

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Lent I

Images

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Living Lent I is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

At one time Lent was widely observed within the Christian church. In the twenty-first century, however, many Christians have little knowledge of the traditional Lenten disciplines and their purpose, and even less of their relevance for today.

Living Lent I is a Living Faith in Suffolk course for people who would like Lent to become relevant once more. Each session looks at one of the traditional themes of Lent (taking stock, growing in prayer, fasting, growing as a community, generosity) and considers how we could do this in Suffolk.

For facilitators:

- Each session should last between 60 and 90 minutes overall including the settling down and welcome.
- The rooms used for the sessions need to be comfortable enough for people to be able to focus on what is going on and to be able to hear each other.
- A clear structure is given; some groups will want to spend longer over some activities than others. The necessary resources are listed for each session. All the handouts are at the back of the book, and individual pages can be printed out for each session as needed.

Resources needed:

- Statements about Lent
- Stones
- Bible[s]
- Imaginative Bible reading info
- “Understanding Lent”

Discussion can be

difficult. Using a resource (such as a choice of statements) can give a framework for discussion that enables people to feel more confident about sharing.

We learn in different ways.

Some people like something to look at, something to hold or touch. Some want to listen, to read aloud or to discuss. Some like to be active whilst others prefer to use their imagination. It is useful to include a mixture of activities.

I. Looking inwards – living reflectively

This session aims to give people a basic understanding of the history and purpose of Lent and to enable them to find ways to be self-reflective about their relationship with God.

Welcome people and allow time for introductions to each other and the course; if participants are not all known to each other, then do a brief familiarisation activity (such as each introducing themselves with one piece of information they'd like others to know; or discussion in pairs to then introduce each other). Set out ground rules for the group (confidentiality and respect).

Ask the group: What are your experiences of Lent? Give time to some discussion to enable people to share their knowledge, experiences, questions. To facilitate, give out statements about Lent (pages 14-15) and ask people to pick one which best sums up their current position or, if none fits, then to write something on one of the blank cards; people feedback and discuss the statements they have chosen.

Give each participant a stone to hold and, while they hold it, do imaginative Bible reading (page 16) of Matthew 4:1-11 (Jesus in the wilderness). When complete, ask for feedback and discuss what struck people from the reading.

Lent lasts for forty days. This is a period of time used on several occasions in the Bible when people prepared for a significant event. We have just read of Jesus' preparation for his ministry; other examples would be Moses spending forty days on Mount Sinai waiting for the ten commandments (Exodus 24:18), Elijah travelling for forty days to Mount Horeb to meet with God (1 Kings 19:8). Traditionally Lent was used as a period of preparation before a new Christian was baptised. It was a time to reflect, to take stock of one's life, to repent (as in, to turn around, make changes to the direction of one's life). Over time this "taking stock" has become a custom for all Christians, not just those preparing for baptism.

Don't worry if people are reluctant to share personal information at this stage.

Giving people the opportunity to discuss issues generally now can also resource them to think more personally later on.

Sometimes tough issues are raised.

They may not be discussed, but thoughts can be triggered by something someone else has said. It is useful to have a time of quiet at the end of each session to give people space to put these to one side or to note the need to seek help.

Discuss: if we are going to "take stock", to think about where we are in our relationship with God, how might we do this? What sorts of things might we think about? What questions might we ask ourselves? What could our relationship with God be like? What are we aiming at? How could we move towards this? As part of the discussion, draw out ideas such as:

- What do we actually do every day/week/month/year to sustain and grow our spiritual life/relationship with God?
- What do we actually do every day/week/month/year to sustain and grow our relationships in our church community?
- Part of our "taking stock" should also include our relationships with others (family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours, ourselves). Ask the above question in relation to these.

As a "Challenge for the coming week", identify one change you will make.

Draw the session to a close in a time of prayer, allowing space for people to (silently) gather themselves if anything talked about has been difficult.

Resources needed:

- Bible[s]
- Prayer Continuum
- “Ways to pray” mind map
- “Ways to pray – further info” sheet.
- Aids to allow people to try out some of the ways to pray (e.g. a newspaper, candle, book of prayers...)

Prayer is often difficult. People may fear that everyone else finds it easy and so be reluctant to admit that they struggle. The discussion can be opened up by the facilitator sharing an occasion when prayer has been difficult.

