

THE BLESSING COURSE

Units in this series

- Unit 1 - Being Disciples
- Unit 2 - Building Our Faith
- Unit 3 - Prayer & Our Spiritual Lives
- Unit 4 - Being The Church
- Unit 5 - Being God's Servants
- Unit 6 - Blessing Your Local Area

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Diocese of Durham



UNIT 3

PRAYER & OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES

THE BLESSING COURSE

LIVING AS DISCIPLES OF THE GOD OF BLESSING

Blessing our communities in Jesus' name



THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Foreword

God is in the business of blessing. He blesses in creation (Genesis 1.22, 28). He blesses in the covenants he makes with humanity (e.g. Abraham Gen 12.1-4). He blesses supremely in our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1.3-14).

We are blessed people. So in response we bless God in praise and worship.

Then we are also called to be a people of blessing. God chooses to use us to bless others, as individuals and communities, and to bless the whole of creation. So we need to grow in our experience and understanding of this blessedness. Hence *The Blessing Course*.

The aim of the whole series is to help us grow as followers of Jesus so that we can be a people of blessing. We bless by our presence, by our prayers, by proclaiming the good news, and by serving.

It is my simple prayer that *The Blessing Course* will be a blessing to all who engage in it; and that we will all then be a means of God's blessing to others.

+Paul Dunelm
May 2016

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Introduction to Prayer & Our Spiritual Lives

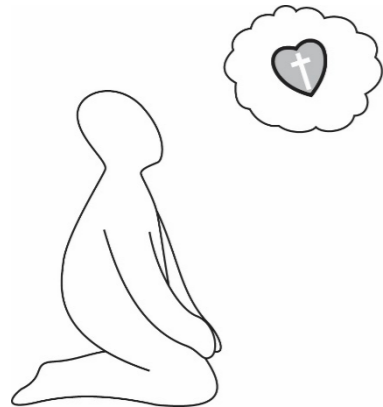
O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. I will bless you as long as I live. I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

Psalm 63.1-4

In this unit, we focus on our spiritual lives. Our spiritual lives develop when we seek God and open our hearts to God. An important way to open yourself to God is through prayer. Each session in this unit enables you to pray and encounter God in a different way.



We will use the Psalms as our guide for many of our prayers. The Psalms are a hymn book of the Jewish people and Jesus would have prayed them too. Today many parts of the church use them for daily prayer. The Psalms take the form of songs, poems and personal prayers. They are written from people to God, so they help us to talk to God. They unlock our hearts and enable us to express a large range of emotions. They give us permission, and the words, to come before God in thankfulness, anger, joy, despair, fear, and confusion.

The titles of the sessions in this unit all include Jesus and emphasise our spiritual need to focus upon Jesus. Each session enables you to approach Jesus in a different way, and encourages you to develop spiritually, both as an individual and as part of your church.

Session Contents and Structure

The sessions in this booklet are designed for group study and consist primarily of activities for you to engage in as a group. In between the activities are short explanatory paragraphs that are meant to guide your sessions. You may want to read these paragraphs aloud, or the group leader may summarise them briefly.

Each session is divided into three sections. The first section is called *Welcome and Worship* - all of the sessions open and conclude with worship. Worshipping God together honours God. It also reminds us that our sessions are about our spiritual growth and opens us to the work of the Holy Spirit.

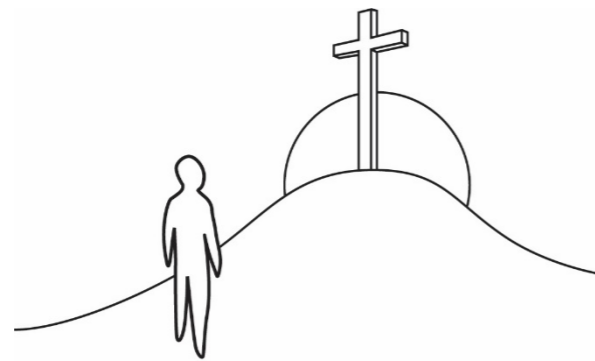
The next part of each session is called *Reflecting Together*. Here you will find opportunities to talk about your faith and what you believe. The final section, *Responding*, helps you to relate your thoughts about your faith to your own discipleship. It allows space for personal reflection and includes the closing worship.

At the very beginning of each session, you will also see a section labelled *Resources*. This provides a list of items you will need for that session. The group leader may provide the items in the list, or you may divide responsibility for these items among the members of your group.

Session 1

Being with Jesus

Our first step in encountering Jesus is often simply being in his presence.



Resources


For this session you will need:

- Music for the Taizé song 'Bless the Lord My Soul' by Jacques Berthier
- Up-lighters, lamps, candles & matches
- A Bible

- Activity 5.9 Share any thoughts or insights that you had through your art work. Sharing with others is not essential, but it can sometimes help us to clarify our thoughts.

Then pray together, silently or out loud, giving thanks to God for his presence with you through the ups and downs of life.

Singing helps us to express ourselves to God. Conclude by giving praise to God through song.

