

saint mary's press

Prayer for Parish Groups



preparing and leading
prayer for group meetings
over 100 resource texts

Donal Harrington & Julie Kavanagh

PRAYER FOR PARISH GROUPS

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PREPARING AND LEADING PRAYER
FOR GROUP MEETINGS



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Preface

This is a book of prayer resources for parish groups. It is not a book for prayer groups, but a book for every parish group. For prayer is the heart of the work of any group engaged in parish ministry or parish renewal.

Often, however, prayer is not put at the heart of the work. Often there is no more than a cursory prayer at the start and end of the meeting – a bit like the referee’s whistle starting and ending a football match. And even when the group tries to do something more substantial, many group members feel a lack of confidence and competence, not to mention a lack of texts and resources.

Prayer for Parish Groups is intended to address this situation. There are one hundred and eight different texts for group prayer, on a wide variety of themes. By ‘text’ we mean a two-page spread (for ease of photocopying) containing prayers, readings and reflections for a ten- to fifteen-minute time of prayer. So, if you are the one preparing the prayer for the next meeting, you need look no further. The alphabetical index at the end of the book will help you in choosing a suitable theme.

But there is more. The group’s prayer isn’t just a litany of words. It is an experience of the divine presence. Merely having a text is no guarantee that the prayer is going to be a moment of spiritual nourishment. With the text in hand, somebody has to *prepare* the time of prayer. Somebody has to think about setting the mood ... lighting a candle ... having music or not ... who will read what ... when to pause for silent prayer ... whether to have spontaneous shared prayer ... These are the kind of elements that turn a *prayer text* into a *prayer experience*.

And that is why the book begins with two short chapters – to help the person

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preparing the prayer to *work with the text*. The first chapter clarifies why prayer is so important for parish groups. If your group wants to make more of prayer, you might begin by discussing this chapter together. The second chapter is a step-by-step guide for the person preparing the prayer. It goes through all the details that need to be considered in order to prepare the prayer well.

Some of the texts gathered here were composed by ourselves, some we have taken from others, some we have reworked from other sources. Needless to say, while each of the prayer texts is self-contained, groups may wish to use or combine elements from different texts in their own ways. Hopefully, use of the book will help all who draw on it to become more creative with prayer

The origins of the book lie in our experience over a number of years with groups engaged in renewal in their parishes. This experience has confirmed again and again the fundamental importance of prayer for the group. When prayer *is* the heart of the work, the work itself is qualitatively different. The group experiences itself and what it does at a new depth. It is prayer, above all else, that leads the group into the mystery of God that is at the heart of what they do.

We extend thanks to our fellow workers in parish renewal over the years, for their witness to the importance of prayer, as well as for coming up with some of the resources gathered here. Thanks in particular to the other coordinators of parish renewal in Dublin – to Micheal Comer, Eilis O'Malley, Brid Liston, Tim Hurley and Oonagh O'Brien – for their help and support in bringing this book to completion.

*Julie Kavanagh, Donal Harrington
Summer 1998*

Praying Together

The Heartbeat of Every Parish Group

Experience has shown that prayer is at the heart of parish renewal and at the heart of all that parish groups do. Putting it simply, the parish group for which prayer is a vital element of its meetings is a group that flourishes in all that it does, through both success and failure.

However, fruitful and effective prayer in the parish group is often hampered by one or more of the following obstacles:

- (a) a feeling of incompetence or inadequacy; the group wants to pray together and appreciates the value of prayer, but does not know how to go about it;
- (b) misconceptions or conflicting conceptions within the group as to what prayer is. For instance, prayer means saying the rosary/or prayer means deep contemplation with long silences/or prayer means very personal sharing;
- (c) the attitude that giving ten or fifteen minutes to prayer out of a meeting lasting one-and-a-half to two hours is equivalent to ten or fifteen minutes of precious meeting time lost. Let us look at these one by one.

From Feeling Apprehensive to Feeling Confident

This first obstacle is about a group feeling incompetent and inadequate about praying as a group. It is likely that behind these feelings of incompetence or inadequacy lie other issues. One such issue is that of leadership. Who leads the prayer in the group? Is it the priest, or the parish sister, or a local catechist? Or is it any one of us who is baptised? This question of leadership is an important one. Often a group will just presume that it is up to the priest or sister in the group. Even to suggest the possibility of other people leading prayer may be a very new idea for some. But it is an idea very much worth exploring.

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No one person in a group is more qualified to lead prayer than another. Many groups rotate the leadership of the prayer and have found this to be a very positive experience. Before a group decides to rotate or widen the leadership of prayer, it is wise to give some time to discussing why the group might choose to do this and the apprehensions that group members may have.

Apprehensions that members of parish groups have shared include the following:

- *What do I say? Where do I start?*
- *I don't know any prayers or have any ideas/books/resources.*
- *The idea of preparing prayer is new to me.*
- *The pressure of having to produce the best prayer yet!*
- *It's the priest's job.*
- *What theme will I choose and will it be relevant to the group?*
- *How long/short should it be? What shape should it take?*
- *Perhaps only some people have the gift of leading prayer.*
- *I'm afraid of making a mess of it and making a fool of myself.*
- *How do I measure what the group can take without putting them off?*
- *Fear of people in the group and what they might think of me.*
- *People may be resistant to prayer or think that we are wasting time.*
- *Prayer is meant to be private.*
- *What if there is tension or conflict in the group?*

Obviously these are very real apprehensions. Experience has shown that it is wise and helpful to discuss them as a group before expanding prayer and its leadership within the group. One suggestion would be to use this chapter as something the whole group might read as a basis for discussion about prayer in the group.

