in church. Single lines can also be used for mantra-like repetition to promote prolonged reflection. This could be a useful introduction to using the 'Jesus prayer'.

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF PRAYER

➤ **The Collect**

The prayer that 'collects' our thoughts and prayers into a common theme Sunday by Sunday through the church year has a set form and structure which children can use to make their own collects for particular occasions and circumstances: the collect begins by using a form of address for God (eg Heavenly Father) followed by a brief description of something that God is or has done and which relates to the subject of the prayer; then comes the subject of the prayer; and finally the standard conclusion 'through Jesus Christ your son our lord, who ...'

One way of exploring the structure of collects might be to have a number of yellow cards, red cards and blue cards available, ask the children to write forms of address for God on the yellow cards, descriptions of what God is or has done on the red cards, and things they might want to talk to God about. Start by making 'random' collects by picking any yellow, red and blue card and reading them in sequence as a prayer; then encourage the children to be more selective – picking sets of cards that seem to 'go together'.

➤ **Intercessions**

Standard subjects

The usual 'subject headings' for our corporate intercessions are: the Church; the world; families and friends; those who are suffering and the departed. Children can make books, dice, 'lift up flap' cards or other materials which enable them to focus on these categories as they are covered by the prayer leader in church. Similar resources can be made to accompany prayers of penitence and thanksgiving. It is also possible to purchase published 'little prayer books' for younger children with pictures and simple words illustrating these general prayer themes.

Prayer Requests

All churches use intercession as a regular part of corporate prayer, and most have some method of collecting prayer requests – usually a book in which requests are written for the intercessor, or a board on which requests can be pinned. This basic procedure can be developed in many ways to add layers of symbolism and meaning and turn prayer into a more active and participatory part of our common worship.

~ What to write requests on

- 'Post-it' notes
- Sheets of paper folded in four so that the creases make a cross
- A sheet folded in four with the 'open' corner torn away so that when it is unfolded it makes a cross
- Sheets folded over and passed on as in the game 'consequences'
- Lengths of coloured sticky paper to make a paper chain
- Prepared pieces of paper or card in relevant shapes, eg: the outline of a person; a speech bubble; a leaf; a heart; a flame; a fish; a flower; a hand

~ Where to put them

Prayer requests placed in a book or on a board are usually read out in the intercessions. Another way of offering prayers which is more appropriate for requests written on specially shaped sheets etc is literally to 'offer' them by taking them to some appropriate collection place eg: in a basket; around the altar; at the foot of a cross; hung on a fallen branch to represent a tree; collected in a net; pegged on a line; placed in a special box; in a bin (for penitential material). Alternatively, the specially prepared paper or card could be taken home as a prompt for action during the week.

COMMON SYMBOLS

The concept of a community defined by shared practice in worship might be extended to include symbols which have a long history of use in the Christian faith, although we must recognise that some traditions have rejected them in the past and some parishes may still be unhappy about using them today. However, in the field of children's work the concrete nature of these ancient symbols makes them particularly helpful in focussing prayer.



candles

can be lit as a symbol of prayer; can be used as a symbol of the Spirit; can accompany reflection on 'the Light of the World'; can be placed by an image or artefact to bring the subject into the light of prayer.

- **crosses**
come in a wide variety of sizes and designs and can be held, passed round as prayer passes round a circle, or used in ways appropriate to their design (see the CMS resource pack 'A-cross the World' for ideas – Resource Centre Section Xn2.20).
- **water**
can be used to wash in various ways and contexts, can be sprayed in asperges, can be used to 'drown sins' as pebbles are drooped into a bucket of water, or can simply provide a visual and sound image of purity as it is poured from a jug into a bowl.
- **bread and wine**
have an obvious role in Holy Communion, but unconsecrated loaves and non-alcoholic equivalents of wine can be used in other contexts – either to be eaten and drunk, broken and poured, or simply placed on a table as a focus for prayer.
- **other symbols from Bible stories**
can be used such as nails, thorns, a bag of coins, fish. They can either form an illustrative focus or be used in some way eg hammering a nail slowly into wood, with a blow in between each section of a prayer.

FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

Inspired by St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

The following extract from St Francis's 'Canticle of Sun' demonstrates the essence of what has come to be called Franciscan Spirituality: it draws its inspiration from the natural world, seeing the Creator in the creation and praising him by celebrating all that he has made.

Praised be thou, my Lord, for all thy creatures, especially for brother Sun, who gives the day and lightens us. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour: of thee, most high he reflects the glory

(as quoted in 'How to Pray', John Pritchard, SPCK, 2002)

The potential for using water and fire (in the form of candle flames) has already been touched on above, the other two ancient 'elements' of earth and air can also be used to focus and inspire prayer.

Elements

- **Earth**
can be a reminder that out of death and decay comes the substance of new life. Children could examine some peat with magnifying glasses to see the fibres that are the remains of earlier organic life. This could lead to a straightforward celebration of the wonderful economy of mother earth, or be used as a metaphor for the resurrection life that had first to pass through the transformation of death.

- **Air**
is the invisible sustainer of our life and as such is an ancient symbol of the Holy Spirit – in fact our word ‘inspiration’ comes from the Latin for ‘to breathe on’. We have already seen that our breathing can be used to focus on the Spirit entering our lives. Children can also breathe and blow on light items such as feathers, bubbles or streamers and think of the way the Holy Spirit, like moving air, can have an effect without being seen. Pictures of sailing ships or wind turbines can be reminders of the great power this invisible element can have.

Animate creations

- **Seeds**
can be used as symbols of hope, aspiration and resurrection life. Small seeds – eg chicken feed – could be scattered on the altar as we cast our hopes into God’s care; seeds can be taken home after church and grown as a constant reminder of the subject of the service and of the growth of God’s word in us; the needs of a seed for growth can be used to illustrate those things we need to grow in faith. Seeds are also powerful symbols of potential: the question ‘How many seeds are there in this apple?’ can lead to estimation and investigation (guess, cut and count) then speculation – is the answer really ‘infinity’ since each seed contains another apple tree which grows apples which contain seeds
- **Fruit**
were used in scripture as examples to explain a point: eg ‘By their fruits, you shall know them’; ‘The fruits of the Spirit’. Children could pick a fruit that seems to symbolise the specialness of how God has made them, or that seems to represent a ‘fruit’ of the spirit to them in some way. Talking about the reasons for their selection can be a good way of exploring their understanding of the ‘fruits of the Spirit’, or of themselves. They could eat their chosen fruit quietly, whilst listening to music and giving thanks.
- **Flowers**
Flower arrangement is an art form. We see wonderful work in churches for weddings and other special occasions. You could invite some crack flower arrangers from your church to talk to the children about how they chose the flowers and other natural objects for their displays – what they symbolise in the mind of the arranger. A special arrangement could have been made on a theme by the guest ‘expert’, or the ‘expert’ could guide the children in making their own arrangement. The arrangement would then become a focus for prayer.

- **Leaves and buds**
On their own they can have significance, but put together, they are a powerful way in to reflection on endings and beginnings. The tree has to 'let go' its leaves in the autumn – and that 'letting go' can produce something very beautiful – before the fresh new buds can appear. Paper leaves with words indicating things we might need to 'let go' of can be shed in a heap; and the children can make themselves – either their fists, or their whole bodies – into tightly furled buds which can then uncurl to music (Grieg's 'Morning Song' is a good piece to use) as they think of all the good things they have the potential to do as they respond to the warmth of God's love.

Inanimate creation

- **Stones**
are fascinating in their variety. Making cairns seems to be a common human urge – putting 'my stone' together with lots of other people's stones to show that we have all 'been there'. Children could select a stone which they feel particularly represents them and place it with stones from the rest of the group or congregation whilst praying about some common experience they share with each other and the rest of humanity. A stone could also be chosen to represent a person or situation to be prayed for, and everyone's stones arranged in the shape of a cross.

Because of their hardness (and sometimes their roughness) stones can be a good physical representation of our sins. Children can grip a stone, feeling its hardness and roughness (perhaps thinking of its destructive potential as a missile), then let it go into a bucket of water at the confession. The hardness also has a positive aspect, of course, hence Jesus nicknaming Simon as 'Peter' (the rock) and the parable of the houses built on sand and rock: children could grip a hard stone whilst giving thanks for the strength of the men and women who founded, sustained and still sustain the Church.