We are all different and so should expect to pray in different ways. None of the ideas looked at today will appeal to everyone. Don't worry if some of the ideas seem a little strange; try something that feels comfortable.

2. Looking upwards – living prayerfully

Traditionally during Lent time is set aside for people to develop spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible study. This session aims to encourage people to pray and to give opportunity to try out different ways of praying.

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask for feedback from those who attempted the “Challenge for the coming week”: what change did they try and what happened?

What are your experiences of prayer? – discussion to enable people to share experiences, difficulties and questions. To facilitate, use the Prayer Continuum on page 17, asking people to mark where on the line best represents their position and, if confident enough, to say something about why they put themselves there.

Why pray? Jesus modelled prayer (e.g. Mark 1:35) and taught his disciples how to pray (Matthew 6:9-13). In his letters, Paul taught the early Christians that prayer is important (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:17). As a group, look up these passages and discuss what you notice in each.

Martin Luther said that “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing” (<http://www.positiveprayers.com/famous-prayer-quotes.html>). But what are we doing when we pray? Prayer is two-way communication with God the Father (Matthew 6:6), made possible through Jesus and helped by the Spirit (Romans 8:26). As in any relationship, it is a necessary ingredient to keep it alive and enable it to grow. It feeds us, and enables us to become closer to God.

How can we pray? As a group, look through the “Ways to pray” mind map (page 18): Discuss responses to the suggestions on this mind map – for example, how do people feel

Living Prayer I is another Living Faith in Suffolk course; it explores further some of the different ways of praying.

Taking it further...
Encourage people to try this activity again at home, repeating something they found useful or experimenting with something different.

Today's session may have been tough for some.
Having a time of quiet to end gives space to identify if help is needed and to be ready to go home.

about varying their posture when they pray? Are there any aids to prayer listed which particularly appeal to anyone in the group? Do people have any useful experiences to share?

Try it out! As a group, use the *Lectio Divina* method looking at Mark 9:30-37 (see page 19). Then, as space and time allow, individually try out some of the suggestions on the “Ways to pray” mind map, for example:

- Someone may wish to try praying through part of a newspaper
- Someone may wish to mind map a prayer
- Someone may wish to be quiet in front of a candle.

Encourage people to try something they do not usually do when praying, and allow about 15 minutes for people to experiment on their own as anything more open-ended could feel unmanageable for those who find this difficult.

Give people opportunity to feed back what they found useful or otherwise in whatever ways of praying they tried. Is there anything else they might like to try, or something they would try again, as a result of today's meeting? As a “Challenge for the coming week”, ask each person to pick one way of praying to try, or to try again, during the coming week.

Draw the session to a close in a time of prayer, allowing space for people to (silently) gather themselves if anything talked about has been difficult.

Resources needed:

- Bible[s]
- “Spiritual Disciplines” sheet and any suggested resources to show the group

Provoke discussion by using open questions.

For example, in the initial discussion ask:

- What did you hope to achieve?
- In what ways did it change you?
- What examples can you give of the difference it made to you/others?

Fasting can be done in a number of ways.

It can involve abstaining from all food for a specific period of time (e.g. one day a week), or from certain foods for a longer time (e.g. giving up meat for Lent). Historically people gave up meat, fish, fats, eggs and milk for Lent, which is why we eat pancakes on the day before Lent as a way of using up any remaining eggs, milk and fats.

3. Looking upwards – living intentionally

This session aims to give people an understanding of the traditional practice and purpose of fasting and to enable reflection on the different ways of fasting.

Welcome people and introduce today’s session. Ask for feedback from those who attempted the “Challenge for the coming week”: what did they try and what happened?

What have you given up for Lent? – discussion to enable people to share how they view this concept, their reasons for giving (or not giving) something up, their aims in doing so and their experiences of the impact of this in previous years. This could include reflections on living alongside others who have given something up.

Traditionally people have fasted during Lent. In the Old Testament fasting was a way of denying physical needs in order to focus on the spiritual and so fasts, individual or communal, would take place in times of need, when facing potentially difficult situations, or as a way of seeking forgiveness. In the New Testament, Jesus fasted during his time in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2) and taught about fasting (Matthew 6:16-18); and fasting was a common practice in the early church (see, for example, Acts 13:1-3 and 14:21-23). Lenten fasting became a practice for new Christians preparing for their Easter baptism; for a few centuries this then grew to being a practice for the whole church. As a group, look up these passages and discuss how relevant you think these, and traditional church practice, are to us today.