However one does it, it is important to explore these fears and apprehensions. Some of the above apprehensions are about the perceived group attitude to a prayer leader. These can be relieved quite easily if acknowledged and discussed as a group, ahead of time.

As regards the actual content and conducting of the group's prayer, the

material in this book, both in this introduction and in the actual resources, is designed to help each member of a parish group become competent in preparing and leading a time of prayer.

Groups where the prayer leadership is rotated have already begun to identify and affirm the positive aspects of such an approach. Their comments include the following:

- *Each person brings his/her own personality and colour to the prayer.*
- *Prayer is now more accessible.*
- *Prayer is as important, if not more important, than any other aspect of the meeting.*
- *It's okay to have a different style of prayer – there is no rigid formula.*
- *Leading prayer is not about being a priest or sister.*
- *Prayer is now at the centre of who we are and what we are about, it is not a frill or a necessary thing to go through before getting to the 'meeting'.*
- *More confidence to ground our work in our prayer and the gospel.*
- *I feel less embarrassed to talk about God and faith.*
- *Prayer is about more than saying words; trying to bring words and images to life.*
- *We've grown in our prayer together – it is freer and less fearful.*
- *It is good to see other people lead prayer.*
- *I think that we are more patient and listen to one another better because of our experience of prayer and the fact that we all own it, through shared leadership.*
- *I enjoy preparing the prayer and thinking about it beforehand. I also appreciate the work that goes into it when others do it.*

Prayer Means Different Things

Obstacle (b) was about misconceptions or conflicting perceptions within the group as to what prayer is. Prayer is, quite simply, making space to communicate with God. It is about setting aside a time and a place where we can consciously enter into God's presence. It is about creating a space in which we can both listen to and talk to God.

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Prayer can take a variety of forms. It can consist of ‘saying prayers’, such as the rosary. It can consist of becoming quite still and maintaining an uninterrupted silence. It can consist of reflective reading of the Bible. It can involve singing and music. It can involve movement and dance. It can be indoors or outdoors. It can be alone or together, or a mixture of both.

In a parish group setting, prayer will tend to be more communal than personal, though time is often given for personal prayer. As a group, we create a space to welcome God into the heartbeat of our work.

Whatever form it takes, the essence of prayer is always the same – making space so as to be in communication with God. This does not mean that God is only there when we are praying. In fact, God is there all the time and most of us are probably ‘praying’ in an unconscious kind of way a lot of the time.

But when we make a special space for prayer, we become more keenly aware of the God who is there all the time. We realise that God speaks to us through the events of our lives and in the events of the lives of those around us. We meet God in the very ‘stuff’ of our lives – indeed this ‘stuff’ is the ‘raw material’ of our prayer! Prayer does not take us away from life; it brings us deeper into life.

The conversation that is prayer – ourselves and God, listening and speaking – changes us. It changes our hearts and then our lives. Prayer affirms and encourages us in our struggles, while it can also invite us to conversion and a change of heart. Either way, it makes a difference to how we live our lives.

The Importance of Prayer – Our Sharing in God’s Work

Obstacle (c) above was about the feeling that prayer takes up precious time. People involved in parish groups have only so much time to give to meetings, maybe only an hour or two every month. Ten or fifteen minutes of prayer can look like a huge chunk taken out of a busy agenda. And yet, prayer is the one element in the work of a parish group that is indispensable.

There are many elements that make up the meeting – the initial chat, looking over minutes, debating issues, hearing reports, making decisions, input, small group discussions, planning, the cup of tea. Any one of these might be missing and the loss could be made up. But if there is no prayer, the group has lost sight of what it is about.

Nothing could be further from the truth than thinking that prayer time is lost time. The time given to prayer together is what gives the group its identity. This is not something that can be achieved with a cursory prayer at the start or the end of a meeting.

The reason for giving quality time to prayer lies in the nature of parish renewal. Whether the group is a leadership group or a ministry group within the parish, its work is contributing to renewal in the parish. And the work of parish renewal is the Lord's work, or rather our collaboration with God's saving work amongst us. Our efforts to share responsibility and collaborate with one another may sometimes obscure the more important fact that, in parish renewal, God is sharing responsibility with us. God is inviting us to become partners in the divine task of transforming all things in Christ.

The place of prayer in the life of the parish group is not unlike the place of the avowal of love in a relationship. If love is not spoken, if a couple do not frequently avow their love, that love will begin to dissolve. Likewise, in prayer the members of the group avow the love that inspires them. They name who they are. They declare aloud the Christianity that is the core of their humanity.

So, if prayer is lost everything is lost. The work becomes simply our work. As the psalmist declared, 'If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.' Without prayer the group might work efficiently, but the work will cease to be truly 'Christian'.

The Fruits of Prayer

Prayer is the gateway into a world where God and humankind strive together to build the kingdom. In prayer, parish group members open themselves to something that is greater than themselves. They open themselves to a divine-human collaboration that will bear rich fruit for them as a group. Reflecting on groups who actively place prayer at their centre, the following fruits can be identified:

Prayer unites the group in a single spirit. With their varied life experiences, members of the group each bring their own colour and spirit to the group's prayer. Though all can be in very different places in their lives, feeling different emotions, prayer makes it possible for all to be in the same place for a period of time.