- **Sand**
Making a footprint in a sand tray can be a way of inviting the children to reflect on what kind of 'mark' they would like to leave on this world. The reflection can be deepened by remembering how the sea washes footprints away from the beach – passing your hand through the sand to smooth out the marks could be an image of the wind passing over the desert sand: this reminds us that the marks we leave on this earth are ultimately transient and that the real impression that counts is the one we make with God.

As well as 'the real thing', of course, posters and OHPs of the natural world – including the cosmos! – are helpful in reflecting on the wonders of the world and our place in creation.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

Drawn from the practice of St Ignatius Loyola (c1491-1556)

VISUALISATION

This technique, explored in Mary Stone's book 'Don't Just Do Something, Sit There', may seem very modern but was used by St Ignatius Loyola in the 16th century to encourage entering imaginatively into Biblical scenes – putting yourself into the story. It can also be used to explore concepts and images such as 'The Light of the World'; or to enable imaginative encounters with Jesus so that fears or concerns, (or joys!) can be shared with him. It could also be extended in other ways eg to allow children to take an imaginative walk round their neighbourhood and hold particular parts of it in prayer, if they are not able to do this physically.

The technique basically involves getting the children to relax and become 'stilled' in a comfortable but not 'slouched' position. The leader then guides the participants through a visualisation by giving certain instructions (eg 'You are sitting on a beach') and then asking open questions (eg 'What can you see?') which encourage the participants to make the scene their own. The questions make frequent use of the senses (eg 'What can you smell/hear?' etc) as well as asking what the participants are feeling or thinking about or wanting to say as the scenario unfolds.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

If Ignatian spirituality is seen as focussing on the use of the imagination then, by extension it could be thought of as an 'umbrella' for the whole world of spirituality in the creative arts. Religious art, music and writing are foundational to our culture and through these media artists have explored spiritual issues for centuries. Can we help our children to make use of their creative activities in similar ways?

➤ **Pictures**

For Icon painters, their work is a work of prayer and praise. They will prepare themselves spiritually – by prayer and meditation – before beginning to work with their materials, and even the preparation of those materials can have a symbolic, spiritual aspect for them. We often invite children to draw, paint, or make images in a variety of ways. Could we give such activities a prayerful aspect by encouraging thought and prayer about the subject before starting, and perhaps providing music and fostering a reflective atmosphere as the work continues.

➤ **Clay or dough models**

The prohibition against idolatry has been seen as a bar to the use of pictures and statues in worship by some during the course of history, and it is vital that children understand that we are praying through and not to the images we make. With that proviso, the use of modelling

materials to create 3D images can be very conducive to prayer thanks to the tactile nature of the activity. As children knead and form the clay or dough into a shape which is intended as a focus for prayer it can give them a very 'hands-on' sense of union with the prayer subject. The finished 'models' can be arranged with candles as a prayer focus but much of the prayer may well have gone on during the making process.

➤ **DIY Symbols**

As well as asking children to wonder about why certain images and objects have traditionally been used as symbols in our faith (eg 'I wonder why a shamrock is seen as a good symbol for the Holy Trinity') we can invite children to create their own visual symbols (eg 'I wonder what would be a good symbol of the Holy Spirit for you') A collection of the symbols the children have come up with can then provide a focus for prayer.

➤ **Photographs/Reproductions**

As well as creating their own images, children can collect or be shown photographs or reproductions of existing art work (the more varied the styles, the better) as a stimulus for discussion and reflection prior to a period of prayer. Such images can be displayed in a variety of ways to form a prayer focus or station.

➤ **Collage**

One of the advantages of a collage is that it allows everyone to bring something of themselves into a unified whole, in the same way that when we meet together to pray we unify our individual concerns with the prayer of the whole church and indeed can join 'with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven'. The question, 'I wonder what an angel might add to our collage' could provide the opening for some contributions on their behalf, and produce a final visual symbol of the union of heaven and earth in singing God's praises.