Nowadays many Christians don’t fast at all, or give up one food item such as chocolate, or fast from something different such as watching television or using social media. What alternative fasts might be appropriate to your group?

Living Mark I is another Living Faith in Suffolk course; it gives an opportunity for individuals or groups to study the key themes of Mark's Gospel using a method of Bible study based around observation, reflection, interpretation and decision, with additional information and questions given for those who want to go a bit deeper in their study.

For many Christians the focus in Lent has moved from “giving something up” to “doing something different”, actively taking something on (such as attending a Lent group!) which will help them to grow in their relationship with God and to develop their faith. As a group, look through the “Spiritual Disciplines” hand-out (page 21): discuss responses to the disciplines suggested – for example, how do people feel about attending a retreat or spending time in silence? Which of the suggestions attract, and which do people feel uncomfortable with – can they identify why?

Try one out! Some of the disciplines suggested are not practical for trying within this session (although you could plan for one, such as finding an alternative service or a retreat to attend together). However, as a group you could spend some time in silence, or in Bible reading / study (see page 22). Then give people the opportunity to feed back how they found the activity. As a “Challenge for the coming week”, ask people to pick one of the disciplines on page 21 and to give it a try.

Draw the session to a close in a time of prayer, allowing space for people to (silently) gather themselves if anything talked about has been difficult.

4. Looking outwards – living communally

Resources needed:

- Bible[s]
- “Living and growing as a community”

This session aims to enable people to regain a communal feel to their faith and to reflect on ways in which this could be developed.

Welcome people and introduce today’s session. Ask for feedback from those who attempted the “Challenge for the coming week”: what did they try and what happened?

There are some interesting images of community. Try searching for some on the internet and consider what they may have to add to today’s conversation. Searching for “community quotes” also produces some interesting results.

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (John Donne). What does it mean to you to be part of a community? What does it mean to be part of a church community?

As a group, read through I Corinthians 12:12-20 and discuss:

- What point is Paul trying to make by describing us as one body with many parts? What are the strengths and weaknesses of having such diversity?
- To what extent does your church community function as a body?
- How does this image change your understanding of what church could be like?

Taking it further... In Paul’s teaching about the “body” he is referring not just to a individual church but to the wider community of Christians. How does your understanding of what it means to function as a body change when you think about this including Christians of other denominations?

Nowadays Lenten practices tend to be seen as something personal (such as the individual choice to give up chocolate, for example), but in the past when everyone was observing the same custom there would have been a community feel to the season. When all members of the church community were fasting from meat, fish and dairy products for this period, this would have enabled a sense of committed belonging to each other as well as mutual support for the difficult task of keeping the fast.

Imagine what it could be like if your church community was able to develop this same sense of committed belonging and mutual

You might want to consider:

- What could be the positive contribution, in your community, to being involved in each other's lives in any of these ways?
- What could be the challenges of this?
- In what other ways might it be possible to grow as a community?

support. What might that kind of community look like? Page 23 outlines some of the ways Christians have lived and grown as a Christian community. For each, discuss your responses to that way of growing.

Discuss as a group what could be done, in your setting, to enable your church to grow as a community. Which of the ideas on page 23 could be useful? Do some of you have a shared concern which you could address together? Could your Lent group organise a social event for the church to attend? Spend some time planning! As a "Challenge for the coming week", identify something which you could do, either individually or as a group, and take steps to plan or achieve this.

Draw the session to a close in a time of prayer, allowing space for people to (silently) gather themselves if anything talked about has been difficult.

5. Looking outwards – living generously

Resources needed:

- Bible[s]
- “Being Generous”

This session aims to give space for people to think about how faith, and living as a church community, can impact generously on the world.

Welcome people and introduce today’s session. Ask for feedback from those who attempted the “Challenge for the week”: what plans were made?

Generosity isn’t exclusively a Christian priority.

For example, giving to charity is one of the five pillars (key principles) of Islam. Sikhs run a langar, a free kitchen providing food to all, regardless of gender or status. Could we learn anything from this?

What do you understand by the term “generosity”? In what ways might God be said to be generous?