Prayer helps the group focus on their vision and purpose. It brings them back to who they are and what they are about. A lot of activity can have the effect of 'scattering' a person. Prayer helps us to 'collect' ourselves again and to recover a sense of our overall direction.

Prayer provides a setting in which members of the group can share both their hopes and anxieties about the work of parish renewal and their own ministry. The sharing of uncertainties and convictions, of struggles and hopes, brings a new depth of relationship within the group.

Prayer yields a perspective on the highs and lows of the group's experience. It nurtures a proper appreciation of both success and failure, by placing both in the context of the Lord's slow work amongst us. It teaches the group to be less anxious about 'doing' and achieving and to be more aware of 'being' in a particular way, as a group who identify themselves as followers of Christ.

Prayer is both comforting and challenging. When members of the group are downhearted, prayer puts them back in touch with what they really want. It regenerates motivation and commitment. On the other

hand, when members grow complacent or self-congratulatory, it presents anew the challenge of renewal.

Clearly, the pulse of prayer within these groups nurtures and fosters their sense of partnership with God. Its constant presence as a heartbeat acts as a loving and gentle reminder of what the group is really about in any work undertaken in the name of the Church.

Some Suggestions for Starting Out

As a parish group sets out to make prayer an essential element of their time together, it may be helpful to keep in mind the following four suggestions:

- (a) *Prepare well.*
- (b) *Move forward gently.*
- (c) *Aim for the participation of all.*
- (d) *Review the experience.*

Prepare Well

Prayer need not be a complicated affair. But because it is so important, it should be carefully and lovingly prepared. There are tools to help us in our preparation. One set of tools is the collection of prayer texts that make up most of this book. Another set of tools is the guidelines that follow in the next chapter about how to use these prayer texts. To make the best use of the prayer texts you will need to use the guidelines!

This book, therefore, presumes the necessity of good preparation, done ahead of time with plenty of opportunity for thought and reflection on the part of those preparing and leading the prayer.

In practical terms, achieving good preparation means making sure that the person preparing the prayer has been given plenty of notice. It also means making sure that he/she has been given the above-mentioned tools to help them in the task.

Again, as has already been stated here, what is provided in this book is the text for prayer. The task of those preparing and leading prayer is to transform

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a text for prayer into an experience of prayer. This can only be done through careful preparation.

Move Forward Gently

Group prayer may be new to many parish group members. It is very important that the prayer time be a positive, non-threatening experience from the beginning. This means starting with very straightforward prayer, where most of the focus is on using the text and not too much focus is on silence or spontaneous shared prayer.

As time goes on, and the group becomes more familiar with the format, the prayer can become more imaginative – with more attention to the sacred space, more time for silence, more sharing of personal reflections and prayers. Also, as time goes on, the time for prayer may expand; it should never be less than ten minutes, but it may sometimes come to take up twice this time or more.

Aim for the Participation of All

This means two things. First, the prayer should allow for maximum participation, through sharing out prayers and readings (or sections of readings) and through time for spontaneous prayer. Second, the preparation and leadership of the prayer should be rotated around the group. In the initial stages, members might find it less intimidating if they prepared the prayer in pairs.

A simple yet vital way of helping to maximise participation is to make sure that everyone in the group has a copy of the prayer text. In practical terms this means photocopying the material to be used. Although it may be troublesome, the usefulness of ensuring that everyone has a copy of the prayer cannot be exaggerated. It means that members have the texts to ponder during times of quiet reflection and for any spoken responses they might have in the prayer. It also enables members to take home the prayer and to use it themselves, privately or with their families.

Review the Experience

It is advisable to check in occasionally with the group as to how the experience of prayer is for members. By doing such a check-in, any tensions or concerns about the prayer and its leadership can be raised. It also gives members an opportunity to share what they have experienced as the fruits or benefits of prayer in the group.

By engaging in an occasional review of the prayer within the group, the group remains attentive to how they go about prayer. It is not taken for granted, but can be continually reflected upon and enriched.

Preparing a Prayer Session

A Step-by-Step Guide

Again, as has already been stated, what is provided in this book is the text for prayer. The task of those preparing and leading prayer is to transform the text for prayer into an experience of prayer. The following guidelines are offered with this task in mind.

Step One: Note the Elements of Group Prayer

Obviously there is more to prayer than simply the text we use. Before preparing and leading group prayer, it is important to note the variety of elements that it includes. The following are those elements. They are flexible and need not all be present on each occasion. Their sequence can be adapted.

- # The Setting*
- # The Sacred Space*
- # The Introduction and Focusing*
- # Music*
- # Reading(s) and/or Reflection(s)*
- # Movement/Gesture*
- # Quiet Time/Silence*
- # Shared Prayer/Reflections*
- # Intercessions*
- # Concluding Prayer*

Some of these elements may be very new to group members. When looked at more closely, each of them can be seen to be quite straightforward.

The Setting

A key to deepening the experience of prayer is attending to mood and

atmosphere, which is created by the setting. If people are merely rattling off a perfunctory prayer, the setting is inconsequential. If they want prayer to be what it can be, setting is all important. Setting includes the lighting, heating and seating arrangement of the room.