➤ **Music**

Music is a great creator of moods – either exuberant or reflective – and as such can make a valuable contribution to any prayer activity either as background, or as the principle focus. Encouraging children to compose their own music, using either percussion or tuned instruments gives them an additional means of reflecting on and expressing their feelings. Rhythm can also provide a half-way house to vocal prayer – if children are not confident in vocalising their subjects for prayer, they could simply beat or clap out the rhythm of the person or situation they wish to pray about.



Poetry

Poetry can be prayer and prayer poetry, as we know. The important characteristics of poetry for our purposes in this respect are not really rhyme and rhythm (after all, not all poetry has either) but the way it tends to express itself in images. Thinking in images is a good way of exploring our feelings about and responses to things at a deep level. Asking children to write a poem then reading it as a stimulus for prayerful reflection can sometimes be a helpful alternative to asking them to write a more formal prayer.

CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

This is taken to reflect the experience and practice of the Celtic church as a whole. It, like Franciscan spirituality, reflects an interest in the natural world but also draws inspiration from the ordinary tasks and utensils of daily life. The following extract from 'Blessing of the Kindling' illustrates this characteristic:

*I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven ...
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,
Without fear, without terror of anyone under the sun,
But the Holy Son of God to shield me ...
God, kindle Thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbour,
to my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all.*

(from 'Threshold of Light – prayers & praises from the Celtic tradition',
ed A M Allchin & Esther De Waal, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986)

Unlike the natural creation, domestic activities and utensils have changed over the centuries, but the basic principle of using our everyday activities can still be used, as Michel Quoist demonstrates with this reflection on the telephone:

*I have just hung up; why did he telephone?
I don't know ... Oh! I get it ...
I talked a lot and listened very little*

*Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue and not a dialogue.
I explained my idea and did not get his;
Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing,
Since I didn't listen, I didn't help,
Since I didn't listen, we didn't communicate.*

*Forgive me, Lord, for we were connected,
and now we are cut off*

('Prayers of Life', Michel Quoist)

Here are some examples of using everyday items and activities in prayer:



Money

Where has it been? What good or ill could it do or has it done?

- **Confetti**
Shower blessings (and get the Hoover ready!)
- **Balloons**
Write things on them; put messages in them; burst them or let them fly.
- **Bubbles**
Pick out one bubble and hold someone/thing in prayer whilst the bubble is floating – blow them from a gallery or the pulpit, or hire a bubble machine.
- **Soap/Bubble bath**
Concentrate on cleansing properties and fragrance (watch out for allergies)
- **Paper plates**
Draw food on them or stick clay food on; draw happy/sad faces.
- **Love Heart Sweets**
Eat ones that seem to say something important to you about Love.
- **Compass and magnet**
What things show us the way God wants us to go? What things pull us off course?
- **Maps and globes of the world**
These can be used to identify places for prayer or to plan a prayer journey.
- **Radio**
Tuning across the dial, in and out of stations, helps reflect on tuning in to God.
- **Tools/utensils**
Any of these can help concentrate prayer/thanksgiving for the particular activity it is used in.
- **'Meaningful' things**
Children can bring ordinary things that have a particular private meaning for them to use in a time of personal prayer.
- **Jigsaws**
If each child has a handful of pieces, making the jigsaw can remind us to be thankful for the contribution everyone makes to life.
- **Puzzle cubes**
Church House Publishing have now produced a puzzle cube version of the Lord's Prayer, and one that takes young children through the communion service.

- **Ball/bean bag**
Catching games can accompany questions and responses such as the greeting. One child throws and says 'The Lord be with you'; the other says 'and also with you' and throws back.
- **Games**
How many children's games can you turn into prayer activities? Here are two to start you off!
 - **The Alphabet Game** – there are many versions of this game in which children are given a subject (eg countries) and have to take it in turns to think of one starting with A, then B etc. Children could be asked to think of a person or place to pray for, going through the alphabet
 - **Pass the Parcel** – instead of passing a parcel, pass a cross or other appropriate symbol, and when the music stops the person holding it says a prayer (controller of the music makes sure everyone gets a turn!) If a child doesn't want to pray aloud, they can pray silently and simply say 'Amen' aloud to indicate that they have finished. Circles are good to pray in – the children could simply pray one at a time round the circle, passing the symbol. One variant of this is for each child to say their name when the symbol is passed to them, and everyone then responds, 'Thank you God for