As a group, read through Luke 15:11-32 and discuss:

- In what ways does the father in this story demonstrate generosity, towards his servants (verse 17) and each of his sons?
- The father’s response to his younger son would have been seen as quite shocking, because his son’s behaviour was most offensive and his own behaviour demonstrated both a lack of dignity (in looking out for the son and running to meet him) and lavish forgiveness. This story is generally understood to illustrate God’s dealings with us: looking at it in this light, what do you notice?
- What does this story have to say to us about generosity?

Taking it further...

What does each of these passages add to your understanding of God’s generosity:

- Psalm 65
- Ephesians 1:3-6
- 1 John 3:1a
- John 3:16-17

Traditionally people have given to charity during Lent, perhaps the money saved by the austere living resulting from the period of fasting. One underlying reason has been a desire to be generous, perhaps in recognition of, or response to, God’s generosity to us. However, giving money is not the only way to be generous. We can also make a difference to the world around us by being generous with our time, gifts/skills and relationships.

Living Vocation I is another Living Faith in Suffolk course; it includes activities and reflections to assist in the identifying of our gifts, skills and callings. It may help you in your thinking about what you have to offer others in your generosity.

As this course ends, consider: how has your understanding of the relevance of Lent developed during this course? In what ways has your faith developed? What will be different, moving forward, as a result of this course?

Look at the “Being Generous” hand-out on page 24 and discuss:

- What gifts / skills do we have to offer
 - as individuals?
 - as a group?
 - as our church / group of churches?
- In what ways could we make different use of our time?
- How could we be generous with our relationships?
- What are the areas of local need we are able to identify?

As a “Challenge for the coming week”, make a commitment to one new way of being generous.

Draw the session to a close in a time of prayer, allowing space for people to (silently) gather themselves if anything talked about has been difficult.

<p>I don't understand why we "do" Lent. I thought Christianity was meant to be happy, and Lent is about being miserable!</p>	<p>I don't give things up for Lent because I can't keep it up! After a few days I always forget.</p>
<p>I always give something up for Lent, it is a traditional thing to do.</p>	<p>I think it is important to remember the difficult bits of Jesus' story as well as the bits we want to celebrate.</p>
<p>I always give something up for Lent because it helps me to remember Jesus fasting.</p>	<p>I don't really know what Lent is about.</p>

I think Lent is important because it is part of the shape of the church year.

I don't see the point of giving something up for Lent, it is an old-fashioned tradition, it doesn't mean anything any more.

I like the idea of giving up things in Lent because it helps me to lose weight and save money.

Living Lent I – Session I – Imaginative Bible Reading

To read a Bible story using your imagination is a way of entering into the story and allowing God to speak to you through what you experience there.

1. Start by praying: ask God to help you to hear what he is saying to you as you read his word.
2. Read the Bible passage.
3. Re-read the story, maybe a couple of times – but as you do so, imagine that you are actually there amidst all that is taking place.
 - What is the setting, what can you see around you?
 - What sounds can you hear? What can you smell, feel, taste?
 - What are your reactions to what is said and done?
 - What are your reactions to Jesus?

You might decide to answer these questions as an observer; you might decide to imagine yourself in the role of one of the characters in the story so that you experience it from a particular perspective.