Prayer is often enhanced by dim lighting (while making sure that readers can read their sheets), and is most certainly enhanced by a warm environment. If a room is too hot or too cold, people will not want to linger in prayer. Ideally people should be seated in a circle or semi-circle, and the seating should be comfortable but firm. Sitting in rows, or in uncomfortable chairs, will not help the experience of prayer.

The Sacred Space

The sacred space refers to a central, visual, focus for the group. It reminds the group of the presence of the Lord among them. It may be as simple as a lighted candle placed in the middle of the floor or table. It may be more elaborate, including, for instance, cloth, flowers, leaves/branches, icon/painting, photographs. What is chosen for the sacred space will depend on the images within the text of prayer, and/or on the time or season of the year.

As a year unfolds, the following visual ideas or themes might suggest themselves:

Early Autumn: first fruits, abundance, harvest, green, darker emerald green ...

Late October/November: green, natural browns/rusts, berries, natural rough fabrics, dry leaves, wheat, pumpkins, lanterns, prayers for the dead ...

Advent: violet, blue – royal and lighter shades in contrast, silver, barren, deciduous branches, advent wreath, Jesse tree ...

Christmas: Light, white, poinsettias, evergreens, richness of fabric, gold, green, red ...

January/Spring: green, snowdrops, new beginnings, fresh start, new life, first hints of new growth, bulbs, buds, daffodils, St Brigid ...

Lent: purple, browns, ashes, barrenness, water jugs, sand, desert, stones ...

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March: St Patrick, green, heritage, water, baptism, holy sites ...

Easter: white, bursts of colour, primary colours, flowers (lily, tulips, mums ...) richness in smell and sight, oil, light, renewal, rebirth, water

...

May: Mary, Pentecost, blooming flowers, red, dove, spirit, wind, life ...

Summer: green, yellows, plants, flowers, ...

The Introduction and Focusing

The very manner in which the prayer begins is vital. What happens at the beginning sets the tone for what is to follow. The leader, therefore, will need to give some thought to how they will begin. He/she may decide to introduce the prayer. This may include mentioning the theme of the prayer and giving the outline of the prayer. The first words spoken by the leader are key and require some thought and care ahead of time.

Focusing refers to the time at the beginning of the prayer where people gather themselves and settle down into a spirit of prayer. This might involve the prayer leader allowing a few moments quiet for people to focus on the theme. It might be appropriate to play some music and/or to slowly read the focus text on the prayer sheet, if there is one.

The leader might invite people to make the sign of the cross, before or after the focusing time.

Music

Music can enhance the prayer experience, by embellishing the theme or by helping people to enter into a time of reflection. It can be used at a variety of stages within the prayer, depending on what it is being used for. It can be instrumental or sung. If using a tape recorder or CD player, this will have to be set beforehand and the leader will need to know when to start and stop it. Some groups may have a repertoire of hymns/songs that they can sing themselves.

Reading(s) and/or Reflection(s)

The readings and reflections within these resources come from a variety of sources, including scripture. Readings and reflections are not hurried ele-

ments of prayer. They need to be slowly and carefully read, with plenty of time for pauses.

Movement/ Gesture

Depending on the content and context of the prayer, the group may be invited to do such things as light a candle, pick up and hold one of the symbols from the sacred space, share a sign of peace, or stand. Part of the prayer preparation is deciding if and how the element of movement/ gesture will be included.

Quiet Time /Silence

Silence is something with which many of us feel uncomfortable. However, it is a very necessary element within prayer. It is so necessary, in fact, that without silence our prayer is weakened. If we have no silence how will we hear God speaking to us?

Because the leader may feel a sense of responsibility for the group's prayer, he/she may in fact be more uncomfortable with silence than other members of the group. The silence may feel longer or more tension-filled than it actually is. The leader may sense a restlessness within the group that in reality is not there. As a prayer leader, the leader should try to grow more and more comfortable with silence where it is appropriate and not rush along too quickly.

Shared Prayer/Reflections

This is another element of prayer that may be new and fearful for some members of the group. Nobody should ever feel that they have to share either a prayer or their own reflections on what has been read or experienced in the prayer. Such sharing should come freely from members.

When leading the prayer and inviting any sharing from the group, it is important to do so in a non-threatening manner. Do not be discouraged if people are slow to share their prayer/reflections. As time goes on, the group will do so more readily.

Often a leader will find that there may be a significant silence before the

PRAYER FOR PARISH GROUPS

first person shares a prayer/reflection. Then a number of other people may share quite quickly. The prayer leader needs to be patient during this initial silence and to resist the temptation to move on to the next element of prayer. When another significant silence emerges from the group it may then be time to move on.

Some of the prayer texts in this booklet have specific intercessions within them and these may be ample for that particular prayer session.

Intercessions

When provided, the intercessions normally have a response for the group. The prayer leader may choose to lead these intercessions or to delegate a member of the group to do so.

Concluding Prayer

The concluding prayer might be said by the leader. Alternatively, he/she might invite everybody to join in saying it together. If the prayer has begun with a sign of the cross, the leader invites people to bring it to a close with the same gesture.

Step Two: Select a Text for the Prayer

The next step is to select a text for the prayer. When doing this, it is helpful to reflect on the group who will be praying together. Perhaps there is a particular theme that would be good for the group to explore at this time. The theme might also be decided upon in light of the season in nature or in the Church year.