- Activity 5.10 Sing three or four songs that help you to respond with praise and thanksgiving for God's presence with you. Some suggestions include: 'All My Days' by Stuart Townend, 'Bless the Lord, O My Soul' by Matt Redman, 'How Great is Our God' by Chris Tomlin, 'To God be the Glory' by Fanny Crosby, 'How Great Thou Art' by Stuart Hine, or 'Praise to the Lord' by Joachim Neander. 

Ask a worship leader to lead this section, if at all possible. Encourage everyone to stand and sing to God. Project the words of the songs on a screen so that you do not need to hold books. Keep the singing informal, so that people focus on God rather than on getting the words or tune right. Like the art work, the aim here is not to produce perfect music but to express ourselves to God.

Conclude with a few words of praise to God.

Take your art work home. Use it to remind you of God's presence with you every day.

Art helps us to pray using images, and may be used as a form of contemplative prayer.

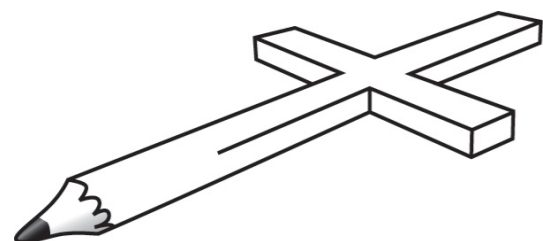
- Activity 5.8 Give everyone an A3 sheet of sketch paper. Put the art supplies where everyone has access to them. Provide everyone with a space where they may draw or paint.

Use Psalm 139 as a focus of prayer. Ask one person to read the Psalm out loud. Everyone else should close their eyes and place themselves in the shoes of the Psalmist.

After the Psalm allow a few minutes of silence. Then ask everyone to pray: 'God, how are you present in my life?' Be silent again for a few minutes, concentrating on this question. You may think of difficult situations when you have seen God supporting you. Or you may think of things that lead you to praise God.

Use the art supplies to express on the sketch paper any images or thoughts that come to mind through your prayer. You may draw pictures, or simply use colours and designs to express yourself.

If you struggle with an answer, imagine a place or situation in your daily routine. Draw that scene. Then ask God how he is present with you there. You may want to refer to Psalm 139 to help with this.



The aim here is not to create a great work of art. It is to explore the presence of God with you.

Welcome and Worship

Dim the lights and light the room with up-lighters, lamps, and candles.



Place one large unlit candle in the centre of the room. Listen to the Taizé song 'Bless the Lord My Soul' by Jacques Berthier as people enter the room.

Ask one person to light the large candle to remind you of God's presence with you. Leave all of the candles lit throughout the session.



Pray together the Celtic prayer for God's Aid:

**God to enfold me,
God to surround me,
God in my speaking,
God in my thinking.**

**God in my sleeping,
God in my waking,
God in my watching,
God in my hoping.**

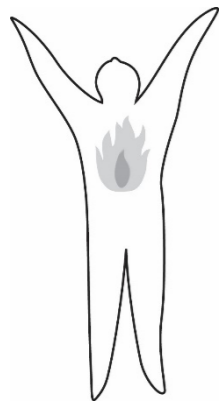
**God in my life,
God in my lips,
God in my soul,
God in my heart.**

**God in my sufficing,
God in my slumber,
God in mine ever-living soul,
God in mine eternity.
Amen.***

*God's Aid, Ancient Prayers – The *Carmina Gadelica*, Celtic Oral Tradition, Faith and Worship
http://www.faihandworship.com/Carmina_Gadelica_celtic_prayers.htm

Reflecting Together

The sessions in this booklet are about our spiritual lives. But what do we mean by 'spiritual'? When people call something spiritual, they do not always mean something Christian. Broadly speaking, spirituality has to do with our sense of meaning in life.



In Christianity, this meaning comes from our relationship with God. For Christians, spirituality refers to the Holy Spirit at work in us, drawing us to God. We grow spiritually when we spend time with Jesus. Your spiritual life is your life with God.

- Activity 1.1 How do you get to know your friends?

- Activity 1.2 We get to know Jesus in many of the same ways that we get to know our friends. Refer back at what you talked about in Activity 1.1 and consider: in what ways do these things apply to getting to know Jesus? What are the implications for your spiritual life?

Draw or write your thoughts here:



In this unit, we have explored a variety of ways to pray. Recall some of the approaches to prayer that we have used:

Session 1: contemplation and singing as adoration of God

Sessions 1 & 2: meditation using Scripture and the *Lectio Divina*

Session 3: confession and the Daily Examen

Session 4: intercession in small groups, lighting a candle, standing and raising our hands like the early church

Session 5: thanksgiving and praise

- Activity 5.6 Spend a few minutes talking about these different forms of prayer. What have you found helpful? What has surprised you?

- Activity 5.7 Talk about how you might continue to use these forms of prayer in your daily life. What have you discovered that you might want to do again?

Responding

Most of the forms of prayer we have explored involve words. But we can also express ourselves to God without words. The Bible is full of imagery and many of us think about God and our faith using images.



- Activity 5.3 Attach your post-it notes to the black paper. As you attach each post-it note, say thank you to God for the things you have written. Play worship music quietly in the background during this activity.