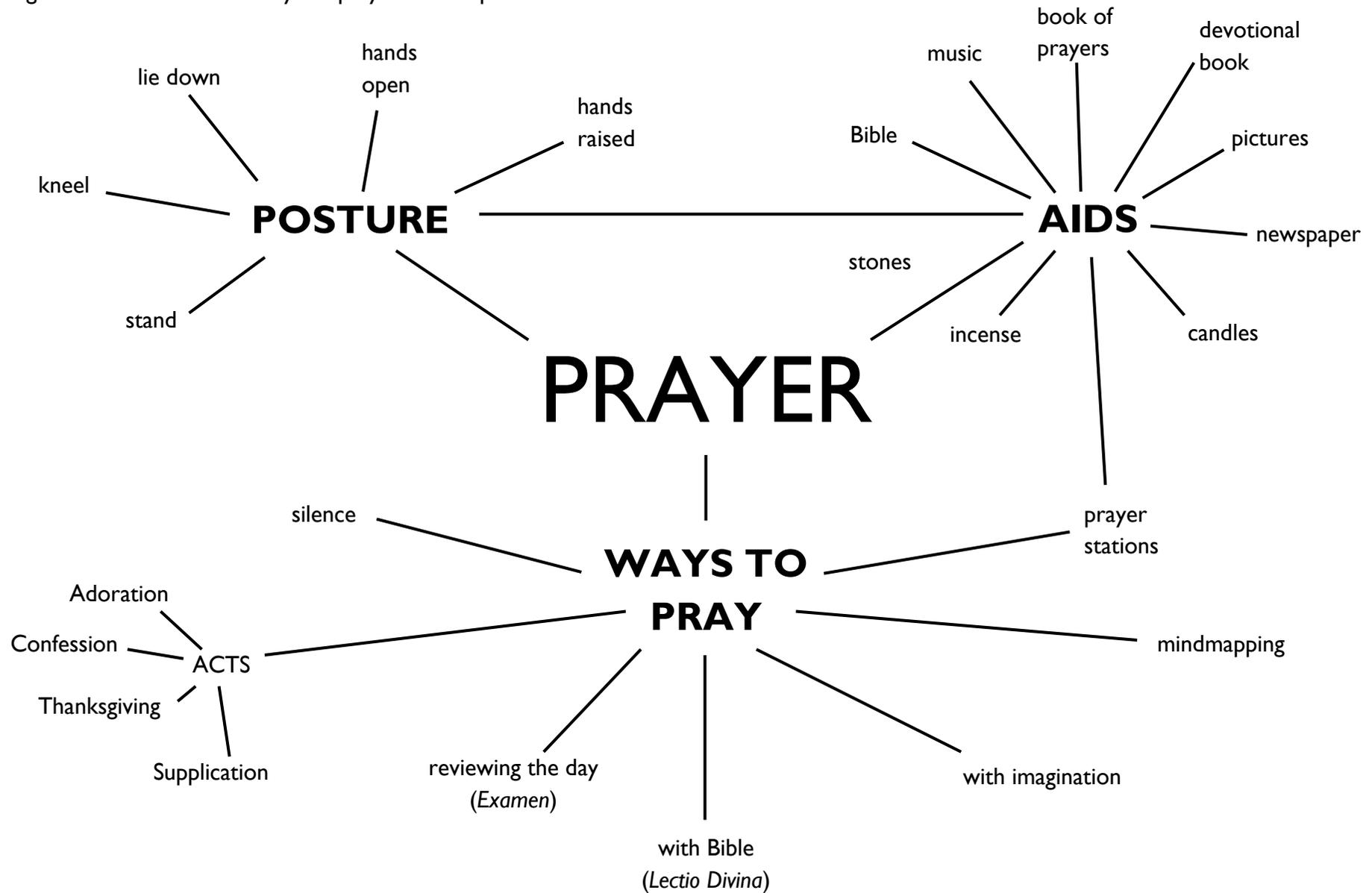
4. What speaks to you in this story? What is God saying to you?

Living Lent I – Session 2 – Prayer continuum

Prayer is so difficult
there almost seems to be
no point in trying to pray

Prayer is really easy,
as natural as breathing.





Praying with the Bible - *Lectio Divina*

This is a traditional Benedictine way of praying. Begin by reading a Bible passage, slowly, several times. As you read, notice what words, phrases or ideas stand out for you and any questions you may have. Then spend time meditating on (thinking about, reflecting on) the things that have stood out. Allow God to speak to you. Speak to him. Ask any questions which have arisen. Then spend some time resting in God's presence before ending your prayer.

Reviewing the day – *Examen*

This kind of prayer comes from Ignatian spirituality and is a way of reflecting prayerfully on the events of the day in order to see God in them. In God's presence, go through your day and notice its highs and lows, the bits for which you are grateful and the emotions you experienced (an audio version of this is available on the Pray As You Go website). Ask God what he is saying through these emotions and events. Respond to what he says.

Using newspapers

One way of praying for world (or local) concerns is to take a current newspaper and pray about some of the headlines.