Contemporary culture also offers many things which can be used in prayer. Here are some examples:

- **Graffiti**
Some communities have tried to deal with the problem of graffiti by providing boards or walls specially designated for the purpose. A graffiti board or sheet could be used in church for bright, creative, decorative prayer requests.
- **Newspapers and magazines**
Children can spend time searching for subjects for prayer (they won't have to search too hard for intercession subjects, but they could be challenged to find some items for thanksgiving – there are usually plenty, but they don't tend to make the front page or banner headlines!)
- **Video**
Clips from a variety of programmes can provide a stimulus

- **Radio**
Simon and Garfunkel's '7 o'clock News/Silent Night' (on 'Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme') is a fascinating example of a song/sound poem/prayer made out of news tapes. Perhaps a similar sound collage could be produced using two or three tape players with recordings of the news headlines through the week and an appropriate song fading in and out over each other.

- **Pop songs**
The 'Song of Songs' in the Old Testament is a love song, and the Bible uses the marriage relationship several times as a way of understanding the relationship between God and his people or Jesus and the Church. Sometimes modern love songs can express a kind of devotion which can equally be applied to our feelings about God, or God's for us. 'Social comment' can also be found in modern pop lyrics, and can sometimes be used in prayer.

- **Street greetings**
Can the rituals that young people develop to greet each other be used in liturgical greetings? Eg. two children slap hands in a 'high five' as the first says, 'The Lord be with you;' they then put their knuckles together in a 'respect' sign and the second responds, 'And also with you.'

HELPFUL READING

(All available from the Resource Centre: 4th Floor, Church House, Manchester)

Many of the ideas in this pack are drawn from material in some of the following books:

101 CREATIVE PRAYER IDEAS FOR CHILDREN, Jan Dyer, Kingsway 1999
101 IDEAS FOR CREATIVE PRAYERS, Judith Merrell, Scripture Union 1995
A CHURCH FOR ALL AGES, Peter Graystone & Eileen Turner, Scripture Union 1993
CARING FOR THE WHOLE CHILD, John Bradford, Children's Society 1995
CHILDREN AND PRAYER, Betty Shannon Lloyd, Alpha/Paternoster 1999
CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH? Betty Pedley & John Muir, NS/CHP 1997
DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, SIT THERE, Mary K Stone, RMEP
DREAMS AND VISIONS, Jill Fuller, Kevin Mayhew 1997
GAZING IN WONDER, Jill Fuller, Kevin Mayhew 1996
HOW FAITH GROWS, NS/CHP 1991
LOOKING BEYOND, Jill Fuller, Kevin Mayhew 1996
MULTI-SENSORY PRAYER, Sue Wallace, Scripture Union 2000
PRAYERS OF LIFE, Michel Quoist, Gill & Macmillan 1963
PRAYING WITH CHILDREN, Jenny Pate, McCrimmons 1995
THE 'E' BOOK, Gill Ambrose, NS/CHP 2000

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WORSHIP IDEAS FOR A COMMON WORSHIP, ORDER ONE SERVICE OF HOLY COMMUNION

PLEASE NOTE: it is not suggested that you try everything on the list below in the same service!

¶ The Gathering

The Greeting

- If the first greeting is used (Common Worship p167), president and congregation could raise their hands to each other as they speak their words, to emphasise that this is a way of saying hello.

Prayer of Preparation

- Slowly fill a clear glass bowl with water from a clear glass jug.
- The children could be encouraged to learn the collect for purity by sequencing the lines: either each line could appear on a separate strip of paper, or they could be printed in the wrong order on a single sheet with a box at the end of each line where the child can fill in a number to indicate the right order.