Step Three: Work with the Text

As has been said, choosing the text is just the beginning of the preparation! The next step is to read the text carefully and enter into it. The questions on page 26 are designed as a guide to help those preparing and leading the prayer to engage in such a process of entering in.

It may be useful for the leader to photocopy these questions and use them as a worksheet for his/her preparation.

Once these questions have been explored, the leader will have a better sense of the spirit of the prayer, while also knowing what practical preparations are needed for it.

Step Four: Use the following checklist for the final stage of preparation

- Arrive early to allow plenty of time to set-up.
- Attend to the setting, making sure that the lighting, heating and seating arrangement will enhance rather than impede group prayer.
- Create the sacred space.
- If using taped music, have the music set and check that the machine works!
- Delegate the tasks within the prayer to other members of the group.
- Distribute the prayer sheets to the group and introduce the prayer.
- Once the prayer begins, trust and let go. And let the Spirit work!

PRAYER FOR PARISH GROUPS

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING THE SELECTED PRAYER TEXT

1. What is the mood and message of the prayer?
2. What images do you find in the text?
3. What symbols suggest themselves for the sacred space (fabrics, colours, oils, incense, icons, branches, rocks, etc.)?
4. Is there any piece of music that the text suggests?
5. Are there any particular gestures or movements/actions that might form part of the prayer experience?
6. What tasks (e.g. readings, sections of reading) are there to delegate to others in the group, so as to maximise participation?
7. What will you say by way of introducing the prayer and focusing people at the beginning?
8. Where will there be pauses for silence?
9. Will you tell the readers when to begin or will they decide themselves?
10. If there is to be a concluding prayer at the end of meeting, might you use some element from this text?
11. Will every one have a copy of the prayer?

Small Beginnings

Focusing

Scripture

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
that someone took and sowed in his field;
it is the smallest of all the seeds,
but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs
and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come
and make nests in its branches.

(Matthew 13:31-32)

Reflection

Many if not all great undertakings
begin in small and often hidden ways.
Seeds need the darkness, isolation and cover of the earth
in order to germinate.
Therefore, for something to begin small, hidden, anonymous,
is an advantage.
It means it can develop away from publicity.
There are no pressures. No burden of expectations.
It can develop at its own pace. There is no hurry.
Hurry ruins so many things.
Hence the importance of beginnings,
of taking care of things in their beginning,
of the small in the accomplishment of the great.

How did Christ begin his great work, the salvation of the world?
He began simply, quietly. No fanfare. No fireworks. No public launching.
He began by calling a few people – two in fact.
It was as simple as that.
He began with personal contact
and that is how his work developed.
It was passed on from person to person by word of mouth.

We shouldn't be surprised at this.
Things which begin with a splash often peter out.
Whereas those which begin quietly put down deep roots,
grow steadily, and survive to produce fruits that last.

So, if there is something which we want to do,
let us not hesitate and think too much.
Let us make a start, however small.
Let us take one step. Let us plant one seed.
Let us trust that if our cause is good,
God will support us, and it will grow and prosper.¹

Quiet Prayer

Shared Reflections/Prayers

Concluding Prayer

O God of small beginnings,
fill us with confidence in our work.
May your presence in what we do encourage us to dare.
May solidarity and togetherness be our strength.

1. Flor McCarthy, *Windows on the Gospel* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), 38-40

Instruments of God

Focusing

Reflection

*A small wooden flute,
an empty, hollow reed,
rests in her silent hand.*

*it awaits the breath
of one who creates song
through its open form.*

*my often-empty life
rests in the hand of God;
like the hollowed flute,
it yearns for the melody
which only Breath can give.*

*the small wooden flute and I,
we need the one who breathes,
we await one who makes melody.*

*and the one whose touch creates,
awaits our empty, ordinary forms,
so that the song-starved world
may be fed with golden melodies.²*

Quiet Time

A Litany of Being God's Instruments of Goodness

Response: God who sings through us, we thank you.

For the talents and the abundance of gifts that are ours...

For the faith that stirs and grows in our hearts...

For the many people who have been instruments of your goodness in our lives...

For the moments when we have heard the song of your presence in our lives...

For the times when your goodness has made music through us...

Response: God of goodness, help us to trust you.

When fear rises up in us and we do not believe in ourselves as your instruments...

When busy-ness and pressures lead us to lose the sense of your song within us...

When we doubt your presence in the difficult aspects of our day...

When emptiness, loneliness and other struggles block out your melody of love...

Response: God of love, sing your song through us.

As we grow in believing in our goodness...

As we allow more and more of ourselves to be influenced by your presence...

As the call to be your instruments becomes clearer to us...

As we seek to discern how and when to share our goodness with others...³

Shared Prayer

Closing Prayer

Glory be to God, whose power working in us
can do infinitely more than we can ever ask or imagine.

