

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADING PRAYER

It is important to bring a group to quiet before inviting them to prayer. A gentle mantra can assist here. In the reflections that follow I have repeated some of the mantras, for example Monica Brown's *Listen*. In this way the music and the words become an invitation to relax into this time of communal prayer.

There is no 'right' way of communal prayer. In leading prayer always be sensitive to the needs of the group and any particular circumstances that the community is holding – the death of a parent, a diagnosis of cancer in a teacher, the birth of a child. This can be named at some stage during the prayer, leaving that person with a sense of being held in the embrace of the community.

As music, art and poetry are the language of the soul I have made an effort to include all or some of these in each of the reflections. For each of us the Spirit speaks in different ways. We do not know what gifts might be lying dormant, and it is often prayer in a safe inviting environment that enables us to begin to see them and hopefully respond, develop and share these gifts for the life of the community. So encourage people to push the boundaries of possibility. And if it doesn't work the question: *What have I learnt?* might open further possibilities.

Throughout the prayers there are opportunities for sharing – with one person or in a small group. This quiet sharing enables people to articulate their insights and experience in a more intimate setting. In this way those who find it difficult to share in a larger group might be encouraged to do so as they have already put words around their experience and been listened to; hopefully attentively. Genuine sharing can deepen our relationships with each other, particularly when the 'boundary markers' are honoured in the group. And deep trusting relationships are the glue that bonds a community. It is important to allow time for personal reflection before inviting sharing. In psalm 51 we pray: *In the secret of my heart teach me wisdom*. So give people time to touch the wisdom within.

One practice I recommend is inviting participants to share, without comment, a word, phrase or line of a poem or story that has been read. Give the instructions before the reading. *'After the reading of this poem there will be a short time of quiet. Then I will invite anyone who wishes to share without comment a word, phrase or line that has resonated within them. If someone says the word you have chosen, repeat it as that is saying something about that particular word or phrase.'* In this way people are listening anew to the wisdom of the poem. It is a non-threatening way for people who are a little reticent to have a voice in the group. It can also relax people so they feel a little more at home in sharing their insights with others

Encourage dabbling in writing poetry, creating art, composing music, to express the mystery of God as experienced in the reading of scripture or the daily rhythm of life. *Let your soul speak. Let your life speak*. If people respond to this you might at the end of a year put together a booklet of shared wisdom. Remember the words of the mystic St Teresa: 'Christ has no body now but yours'. Christ can only enter our world through our hands, heart, eyes, voice, feet..... Prayer is always inviting us to do just that. And this happens in the very ordinary events of daily living. The article following this highlights the value of poetry in the quest to integrate faith and life.

At the end of some reflections there are suggestions regarding that particular prayer. They are there just to offer some of the thinking that underpins the prayer and some suggestions for those leading the prayer.

If your particular staff group is responsive to art, search the net. There is wonderful art there. Three or four depictions of a scripture text by different people, from different cultures breaks open the text in unexpected ways. And listening to what others see when they look at the same work can blow your mind. I would have included more, but trying to find where to seek copyright for some was impossible. But for a one off prayer that should not be a problem.

The setting for your prayer will depend upon your particular circumstances. For a staff reflection day I like to work in a circle with a sacred space in the centre, usually on the floor. There is no hierarchy in a circle, no seat of honour, so it captures the spirit of the gospel, At a staff meeting you will need to work in the space where you meet. But with a bit of imagination you will discover ways of making the interpersonal space inviting. A community gathered is 'sacred space'. Remember the words of Jesus: Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am.' *Matthew 18:20* May you lead your communities to a deeper awareness of this.

The resources that follow could also be used for personal prayer. Staff could be encouraged to choose one of the themes to nurture the inner landscape of their life. Another way could be for small groups to commit to praying together once or twice a term.

Finally let these words from *Gaudium et Spes* remind us of the profound work entrusted to us as teachers, parents, leaders and disciples.....

...the future
of humanity
lies in the hands
of those
who are strong enough
to provide
future generations
with reasons
for living and hoping....