Praise focuses on God and declares who he is. We make our declarations of praise to ourselves, to those around us, and to the whole world.

- Activity 5.4 Look again at Psalm 96. This Psalm asks us to declare God’s glory.



On the star-shaped post-it notes, draw or write one thing about God that you would like to celebrate. Write one thing per post-it note.

- Activity 5.5 Praise God for what you have put on the post-it notes.

Once again, attach your post-it notes to the black paper and declare out loud your points of praise. You may want to begin your praise by saying, ‘God, I praise you, because...’

One of the ways that we get to know Jesus is by deliberately spending time with him. In this session, we will practice being *with* Jesus.

- Activity 1.3 To focus on Jesus, we need to stop focusing on other things. Close your eyes and consider, what are you thinking about? What is occupying your thoughts? Try to pinpoint the main things that your heart and mind are concerned with.

Allow a few minutes of silence, to give everyone time to identify these things.

- Activity 1.4 Keeping your eyes closed, deliberately put down the things you have identified. Take your focus off of those things and turn your focus to Jesus. Imagine Jesus sitting in the room next to you.

Allow a few minutes of silence.

- Activity 1.5 Pray silently and directly to Jesus. Pray as you breathe. As you breathe in, quietly or in your mind call his name, ‘Lord Jesus Christ’. As you breathe out, say ‘have mercy on me’.

Repeat this prayer quietly for several minutes.

Activity 1.5 uses an ancient form of prayer known as the Jesus Prayer. The prayer is based on the words of the tax collector in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’
Luke 18.13 (NIV)

The Jesus Prayer originates in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its aim is to make you aware of God's presence with you. It is a way of praying from the heart: once you know the words, you can focus fully on Jesus.

- Activity 1.6 The full Jesus Prayer is: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Pray again silently and directly to Jesus using this prayer, either the short version from Activity 1.5 or the full version. As you pray, focus on Jesus and use the prayer to call upon his name.

Repeat this prayer quietly for several minutes.

God seeks to know us just as we seek to know him. The term that we use for focusing on God's presence with us is contemplation.

In contemplation we seek to see God. Or as Brother Lawrence says, we seek to gaze on God. Contemplation makes us aware first and foremost of God. It helps us to *be with* God.

Contemplation is 'the pure loving gaze that finds God everywhere'.

*Brother Lawrence
The Practice of the Presence of God*

Contemplation is prayer of the heart. It engages both the heart and the mind, and brings both before God. Gregory the Great called it 'resting in God'.

There are a variety of approaches to contemplation. We have already contemplated Jesus' presence with us. Next we will focus on God using sung worship.

Reflecting Together

- Activity 5.1 What do you do when you are thankful for something someone has given to you or done for you? How do you respond?

Write or draw your thoughts here:

Our praise and thanksgiving are like light in the midst of darkness. They are like stars in the night sky. When we thank and praise God, we give space and voice to the good in this world. We point to God's presence with us.



- Activity 5.2 What are you thankful to God for? This may be anything in your life. Answer this question individually and draw or write your answers on star-shaped post-it notes. Draw or write one answer per post-it note.

Thank you prayers express our gratitude to God.

Welcome and Worship

Run the powerpoint slide show as everyone arrives. If you are not using a powerpoint, point out the photos you have hung around the room and ask people to compare them. Play quietly in the background one of the worship songs that you will use at the end of the session.

Read aloud this section of Psalm 96 as a declaration of praise to God. Take turns reading, with a different person reading each line:

O sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name! Tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples.
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised. He is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
Honour and majesty are before him. Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name. Bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness. Tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns!'
Psalm 96.1-10 (NRSV)

- Activity 1.7 Talk together for a few minutes about how worship songs enable you to encounter God.

Why do we sing in worship?

How is singing a matter of both the head and the heart?



Singing enables us to open our hearts to God while also engaging our minds. The style of worship music you prefer is less important than what the singing does: it helps you to express yourself to God.

Worship songs come in many forms. Hymns help us to think about and give us words to express what we believe. They are word-rich. Simple repetitive worship songs and choruses help us to move beyond words. The words of these songs are easy to learn. Once you know the lyrics and the melody, you can use such songs to express yourself directly to God.

- Activity 1.8 Listen to the refrain of the Taizé song 'Bless the Lord My Soul'. Then sing the refrain together. Once you know the words and tune, sing directly to God.