2. Joyce Rupp, *May I Have this Dance?* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1992), 117

3. Joyce Rupp, *May I Have this Dance?* 125-6 (adapted)

That Dreams would Soar

Focusing

Scripture

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to their ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (*Matthew 25:14-18*)

Meditation

Dreams come and go in our lives;
far more die than come to reality.
What is it in us that allows us to let go of visions
that could create new and beautiful worlds?
Why do we so easily give in to barriers?
Why do we let ourselves conform and be satisfied with what is?
Reaching out to a dream can be risky.
It can involve hardships that our imaginations never knew.
Our comfortableness can so easily be disturbed.
But, what beauty can be experienced
as we accept the challenge of a dream!
What a precious feeling to be supported, to have others say
'You can do it, we can do it together.'
Nothing is beyond our reach if we reach out together,
if we reach out with all the confidence we have,

if we are willing to persevere even in difficult times
and if we rejoice with every small step forward,
if we dream beautiful dreams
that will transform our lives, our world.
Nothing is impossible if we put aside our careful ways,
if we build our dreams with faith –
faith in ourselves,
faith in our sisters and brothers,
and above all,
faith in our Lord God
with whom all things are possible.⁴

Quiet Prayer

Shared Reflections/Intercessions

Concluding Prayer

We pray to you, God of heaven and earth,
in wonder and thanks
that you have reached out to us,
dreaming and risking.
We pray through your Son Jesus who,
never satisfied with what is,
endured hardships the mind could not anticipate.
We pray in your Spirit,
released into the world by your dream for us,
who teaches us that nothing is beyond our collective reach.
May your Spirit inspire us
with the confidence not to bury our talents,
but to give ourselves unreservedly to the dreams
that will transform our lives.

⁴ Delora Hintz, *Prayer Services for Parish Meetings* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), 66-67

Stones

Focusing

Let us bow our heads before the wonder of creation ... 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...' 'In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... through him all things came to be; not one thing had its being but through him.'

A variety of stones are placed on an ornamental cloth with reverence – it is God who made them. And God saw that it was good.'

Reflection

The variety of stones.

God made stones in great variety ... variety of shapes, circular and irregular ... variety of sizes, small and larger ... variety of textures, smooth and porous ... variety of colours ... *Pause ...*

O God of variety, save us from monotony and sameness. Lord hear us.

The variety of uses of stones

God's people in their creativity have discovered a variety of uses for stones ... corner stones ... foundation stones ... millstones ... stepping stones ... headstones ... wall stones ... ornamental stones ... paving stones ... and fun stones (the Blarney stone, the stone outside Dan Murphy's door). *Pause ...*

Creator God, you made us in your image. You also made us of the same stuff as the stones. May our creativity show forth your creativity which you have so strikingly revealed to us.

Lord hear us.

Stones and time

Celebrating two thousand years of Christianity ... placing this in the context of the stones on the table, five hundred million years in existence.

Pause ...

*Lord God, we reflect on the immensity of time and space,
of stone and of all creation.*

*May the immensity that is you not overwhelm us,
but lift our hearts in wonder and humility. Lord hear us.*

Stones in Scripture

Yahweh said to Moses: 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay there. I will give you the slabs of stone, the Teaching and Commandments which I have written for their instruction.' *Pause ...*

*Liberating God, may we see your commandments as your gift to us,
a path to life, signs of your love and care,
leading to blessedness as we take on your ways. Lord hear us.*

Jesus and stones

'Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.' *Pause ...*
*Lord, let me see that if I cast the first stone or any stone,
then I have become that stone. Lord hear us.*

'Which of you would give your son a stone when he asked for bread?'
Pause ...
*Lord, we turn to you for nourishment, you who are the Bread of Life.
Lord hear us.*

'Some seed fell on stoney ground.' *Pause ...*
*Lord, may we keep searching for ways to prepare the soil
so that your Word will bear fruit a hundredfold. Lord hear us.*

Concluding Prayer

*Each take a stone from the centre, contemplating quietly with the words,
'They found the stone had been rolled away.' Then say together:*

Lord, we ask your help, that we leave no stone unturned,
as we continue to roll away the stones that entomb us.
Then we can rise with you. Amen.⁵

⁵ Composed by Donal O'Doherty (printed with permission)

A Disciple's Heart

*When you were born,
you cried and the world rejoiced.
Live your life in such a manner that,
when you die,
the world cries and you rejoice.*

Focusing

Scripture

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;
be like those who are waiting for their master
to return from the wedding banquet,
so that they may open the door for him
as soon as he comes and knocks.

Blessed are those slaves
whom the master finds alert when he comes;
truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt
and have them sit down to eat,
and he will come and serve them.

If he comes during the middle of the night,
or near dawn, and finds them so,
blessed are those slaves.

(Luke 12:35-38)

Meditation

*Lord of the winds, I cry to Thee,
I that am dust,
And blown about by every gust
I fly to Thee.*

*Lord of the waters, upon Thee I call.
I that am weed upon the waters borne,
And by the waters torn,
Tossed by the waters, at Thy feet I fall.
(Mary Coleridge)*

Pause for Reflection

Time for Sharing

Concluding Prayer

We bless you Lord for our calling
for nurturing in each of us a disciple's heart
a heart that rejoices in your coming
a heart sustained by your Spirit
a heart encouraged by fellow disciples.
May there grow in each of our hearts
the disciple's commitment to serve
the disciple's willingness to learn
and the disciple's joy in becoming
a medium of your grace.

We Believe

*We rest from our work, our activity
to make contact again
with the fire that burns within us
the passion of our faith
the conviction of what we believe in.*

Focusing

A Creed

We believe in God
who did not create an immutable world, a thing incapable of change;
who does not govern according to eternal laws that remain inviolate,
or according to a natural order of rich and poor,
of the expert and the ignorant, of rulers and subjects.