Using pictures / candles / objects

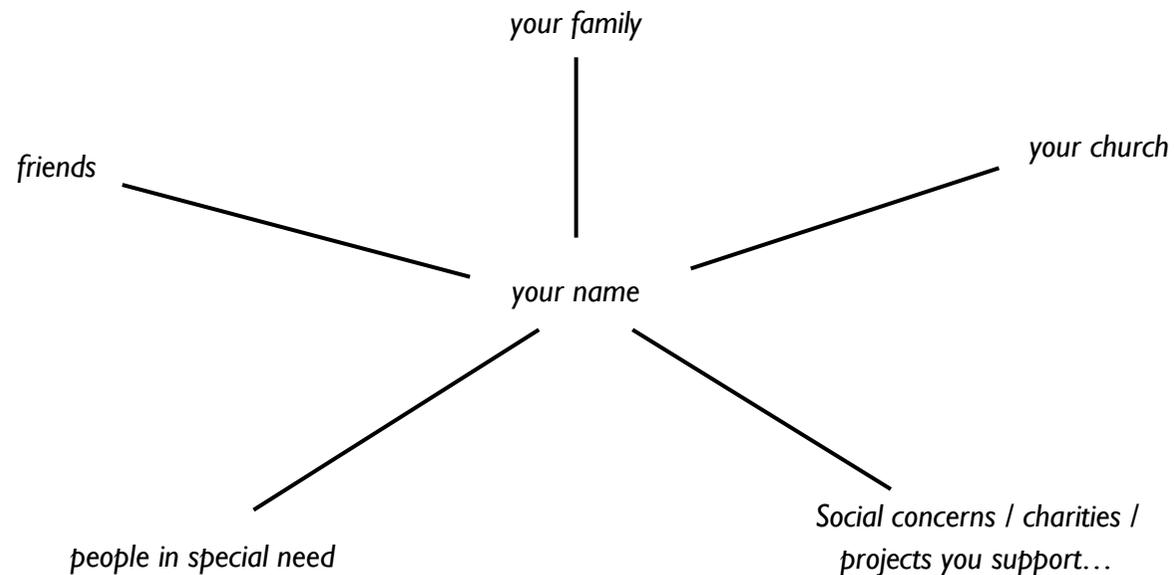
Distractions can be a real problem whilst praying. Some people find it useful to have something to look at, such as a candle, an icon or some other picture which helps them to focus or which has a particular message. Others find it helpful to have something to hold, such as a stone or a holding cross.

Praying with imagination

This kind of prayer comes particularly from Ignatian spirituality. Choose a Bible passage (this works particularly well with stories from the gospels) and, in imagination, become a participant in the scene. Be aware of what you can see, hear, feel, smell, touch, taste. Notice what emotions are stirred, what feelings and desires are evoked. What do you take away from this experience?

Living Lent I – Session 2 - Mindmapping a prayer

- Put your name in the centre, where it says “your name”.
- Then, from each of the headings, put lines out and write in the names of people/situations for which you want to pray. You can add new headings if you want to. You also need not use all the headings that are there.
- You can then pray for all or part of a section of the mind map each day.



Solitude: Spending time alone to be with God. This can be hard to achieve: for most people life involves almost constant contact with people. Even if you do have time alone, it may be filled with activity, interaction via social media, background television/radio/music. Could you take half an hour once a day, or once a week, to spend time alone with God?

Silence: Giving opportunity to hear God. Even when we spend time with God that time can be filled with noise: “religious” music or television programmes, or simply the “noise” of our own talking to God. Could you take time to stop talking to him and, in the silence, listen instead?

Retreat: Taking time out from daily life. Some people find it helpful to go away for a period of time, a few days or just a “Quiet Day” to step aside from their usual routine and give time to being with God. Could you investigate attending a retreat or quiet day? – look at the Spirituality section of the diocesan website (under Life and Faith) for details of centres near to Suffolk.

Service: Demonstrating God’s love to others. If you are a practical, active person you may want to challenge yourself to do something for others as your Lenten discipline. Suggestions are available in the “Live life love Lent” resource (available on the Church House Publishing website) and from the Bible Society, and include giving a gift to someone you love, and taking an item to a charity shop.

Bible reading / study: Growing in knowledge and understanding. Regular Bible reading may or may not be a part of your usual practice, but it is an important discipline to develop. Could you set yourself a challenge, such as reading through one of the gospels during Lent, or using a commentary to study a passage in more detail each week?

Worship: Praising God. This is often seen as something we only do at church, but really it is more of an attitude. Could you make a conscious decision to praise God for something each day? Worship at church is often familiar and can become routine. Could you attend a different service / place of worship once during Lent?