Prayers of Penitence

- Pebbles, symbolising those things for which forgiveness is asked, can be placed into the bowl of water. One child, or a small group of children could do this on behalf of the whole congregation, or each congregation member could be given a pebble by a child on entering church, and could then place it in a large bucket of water, as and when they felt moved, during a time of reflection, with music.
- During a silence for reflection, the congregation could taste the bitterness of sin by eating short piece of 'bread stick' dipped into a bowl of lemon juice. When absolution is pronounced, the bitterness can be removed by dipping another piece of bread stick in honey.
- If the font has been filled, the water could be used for asperges (sprinkling the congregation) at the absolution.

- The children could be supplied with 'happy' and 'sad' masks, or faces on paper plates, or a pair of curved card lips which can be turned up or down. They could hold up 'sad' during the confession, and 'happy' at absolution.
- The congregation could indicate the things they are asking forgiveness for by writing or drawing on small pieces of paper. The paper can be in a shape that is relevant to the theme of the day's service, if that is appropriate. The children could collect the papers and lay them at the foot of a cross.
- Children could use published 'sorry' books (eg *I'm Sorry - Little Fish Books About You and Me*, SU, ISBN 0 8307 0957 6) or make their own, giving examples of the things they might ask forgiveness for. When absolution is given, these books should be collected and put away and should not come out again during the service!
- The congregation could be asked to make a tight fist as they imagine the things they are holding on to that need God's forgiveness. They then open their hands, palm down, to release these things. Next hold out their open hands, palm upwards, to receive the absolution.

Gloria in Excelsis

- This is a joyful response to God's forgiveness. Singing is most appropriate, but make sure it is something the congregation, especially the children, can easily join in with. There are several short, simple and dramatic versions such as the 'Peruvian Gloria'. If you use an ornate 'choir party piece', invite the congregation simply to listen and let their thoughts be carried away on the wings of the music, rather than lose the joy of it by trying to join in something that is too hard for them.

The Collect

- The Collect completes the Preparation and at this point the Common Worship rubric (p171) says *The president introduces a period of silent prayer* In the silence there could be a brief activity appropriate to the theme of the collect (eg the collect for the 3rd Sunday before Advent refers to people 'in authority': cards showing pictures of world leaders, maps of their countries or their flags could be distributed or images projected, and people could spend a moment or two silently praying for them).

¶ **The Liturgy of the Word**

Readings

- The children can use their own Bible story books at this point. If they contain a version of the Gospel for the day, so much the better. The books should be kept in a special place and taken out and put back with care.
- If the reading is from a good 'child friendly' translation many in the adult congregation will also be appreciative! *The Message* version (Eugene Peterson, Navpress, ISBN 1 5768 3289 9) often offers a lively rendition.
- Activity sheets based on the Gospel for the day can be purchased (eg Redemptorist *Look* sheets) or produced 'in house' which children can complete on clip boards during the readings and perhaps on into the sermon.
- There are many alternatives to simply reading from scripture, including: drama, dance, mime, rap, or response to 'key words' (as in the CPAS *Telling Tales* series).

Sermon

- Similarly, there are many ways of exploring the meaning of scripture other than just talking about it. An activity might fill the 'sermon slot' so that the congregation have a chance to talk about and reflect on what they have heard rather than the worship leader doing it all. Children can present something themselves provided they are well prepared and microphones are used.

The Creed

- Wherever choices are invited, make sure they are 'child friendly'. Again, many adults will also prefer this. There are a number of affirmations of faith that can be used at this point (p138-148). The short question and answer one (p144) allows children to learn and use the repeated response.
- The children, the congregation as a whole, or the worship leader can move around the church to places appropriate to each of the persons of the Trinity: eg. the door (leading to the world) for the Father; the altar for the Son; the font for the Holy Spirit.
- Images connected with the three persons on the Trinity could be shown at the appropriate moment during the creed/affirmation.