We believe in God
who willed conflict in life
and wanted us to change the status quo
through our work, through our politics.

We believe in Jesus Christ
who was right when he, like each of us,
just another individual who couldn't beat city hall,
worked to change the status quo, and was destroyed.
Looking at him I see how our intelligence is crippled,
our imagination stifled, our efforts wasted
because we do not live as he did.
Every day I am afraid that he died in vain
because he is buried in our churches,
because we have betrayed his revolution
in our obedience to authority and our fear of it.

We believe in Jesus Christ
 who rises again and again in our lives
 so that we will be free
 from prejudice and arrogance, from fear and hate,
 and carry on his revolution
 and make way for his kingdom.
 We believe in the Spirit that Jesus brought into the world.
 We believe it is up to us what our earth becomes,
 a vale of tears, starvation and tyranny,
 or a city of God.

We believe in a just peace that can be achieved,
 in the possibility of a meaningful life for all people.
 We believe this world of God's has a future. Amen.⁶

Quiet Prayer

Shared Reflections/Prayers

Closing Prayer

The love of God flowing free
 The love of God flow out through me.
 The peace of God flowing free
 The peace of God flow out through me.
 The life of God flowing free
 The life of God flow out through me.⁷

⁶ Dorothy Sölle, *Revolutionary Patience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), (adapted)

⁷ David Adam, *Tides and Seasons* (London: SPCK Triangle, 1989), 51

Sing a New Song to the Lord

*There is no more difference between
the written gospels and the lives of saints
than between written music and music sung.
(Francis de Sales)*

Focusing

Scripture

The seventy returned with joy, saying,
'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'
He said to them,
'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.
See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions,
and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.
Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you,
but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'
(*Luke 10:17-20*)

Quiet Prayer

*In this quiet time, thank God that our names are written in heaven;
praise God for the ways in which our lives sing forth the gospel.*

Reflection

'Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.'
We are told to sing to the Lord a new song. A new person knows a new song. A song is a thing of joy and, if we think carefully about it, a thing of love. So the one who has learned to love a new life has learned to sing a new song. And a new person, a new song and a new testament all belong to the same kingdom.

My children, holy seeds of heaven, you who have been born again in Christ, born from above, 'sing to the Lord a new song'. 'But I do sing', you may say. You sing, of course you sing ... but make sure that your life sings the same tune as your mouth. Sing with your voices, sing with your hearts, sing with your lips, sing with your lives ... The singer himself or herself is the praise contained in the song ... Do you want to speak the praise of God? Be yourselves what you speak. If you live good lives, you are his praise. (*Augustine, Sermon 34*)

Intercessions

*Thank God for people through whose lives we hear the gospel sung,
in whom we hear God praised.*

Concluding Prayer

Come Lord Jesus and sing your song in us
– that we may live the truth we sing.
Show us the path of life and reveal your justice to the nations
– that we may live the truth we sing.
Gently bring us to ways of compassion
– that we may live the truth we sing.
Fill our hearts with the power of your love
– that we may live the truth we sing.
Guide our actions by the light of grace
– that we may live the truth we sing.
Bless us and sustain us in the name of the Trinity
– that we may live the truth we sing.

Bread of the Kingdom

Focusing

Reflection

‘Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth,
the expectation of a new earth should spur us on,
for it is here that the body of a new human family grows,
foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come.

That is why earthly progress
is of vital concern to the kingdom of God.

When we have nurtured on earth the values
of human dignity, communion and freedom,
we will find them once again,
freed from stain, illuminated and transfigured.
Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present;
when the Lord comes, it will enter into its perfection.’

(Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, 39)

The Song of the Bread

Bread from seed sown in earth
bread made by human hands
bread tasting of sorrow
and of people of many lands

bread of war and of peace
unchanging daily bread
strange bread of affection
and the stone bread of the dead

bread, our body our all
earned with such bitter sweat
bread, life with our fellows
whom we easily forget

bread without which we die
matter of such great worth
bread shared with each other
through all our life on earth.

Bread of life shared with us –
you give yourself as food
you, man among others
and a God of flesh and blood.⁸

Quiet Prayer

Shared Reflections/Intercessions

Concluding Prayer

Lord our God, you have sown in us your word,
given us your son – he, who was broken and died for us,
is bread and life for the world.

We ask you to let us find strength to tread his path,
to let us be for each other as fertile as seed and as nourishing as bread
and thus lead a happy life.⁹

⁸ Huub Oosterhuis, *Your Word is Near* (New York: Paulist, 1968), 138

⁹ Huub Oosterhuis, *Your Word is Near*, 139

A Prayer on our Journey

Focusing

Leader: Let us pray to the God who supports and nourishes us along the path of life. Let us thank God for the signs of care and loving providence that we find so reassuring along the way.

All: God of hope, accompany us along the way.

Scripture

The whole congregation of the Israelites came to the wilderness of Sin. And they complained against Moses and Aaron, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.’

Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, ‘In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?’

Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining”.’ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. (*Exodus 16:1-10*)

Quiet Prayer

Intercessions

In the fear and apprehension in the hesitation and insecurity that we experience as we follow you ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

In the sense of mystery, in the wonder that dawns in us, as we seek to follow you ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

In the expectation and pain and restlessness that we experience as we follow you ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

When we grow tired and weary, when the burden makes us falter and want to stop ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

When we grow in insight, as your wisdom prompts us when to let go and when to take up ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

When we glimpse your presence and thrill to the sense of your nearness ...