**Bless the Lord, my soul,
and bless God's holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul,
who leads me into life.**

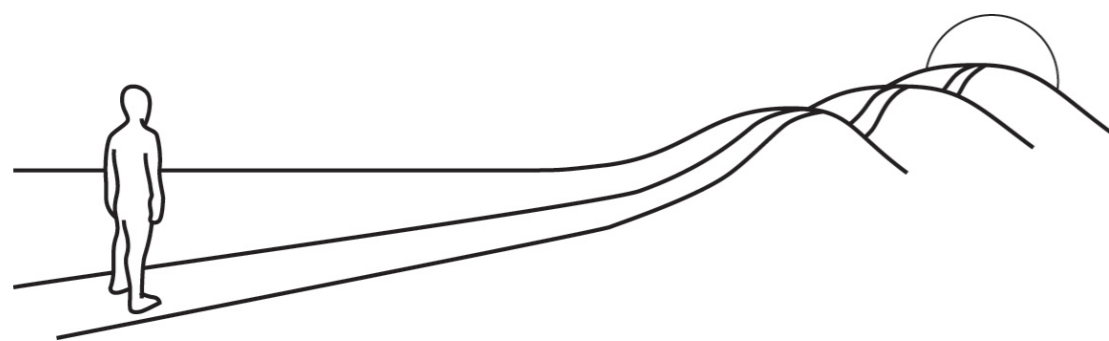
Responding

Keeping our focus on God, we turn to a method of prayer called the *Lectio Divina*, which means 'holy reading'. It is a form of meditation that seeks to encounter God through Scripture. It allows God's word to engage our hearts and minds.

Activity 1.9 Ask everyone to close their eyes. Tell them that you will read Psalm 121 out loud as a prayer.

Say to them: during the reading, you should listen for a word or phrase that strikes you, or that seems to speak to you. Once you notice a word or phrase, focus on it during the rest of the reading. In the silence that follows the reading, repeat the word or phrase over to yourself.

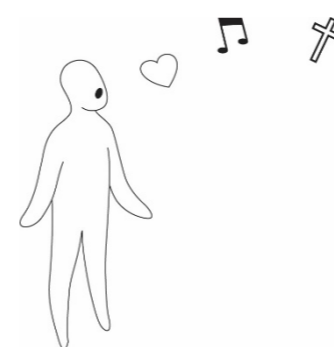
Then begin with a few minutes of silence. Read Psalm 121 out loud slowly. Allow 2-3 minutes of silence afterwards.



- Activity 1.10 Keep your eyes closed and continue to concentrate upon your chosen word or phrase.

Session 5

Thanking Jesus



**God is always present with us.
We respond to his presence
with praise and thanksgiving.**

Resources

For this session you will need:

- Powerpoint slideshow of stars, galaxies, the sun and moon. The slides should contrast light with darkness. Alternatively, you may simply want to collect photos and hang these around the room.
- Star-shaped post-it notes
- A large roll of black paper or a very large sheet of black card. Hang this somewhere accessible in the room.
- A Bible
- A3 sheets of paper from a sketch pad, one sheet per person
- Drawing or painting supplies such as: water colour paints and paint brushes, coloured pencils, coloured markers
- A worship leader to lead the final section of the session, preferably with a piano or guitar

Stand up to pray. The people of the early church faced east, towards Jerusalem, when they prayed. They raised their hands high and prayed out loud, crying out to God with their hearts. Do the same. Face east as a group, lift your hands up to God and pray for yourself.

Keep the worship music playing throughout this prayer time so that people are comfortable praying out loud. You may choose to whisper your prayers. Everyone should pray at the same time. Don't worry if this feels strange to you. This is an ancient form of prayer that we don't often practice now.

Conclude your prayer time with everyone saying the Lord's Prayer together.

You should now have a bookmark containing the situations and people that you have interceded for in this session. Take this home and use it to help you to pray in the coming week.

Read Psalm 121 a second time. This time consider what images, thoughts, feelings, or memories accompany your word or phrase. The word or phrase may lead to gratitude, concerns, or regrets. It may make you think of a situation.

Allow 2-3 minutes of silence after the reading.

- Activity 1.11 Read Psalm 121 for the third time, quietly. As the Psalm is read, respond to your reflections in prayer. This prayer is between you and God. Pray honestly and openly, from your heart. You may pray silently or whisper your prayers out loud.

Again, allow 2-3 minutes of silence after the reading.

- Activity 1.12 Read Psalm 121 for the fourth and final time. During the reading, rest quietly in the presence of God.

Imagine laying down before God the word or phrase and all that accompanies it.

Remain in silence for a few minutes and simply look at God.



Close the time of prayer by singing again the refrain of the Taizé song 'Bless the Lord My Soul'.

Session 2

Listening to Jesus

God speaks to us in many ways. One important way that he speaks is through Scripture.



Resources

For this session you will need:

- Copies of pictures of a shepherd and sheep and blu-tack. Or alternatively, a powerpoint slide show of these pictures.
- The music and words for 'The Lord's My Shepherd' by Stuart Townend.
- One Bible per person
- Coloured markers, pens or pencils

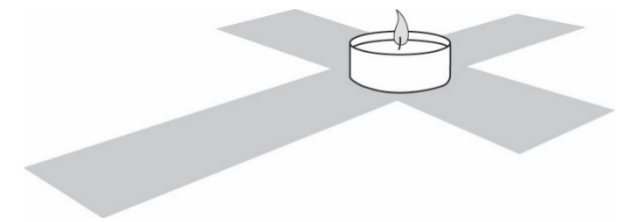
When we intercede, we speak directly to God. Sometimes intercession resembles contemplative prayer: you speak to God from your heart.

- Activity 4.9 Give everyone a tealight. Place the large candle near the masking tape cross and light it.