Prayers of Intercession

- Subjects for prayer could be written or drawn about on pieces of paper, possibly in shapes appropriate to the theme of the day, and collected up to be taken to the altar at the offertory.
- Symbolic actions such as lighting a candle, or planting a seed can accompany prayer, either done by a representative or representatives of the congregation (who could be children) or by the congregation as a whole during a time of reflection. Music is often helpful.
- Visual symbols of things to be prayed for can be used eg a globe, a house, a church, or symbols of aspects of church life, such as a Brownie banner or a music book. They can be placed in one central position as the prayers progress, or placed in 'stations' around the church which can be 'visited' by the congregation during a period of reflection.
- The children can use a variety of resources in a prayer time of their own, whilst the adults are being led in prayer: published or self-produced 'please' and 'thank you' books; 'lift-the-flap' thank you prompts; prayer cubes; jigsaws made of pictures appropriate to the standard headings for intercessions, or cards with these headings and an appropriate picture; boxes of cards with pictures – of people, places, everyday events, nature - which can be used to stimulate prayer.
- If the children are expected to listen to prayers being read by a worship leader, make sure the prayers are brief and would get the 'plain English' award – again, many adults will also be thankful for this. The same is true, if children are asked to read prayers – they should also be provided with good microphones, and given time to practice the technique of using them.

¶ The Liturgy of the Sacrament

The Peace

- The children can be gathered at the front and asked to take the Peace out to the congregation. Some may want to be accompanied.

Preparation of the Table Taking of the Bread and Wine

- The elements can be brought up by children who can say the leaders lines in the Prayer at the Preparation No8 (Common Worship p292), if provided with a microphone.

Eucharistic Prayer

- The children can have the text in their own illustrated booklet which will help them mark progress through the prayer – a booklet for each prayer in use in the church will be needed.
- Young children can use ‘thread the lace’ silver card shapes of the chalice and paten to get them used to the special vessels used at this point.
- Symbols, or symbolic images relevant to each section of the prayer can be used to point up its structure and mark progress.
- Children can work with a set of ‘matching pairs’ cards – on one set of cards are key phrases from the prayer in use, and on the other are appropriate illustrations. The children aim to match the phrases to the pictures before the prayer is over.
- The ‘Thank you’ element of the prayer could be emphasised by giving the children sets of cards illustrating things they might want to give thanks for, and encouraging them to look at some of these cards and reflect on them during the prayer.
- The children could look at published books, such as *Teddy Horsley (The Picnic – Teddy Horsley Goes to Communion)*, Leslie J Francis & Nicola M Slee, NCEC, ISBN 0 7197 0857 5) on the theme of Holy Communion.
- The choice of prayer can be ‘child friendly’ – Prayer H is short and responsive; the responses in Prayer D encourage participation. Remember, ‘child friendly’ choices make many friends amongst adults too.

The Lord’s Prayer

- Children should be encouraged to learn the prayer, perhaps as a sequencing activity (cf Collect for Purity, above).
- Published or self-produced Lord’s Prayer books can be used.
- Mimed actions can accompany the prayer. The children can be asked to devise these. ‘Signing’ is becoming a more regular feature in liturgy, and many find that it is a beautiful enhancement to worship: expressive miming can have a similar effect for all.

Prayer after Communion

- The rubric (Common Worship p182) states *Silence is kept*. During this silence, appropriate images of could be projected - with suitable accompanying music, if we interpret 'silence' as an absence of words!

¶ **The Dismissal**

- The congregation can face the door, and the dismissal can be given from there

GENERAL POINTS

- The children can use their own communion book, either published or home-made. Published resources are *My Communion Book*, Diana Murrie, CHP, ISBN 0 7151 4946 6 (discount on pack of 6! ISBN 07151 4977 6); *The Communion Cube*, Diana Murrie, CHP, ISBN 0 7151 4976 8; *My Holy Communion Book*, Aileen Urquhart, Redemptorist. ISBN 0 85231 238 5
- Clipboard activities can be devised for the whole service. *Come and Join the Celebration*, John Muir & Betty Pedley, CHP, ISBN 0 7151 4947 4 has a complete set.
- Some form of 'clock' or other device to mark progress through the different sections of the service structure helps children know where they are – and how much more there is to come.

Many of the above ideas have been adapted from:

A Church for All Ages, Peter Graystone & Eileen Turner, SU 1993
Come and Join the Celebration, John Muir & Betty Pedley, NS/CHP, 2001
Multi-Sensory Prayer, Sue Wallace, SU 2000