Prayer: Talking and listening to God. As in any relationship, communication is a necessary ingredient to keep it alive and enable it to grow. In Session 2 we looked at different ways of praying. Could you spend time using one or more of these each day/week?

Living Lent I – Session 3 – Ways of reading / studying the Bible

We have already used two methods of Bible reading: imaginative reading (in Session 1 – see page 16) and *Lectio Divina* (in Session 2 – see page 20). Looking at your chosen Bible passage, you could use one of these again, or use one or more of the following suggestions:

Alternative 1:

- First, as a group, read the passage in one of the following ways:
 - read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
 - allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
 - read slowly and meditatively
 - read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time.
- Then discuss your answers to the following questions:
 - What does it say? – what are the points it is trying to make?
 - What does it mean? – in its context, and to us now?
 - What difference does it make? – what could we do about it?

Alternative 2:

Read the Bible passage and discuss what you notice from that passage. Then, read the notes on that passage from a Bible commentary (such as Tom Wright's *For Everyone* series, published by SPCK). Discuss the ideas brought out by the commentary – how do these add to what you noticed in the passage? What does the passage have to say to you, now, in your current setting?

Alternative 3: Bible Meditation (from Joyce Huggett's *Encountering God* pp51-53 – Hodder and Stoughton Religious 1995)

- **READING:** Become still in God's presence and ask the Holy Spirit to shed light on the words you are going to read. Read the passage several times, becoming familiar with it. As you read, listen with anticipation. Read between the lines, conscious that God is anxious to convey so much more than words can say.
- **RECEIVING:** Spend time savouring the words; note which draw you in; repeat them and allow them to permeate your entire being.
- **RESPONDING:** Allow time to respond to what God has said through the passage: this might be a response of joy, of aching to know God better, of being overwhelmed, of repentance, of clarification and rededication.
- **RESTING:** Rest in God's presence, focusing not on the words but on God himself. Feel his love, absorb it, luxuriate in it, and open yourself to him to do in you and with you what he chooses.

MONASTICISM

Throughout the centuries there have been Christians who have given up their own individual lives to live as part of a community with a shared way of life. This still happens today, both in traditional monastic communities (such as Worth Abbey) and also in 'new monasticism' such as Moot in London), and see the Scargill Movement as an example of community living.

SHARED HOUSES

Acts 2:44-47 describes the early Christians as having all things in common, selling possessions and property rather than each person having their own. Some Christians still do this, two families living their own lives but sharing a house, for example.

SHARED RESOURCES

Shared lives might be a step too far for most of us, but there are lots of other ways of sharing resources. For example, are all of the cars in your church community needed, or would it be possible to own fewer cars and share them? Could you and your neighbour take it turns to cook for each other, saving time and energy and growing your relationship?

LIVING AND GROWING AS A COMMUNITY

SHARED CONCERN

Being united in a concern for a particular issue, or in working together on a project, enables people to get to know each other better and become more involved as a community. Another example of shared concern could be helping out someone in the congregation who has no transport to go shopping – doing this regularly could build up the relationship between you.

SHARED ACTIVITIES

One fun and non-threatening way to build community can be to have social activities together. Joining in a film night or a meal out enables people to get to know each other better. Doing spiritual activities together also builds community: consider, for example, how the relationships are growing as this Lent course progresses.

Living Lent I – Session 5 – Being generous

It is easy to think of generosity, at least when we think as a church, as being about giving more money. But there are many ways of being generous. Here are a few examples.

How can we be generous with our gifts and skills?

- Using listening skills with someone who needs to talk
- Using a gift for enthusiasm to encourage and inspire others about a particular issue
- Using a gift for creativity and IT skills to publicise events or to transform the church's notice boards.

How can we be generous with our time?

- Volunteering
- Raising money for, or awareness about, an issue
- Investing time in relationships, projects, driving a neighbour to the supermarket.

How can we be generous with our relationships?

- Welcoming others into our circle of friends, house group, group that we talk to over coffee after church
- Sharing the contacts we have with others who may benefit from them
- Building the relationships that we have.

How do we identify need?

- Be aware of what you see and hear around you (in the street, on the television, in local newspapers and in conversation).
- Ask questions: What prevents us from achieving this goal? What would make this person's life better / easier? Why does this happen and how could it be changed?