Think of a specific person for whom you would like to intercede. This may be a friend, family member, neighbour, work colleague, or someone in your church. Add this person to your bookmark.

While the worship music plays, invite everyone to come forward with their tealight.

Light your tealight from the big candle and place it on the masking tape cross. As you place your tealight, say out loud a one sentence prayer for your chosen person.



When you are finished, the tealights should form a lit cross. Leave this cross lit for the remainder of the session.

We conclude by praying for ourselves. This form of prayer is a personal appeal and is sometimes called 'petition' or 'supplication'.

- Activity 4.10 The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we are dependent upon God. Making a request to God is about recognising your dependence upon him. Choose something in your life that you want to bring before God. Add this to your bookmark.

Next you will intercede for your church.

- Activity 4.7 Distribute the church's news sheet so that everyone can see a copy. Each person may choose for prayer an up-coming event listed on the news sheet. Alternatively, you may want to choose a specific ministry or group in your church for prayer. Draw or write your chosen event, ministry or group on your bookmark.

Then think of one or two prayer points for this event, ministry or group. You may want to use the central part of the Lord's Prayer as a guide for these prayer points:

Give us this day our daily bread - ask God to supply needs.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us – ask God to enable forgiveness and healthy relationships.


Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil – ask God to protect and to show his way of walking through life.

- Activity 4.8 Each pair should join with another pair, to form small groups of four people. In your small group, pray out loud for your chosen event, ministry or group. Use the list of prayer points to help you pray, but also be open to other things that the Holy Spirit may bring to mind.

Welcome and Worship

Hang copies of pictures of a shepherd and sheep around the room. Or use a powerpoint slide show to project these pictures onto a wall. Ask the group to think about these pictures.



 Play 'The Lord's My Shepherd' by Stuart Townend in the background as the group look at the pictures.

Then say the following prayer responsively:

Lord, speak to us
that we may hear your word.
Move among us
that we may behold your glory.
Receive our prayers
that we may learn to trust you.
Amen.*

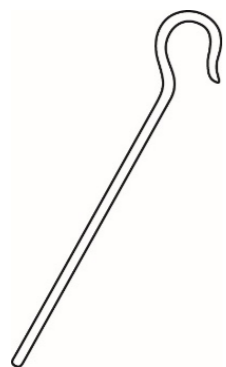
*Adapted from 'Gathering and Greeting A39', New Patterns for Worship, The Church of England
<https://cms.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/new-patterns-worship/resource-section-themes/a-gathering-greeting>

Reflecting Together

In the previous session, we focused on developing our relationship with God by spending time with him. Another important way that we develop any relationship is through communication.

We communicate with God through prayer. Prayer is conversation with God. Conversation involves both speaking and listening. In this session, we consider how we can *listen* to God through Scripture. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to speak to us.

We begin with Psalm 23.

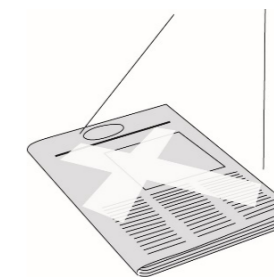


•Activity 2.1 At the heart of Psalm 23 is the image of God as our shepherd.

What do the pictures you have been looking at suggest to you about a shepherd and sheep?

When we ponder what God is saying through Scripture we open ourselves up to hear from God. This approach to Scripture is called *meditation*. Meditation is prayerful and is done slowly, so that you have time to dwell on the words, images, and contents of Scripture. Meditation is deliberately reflective and its aim is for you to hear God and to internalise Scripture.

- Activity 4.6 Browse the newspapers for a specific situation in the world or your community that needs prayer. Draw a picture of your chosen situation, or write a word or two, near the top of your bookmark. Do not write out a prayer.



Then divide into pairs and tell one another *very briefly* about your chosen situation.

One way to intercede is to allow our prayers to be shaped by the words of Scripture. Pray out loud in your pairs, with each person interceding for her or his chosen situation.

You may pray using your own words, or using the words taken from Psalm 86 in the box below. Fill in the blanks with the situation you have chosen:

**Hear my prayer, O Lord. Listen to my cry for mercy.
You, O Lord, are a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger,
full of unfailing love and faithfulness.**

Look down and have mercy on:

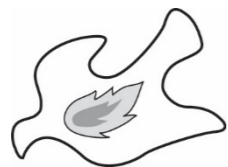
_____.

Give strength to: _____.

and save _____ **. Amen.**

To do this, we must first centre ourselves upon God, and open ourselves to God's guidance. We do not intercede on our own. The Holy Spirit guides our prayers.


- Activity 4.5 Spend a few minutes in contemplative prayer, using the form of prayer found in Session 1 Activities 1.3 and 1.4.



Then while everyone is quiet, read Romans 8.26-27 out loud. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your prayers in the remainder of the session. Ask everyone to listen for any prompting from the Holy Spirit as they pray.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.
Romans 8.26-27 (NIV)

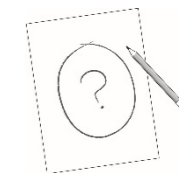
For the remainder of this session, you will engage in intercession. Your intercessions will begin with a broad focus, the world, and narrow in focus until you conclude by praying for yourself.