God of hope, accompany us along the way.

Concluding Prayer

God of hope,
like the people of Israel, we also complain,
we too need to learn.

Enliven in us the memory of how you have released us from bondage.
Teach us to rest secure in your presence accompanying us on the way.
Inspire us to acknowledge the signs of hope
and to respond to the invitations to new life
that we find along the way.

In Silence, Peace

*Sometimes in a lonely cell
in the presence of my God
I stand and listen.
In the silence of my heart
I can hear God's will
when I listen.
For I am but a servant
who is guided by my king
when I listen.
(Columba)*

Focusing

Reflection

To deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself completely to the silence of a wide landscape of woods and hills, or seas, or desert, to sit still while the sun comes up over that land and fills its silences with light. To pray and work in the morning and to labour and rest in the afternoon, and to sit still again in meditation in the evening when night falls upon that land and when the silence fills itself with darkness and with stars. This is a true and special vocation.¹⁰

Quiet Prayer

Scripture: a Modern Version of Psalm 23

The Lord is my pace-setter, I shall not rush;
he makes me stop for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness
which restore my serenity.
He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind
and his guidance is peace.

Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day
I will not fret, for his presence is here;
his timelessness, his all-importance will keep me in balance,
as he prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity.

When he anoints my mind with his oils of tranquillity,
my cup of joyous energy overflows.
Truly, harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours,
for I shall walk in the pace of my Lord
and dwell in his house forever.

(Tokio Megashia)

Shared Reflections/Prayers

Concluding Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for your gift of silence –
for these moments now
and for the other silent spaces you give us during the day.
We thank you for the gift of yourself in silence,
and for the knowledge that you, whom we so easily neglect,
are so wonderfully close and alive in our lives. Amen.

10 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1956), 101

Beatitudes of Nature

*Come Lord, come down,
Come in, come among us.
Come as the wind to move us,
Come as the light to prove us,
Come as the night to rest us,
Come as the storm to test us,
Come as the sun to warm us,
Come as the stillness to calm us,
Come Lord, come down,
Come in, come among us.¹¹*

Focusing

Beatitudes

Blessed is the tree which takes time to sink deep roots
– it shows us what we have to do in order to withstand the storm.

Blessed is the seed which falls on good soil and so produces a rich harvest
– it shows us what happens when we take the word of God to heart.

Blessed is the vine which, having been pruned, becomes all the more fruitful
– it shows us the benefit of self-denial.

Blessed are the flowers of the fields
– their beauty bears witness to God's prodigal artistry.

Blessed are the ubiquitous sparrows
– their carefree attitude to life gives us a lesson to trust in providence.

Blessed is the wind, coming from where we do not know,
to set sails in motion, to breathe life into dying embers
– it reminds us of the mysterious workings of the Spirit of God.

Blessed is the rain which falls without favour on all fields
– in it we see a reflection of God's indiscriminate love for all God's children.

Blessed are the leaves, which know when to let go,
and do so in a blaze of colour
– they show us how to die.¹²

Quiet Prayer

Shared Reflections/Prayers

Concluding Prayer

Praised be Jesus, in love with God
and enraptured by all God's creation.
Praised be the imagination of Jesus,
seeing in creation so much of God's wisdom.
Praised be Jesus for imaging to us,
through creation, so much of life.
Praised be God's creation,
speaking through Jesus to us.
Praised be our imaginations,
vitalised by the words of Jesus.
Praised be God
who makes all things possible.

11 David Adam, *Tides and Seasons*, 22

12 Flor McCarthy, *Windows on the Gospel*, 18-19

Hope, our Friend in Need

Focusing

Scripture

It is the God who said, 'Let light out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

(2 Corinthians 4:6-10)

Hope

*Even at the gates of hell,
Believe in redemption.
Let my grace and power work,
Where you have none.
It is only for you
To believe and to trust.
Be confident.
Trust.
Love.
Do not condemn.
Believe,
In the face of unbelief.
Hope against hope.
This is faith.*

*This is the gift most needed
For those who have suffered
So deeply, and lost all.
You must manifest love and hope.
It is only then
That my people will begin to
Believe in themselves.*¹³

Quiet Time/Shared Prayer

Litany

Response: Spirit of hope, come to sustain us; Spirit of Christ, lift up our hearts.

Our progress is slow. At first we expect great things
and then we learn to appreciate small steps forward. *Response.*

Difficulties and adversity make our work feel frustrating.
But trusting in you, we want be part of the struggle. *Response.*

There is no blueprint, no neat solution –
yet in the messiness, we learn to see your hand. *Response.*

It's complicated when people are so different in their approaches.
We need to trust each other when conflict surfaces. *Response.*

Confusion and perplexity and searching characterise our work.
We thank you Lord for the light that urges us to keep going. *Response.*

In the pain of failure, Jesus touches our hearts.
He whose dying was the seed of new life
inspires us to envisage new beginnings. *Response.*

Blessed be God eternal, watching over all we do.
Blessed be Jesus our wisdom, companion in the striving.
Blessed be the divine Spirit, constantly renewing our hearts. Amen.

¹³ Edwina Gateley, *I Hear a Seed Growing* (Wheathampstead, Herts: Anthony Clark, 1990), 134