

Encouraging ways of praying

Not everyone finds prayer easy. Perhaps that is because not everyone understands how many different ways there are to pray. Gertrud Sollars has some advice for helping others to grow in prayer.

It has changed my attitude towards prayer.' I had some wonderful times of prayer – I could have just stayed there.' I was getting bored with my prayer life – the course helped me to do different things.' I've learnt praying through distractions – it's helped me not to see them as something negative.' This is just some of the feedback I have had at the end of running *Helpful Habits*, a six or seven week course to explore prayer, following Graham Pigott's little book on the subject.¹ Being a subscriber to the Grove Spirituality series, I found the booklet dropped through my letterbox just over five years ago. It inspired me to offer the course at our church, and I've now run it eleven times, with an average of six attendees at each.

There are two aspects to the booklet which make it a gem in my eyes, one spiritual, the other practical. The first is that it has a wide definition of 'prayer' – prayer is being in the presence of God. Most people who come think of prayer as intercession and are hoping for ways of interceding that are interesting and that 'work'. They leave, having tasted the goodness of being still before God and hungry for more. The second beauty of the booklet is that it describes a course which the author himself had led several times with different people, so by the time the course – probably better called a series of workshops – made it into the booklet, it was a tried-and-tested format which can be followed almost line by line, with minimum preparation. (I don't mind the preparation, but if I can, I like to take the 'error' phase out of the trial-and-error sequence.)

The basic pattern of the sessions is the introduction of an aspect of prayer or a way of praying, then trying it out, then reflecting on it together, sometimes more prayer, and finally 'homework' – see how you can integrate this into your prayer practice over the next week. The following week, we start by sharing how the week has gone, and open up a different topic.

For example, in the first practical session we look at

posture. For this one, I need to borrow my husband's car to ship in my prayer stool, bean bags, and rugs and pillows. We talk about posture and how it can help or hinder prayer, and then the group has some time to try things out. There is usually a queue for my prayer stool and questions afterwards about how I made it. (Those woodwork classes in 1978 did pay off.) That week is called 'Stopping', and it is followed by the next one called 'Starting', which together with week three ('Staying') looks at ways of focusing our attention. For this, my luggage contains images of various kinds, pebbles, a jug, a candle, a holding cross and anything else I've ever found useful to help me still myself in the presence of God. There is then a week on *Lectio Divina* ('Slowing'), one on Ignatian meditation ('Seeing') and finally a session on closing a time of prayer called 'Self-Offering'.

As practice and trying things out are at the centre of the workshops, we spend quite a bit of time in silence and prayer. There is inevitably surprise at how fast ten minutes of silence in the presence of God go by.

There are a few ground rules. I don't present as a leader but as a fellow traveller – I am not an expert on prayer. Acceptance of each other's contributions as well as confidentiality are crucial. People may contribute and share, but there is no obligation. Silence is fine.

I have made a few changes to the pattern described by Piggott. I have used the contents of the first six short chapters of the book as the basis for a stock-taking exercise on prayer by way of introduction to the whole course. I tend to roll weeks two and three into one, as there is some overlap and they can be covered in little more than an hour. The course is advertised as taking an hour a week over six weeks, which seems to be what people are willing to commit to.

If someone misses a session, they can follow it in the booklet, and the 'weeks' are also published as handouts on the Grove website.² I have run the



workshops in the morning, afternoon, evening and one series for early birds at 7 o'clock in the morning. At that one, as a concession, I made coffee, but of all of them it has been my favourite, because those who came showed such commitment and sincerity. It was also the course with the largest proportion of men. This group still meets once a month at 7 a.m. for an hour's 'Space for God' – a time with a short introduction, followed by silence and finishes with sharing and prayer.

I have now followed this course with a 'Helpful Habits 2' of my own devising. It is shorter – three or four weeks, and goes into more detail on different aids to praying: praying with my pen, praying with images, praying with stuff, and, when our church has been re-ordered so that I can fit in a labyrinth, I hope to do a session on praying with my feet.

I have found that people are hungry to be with God, but many don't know how to go about it. *Helpful Habits* has been a non-threatening, immensely practical guide. Do try it out.



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References

- ¹ Pigott, G. *Helpful Habits*. (GroveS31), Grove Books, 1989
- ² www.grovebooks.co.uk 1989