 Play worship music softly in the background throughout the intercessions so that no one becomes self-conscious about their own voice and use of words. The aim is to enable everyone to intercede, not to use 'perfect' words. Some useful worship songs include: 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' by Joseph Scriven, 'Faithful One' by Brian Doerksen, 'Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Come to Us' by Patrick Appleford, and 'O Lord Hear My Prayer' by the Taizé Community. All of these songs focus on prayer.

- Activity 2.2 Read out loud Psalm 23.

**The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**
Psalm 23 (NRSV)

What do you notice about this Psalm?



- Activity 2.3 Ask everyone to close their eyes. Read Psalm 23 out loud again. This time, put yourself into the scene. Jesus is the shepherd and you are the sheep.

Afterwards discuss:

As you listened to the Psalm, what did you imagine Jesus doing?

What did you imagine Jesus saying to you?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus uses the image of a shepherd and sheep to tell a story. We will meditate together on this parable using another form of *Lectio Divina*.

As we saw in the previous session, *Lectio Divina* allows God to speak to both our hearts and our heads. God's word enters our thoughts slowly and stays with us. This may be compared to enjoying a boiled sweet. You put it in your mouth and it remains there for a long time as you taste it and take it in.



When we intercede, we address God. Doing this out loud helps us to pray together. One question that arises in praying out loud is how to begin and how to end.

- Activity 4.3 Many people begin their prayers by saying God's name as a way of focusing upon God. Some people begin their prayers with 'Lord Jesus' and others with 'Dear God'. The Lord's Prayer begins with 'Our Father in Heaven'.

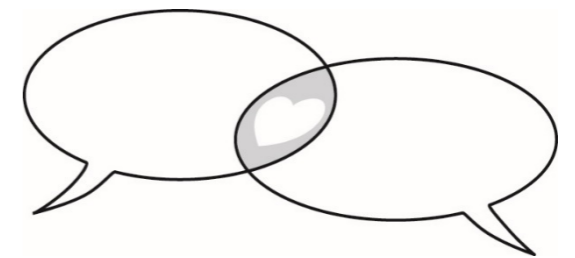
Talk *very briefly* about the ways you like to begin your prayers. Write one of these ways at the top of your bookmark.

- Activity 4.4 People also use a variety of words for closing their prayers. The most common word is 'amen'. This is an ancient way of concluding prayer. 'Amen' means 'so let it be' and is a way of saying that you agree with what has just been said. Other common ways of closing prayer include: 'In the name of Christ, amen' and 'Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer'.

Talk *very briefly* about the ways you conclude your prayers. Write one of these ways at the bottom of your bookmark.

Responding

Intercession is not about making a list of things we 'want' from God. When we intercede, we seek to see the world from God's point of view, and we ask for God's will to be done. This echoes the Lord's Prayer: 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.



- Activity 4.2 The Lord's Prayer shows us how we might intercede for ourselves and for others. Our motive for intercession is compassion: we pray because we love. Look at the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6.9-13.

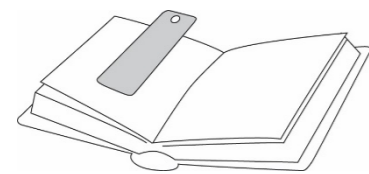
What kind of requests do you make when you pray the Lord's Prayer?



- Activity 2.4 Ask everyone to close their eyes. Read Luke 15.3-7 out loud slowly. As you listen, step inside the story using your imagination. Put yourself in the scene. How does it make you feel? What do you notice?

Then talk about your experience of this as a group.

- Activity 2.5 Read the parable out loud again. This time, read along, using the box below. Pay attention to the details and ask questions of the passage.



In this session, you will create a prayer bookmark that you can use to guide your intercessions in the coming week.

Give everyone a rectangular card and a few coloured markers. A number of activities will ask you to write on the bookmark, so write small!

So Jesus told them this parable:
'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?
When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.
And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them,
"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."
Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'
 Luke 15.3-7 (NRSV)

Break into pairs and chat about the following questions:

What did you notice? What did it make you think about?

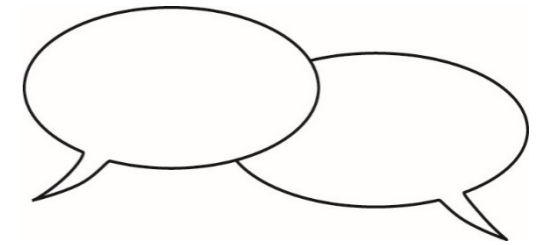
What might the parable mean?

What might this parable mean for the life of your church?

Give everyone time to chat, then feedback to the whole group.

Reflecting Together

Prayer is conversation with God. Conversation is two-way: it involves both speaking and listening. In Session 2, you thought about listening to God. In this session, you will focus on talking to God.



- Activity 4.1 What is your experience of prayer?

What do you expect when you pray?

My thoughts:

Many people think of prayer as making requests to God. This is a particular form of prayer. It is called intercession. Intercession means standing in the gap between people and God. When we intercede, we come before our great God and ask him to act.

In Session 1, we thought about how God is *with us*. Not only is God with us, but God also *works with us*. He consistently chooses to work in this world through his people. When we intercede, we partner with God in taking a stand against the wrongs of this world and seek good in the world instead.

Welcome and Worship

We begin this session by declaring the greatness of our God who made the world and loves us.

Ask everyone to stand up and face the centre of the room so that half of the people in the room face the other half. Then say together the following Psalm, with one half of the room saying the lines in normal font and the other half saying the lines in bold:

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD.

Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him.

The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker,

for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Psalm 95.1-7 (NIV)

Ask one person to say a prayer of thanks that all of you belong to God.

Responding

- Activity 2.7 Ask the group to close their eyes and to listen prayerfully as you read the parable out loud for the third time.

This time, let the reading provide space for prayer. Bring your thoughts and feelings to God as you listen. It may help to focus on one thought or image that you noticed in the passage. Consider what the passage is saying to you and talk to God about that.

- Activity 2.8 Ask the group to close their eyes and to listen prayerfully as you read the parable out loud for a fourth time.

This time, as you listen be aware that God is with you. Then be still before God, keeping yourself open to God's presence.

After reading the Psalm for the fourth time, remain in silent prayer for 2-3 minutes.

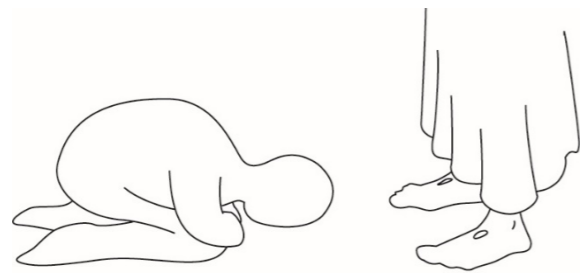


Conclude by singing together 'The Lord's My Shepherd' by Stuart Townend.

Session 3

Confessing to Jesus

In this session, we seek to be honest before God and to confess to him the things that separate us from him.



Resources

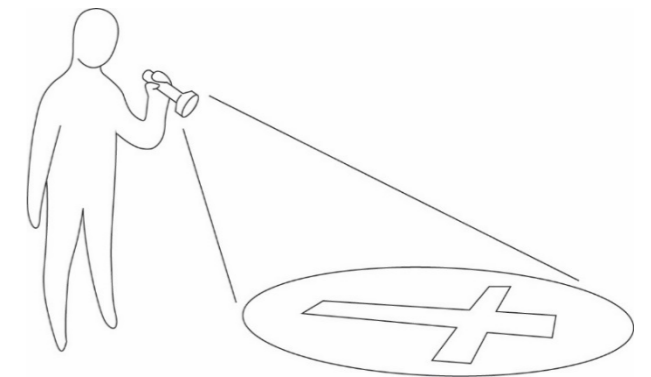
For this session you will need:

- A wooden cross
- Three candles & matches
- A Bible for each person
- A basket full of small stones, one stone per person
- The music for 'Before the Throne of God Above' by Charitie Lees Bancroft and Vikki Cook

Session 4

Seeing with Jesus

When we follow Jesus, we learn to see our world from his perspective. This enables us to pray for our world.



Resources

For this session you will need:

- One Bible per person
- Narrow rectangular cards, in the shape of a bookmark, one per person, and coloured markers or pens
- Recent national and local newspapers
- Copies of your church's most recent news sheet or parish magazine
- Tealights, one per person
- Masking tape: use this to make the shape of a cross on the floor or on a table in the centre of the room
- One large candle & matches
- Worship music such as: 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' by Joseph Scriven, 'Faithful One' by Brian Doerksen, 'Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Come to Us' by Patrick Appleford, or 'O Lord Hear My Prayer' by the Taizé Community.

Conclude by saying together this prayer of absolution:

**May the God of love
bring us back to himself,
forgive us our sins,
and assure us of his eternal love
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.***

*'Penitence B73', New Patterns for Worship, The Church of England
<https://cms.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/new-patterns-worship/resource-section-themes/b-penitence>

Welcome and Worship

Place the cross in the centre of the room and the candles in a triangle next to the cross.



Light the three candles one at a time. As you light the candles, say responsively the following prayer:

**We meet in the name of God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.***

Keep silence for a few minutes, then say the following:

**We come from scattered lives to meet with God.
Let us recognize his presence with us.
(Silence is kept).
As God's people we have gathered:
let us worship him together.
Amen***

*Adapted from 'Gathering and Greeting A19 and A12', New Patterns for Worship, The Church of England
<https://cms.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/new-patterns-worship/resource-section-themes/a-gathering-greeting>

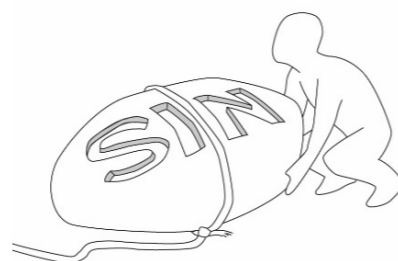
Leave the candles lit throughout the session as a reminder of God's presence with you.

Reflecting Together

To develop our relationship with God, we need to acknowledge the barriers that exist between us and God.

- Activity 3.1 Pass around the basket of stones. Take one stone and hold it in your hands. Feel the weight of it. The stone is hard, and sin is often described as hard-heartedness. The stone represents the weight of sin in your life.

Take a few minutes individually to feel and reflect on the stone. What might it represent for you? What are you holding onto that may weigh you down?



- Activity 3.2 While holding the stone in one hand, reach out and try to take the hand of someone next to you with that same hand.

How difficult is it to do this?

How might the sin that we hold onto affect our relationships with others?

In Unit 2 of the Blessing Course, we said that sin is like a chronic illness. All of us are ill with sin. The way that sin manifests itself - the symptoms of sin - include self-seeking, all sorts of wrong-doing, and unhelpful attitudes.

acted regardless of him or drew away from him. Admit any sins or wrong-doing to God and express your sorrow to him.

5. Turn your hands downward and let go of the stone, to show that you are turning all it represents over to God. Then turn your empty palms upwards again to receive from God. Give thanks for his grace. Ask God for his guidance throughout your day tomorrow.*

*You can get more guidance on this form of prayer from:
<https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/examen-and-ignatian-prayer/how-can-i-pray-try-the-daily-examen>

When we confess our sins, God responds with forgiveness and love. Confession leads to gratitude, not guilt. God's love is like a mighty, powerful river. It is much larger than our sins, and washes our sins away when we are willing to let go of them.

- Activity 3.8 Quietly in the background play the worship song 'Before the Throne of God Above' by Charitie Lees Bancroft and Vikki Cook.

Walk forward and place your stone at the foot of the cross. Say 'thank you' out loud as you lay down the stone.



We will use a variation on the Daily Examen as a means of helping us to recognise our sins and confess them to God.

- Activity 3.7 The Daily Examen has 5 parts. Include a period of silence between each part. The group leader will need to lead this time of prayer, allowing 2-3 minutes for each part.

1. To begin, bow your head or kneel before God. Become aware of God's presence with you. Still yourself and consider what things are occupying your thoughts. Deliberately take your focus off of the things you have identified and turn your focus to Jesus. Imagine Jesus sitting in the room next to you. Think about his love for you.

2. Open your hands out empty, palms up, to show that you are willing to be honest before God. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to look honestly at your day. Recall places, people, events. Review your day and thank God for the good things that have happened – things that happened to you and to others. Express your gratitude to God.



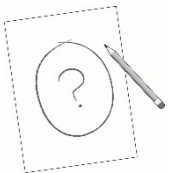
3. Look at your day again and see yourself in it. Recall your feelings and motives. What drove your actions and words? When were you aware of God's presence? When did you act or speak regardless of God's presence? When did you draw closer to God? When did you move further away?

4. Pick up your stone and hold it out before God on the palms of your hands. Confess to God the times in your day when you

For many of us, it is difficult to say sorry or to admit that we are in the wrong.

- Activity 3.3 Talk together about the difficulty of admitting to being in the wrong and saying sorry. Why might we find this hard to do?

Write or draw your thoughts here:



God asks us to confess our sins to him. To confess our sins means to acknowledge our sins and to admit them to God.

- Activity 3.4 Read 1 John 1.6-9. This passage is often used as part of the liturgy in Anglican services. The phrase 'walking in the light' refers to honesty or owning up to our sin, while 'walking in darkness' refers to dishonesty or denial of our sin.



According to this passage, what are the results of confessing our sins?

God forgives our sins through the power of Jesus' death. His forgiveness is complete and not dependent upon us.

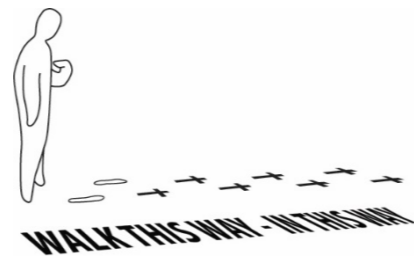
Forgiveness is the divine miracle of grace. The cost to God was the Cross of Christ.
Oswald Chambers

Confessing our sins is an act of repentance. It keeps our relationship with God honest and healthy. It helps us to face up to our sins and deal with them.

Psalm 32 describes the impact of confession on our lives.

- Activity 3.5 Read out loud Psalm 32. As you listen, place yourself in the shoes of the person in the Psalm. What journey does the Psalm describe? How does it make you feel?

How does this journey of confession compare to your own experience of confession?



Psalm 32 describes the journey that we go through when we confess our sins. Psalm 51, in comparison, is an actual confession. It provides us with a model for approaching God.

- Activity 3.6 Read aloud Psalm 51. Once again, as you listen to the Psalm, place yourself in the shoes of the person in the Psalm.



How does the person in the Psalm ask God to respond to her or his sin?

What does the person ask for in place of the sin?

Responding

When we confess, we admit to specific wrong-doings and seek forgiveness for these. This is an act of prayer.

Ignatius of Loyola developed a method of prayer that can be used to review your day in the presence of God. It is called the Daily Examen. This method of prayer brings you into God's presence, and helps you to discern what gives you life and what you need to leave behind.