

How to Lead Contemplative Activities – for the Teacher/Parent

By Kerry Wilson

Many of the contemplative activities in these resources may be new ways to pray for you, but they can be rich experiences that do not fit the typical model of how we usually pray in church. So many different things can be prayer: words, movements, creativity, silence, dance, music, etc. It is all about our intention during the activity, which is to be open to and connect with God. The focus is on “hanging out with God” in a relaxed way, without judgment, and noticing how the Spirit is moving in the experience.

You as the teacher/parent will be guiding these contemplative activities, and this may be new for some of you, or you may feel like you can’t do this... but you can! With these simple guidelines, you will be able to set the tone and navigate the experience with sensitivity, openness and confidence.

In order to make these activities accessible for younger children, there is often movement and creativity involved so that children can engage with their whole being, not just with words. Sometimes they might feel a little awkward or uncomfortable at the beginning because it is something new, but try to notice if there is a difference in them after the activity. That is how you can tell if the activity has landed. And each activity will not land for everyone. We are all unique in the way that we connect with the Holy.

If some students are not inclined towards these activities, don’t worry if they act silly. This can be a way of coping with something new. There is value in just being exposed to these ideas about prayer; later in their lives, this may begin to make more sense for them. The main focus for those who are not connecting is that they do not distract others who are going deep and that they are respectful of (not making fun of) those who are engaging. So, firm guidelines need to be in place to limit distracting behaviours – guidelines such as silence for all and gathering back in a location that is away from others who are still engaged.

Explanation

Explain the activity to everyone before you begin, because participants are to do these activities without talking. Make sure everyone has all the materials they need. *****Make sure you have fielded questions regarding what to do and how to do it BEFORE starting so there is no interruption of the flow once you begin.**

Creating the Setting

Make sure your space is quiet and you will not be interrupted. If you are indoors, peaceful sounds of the ocean or gentle music playing softly in the background can help create the appropriate atmosphere. Make sure you centre yourself and are not feeling rushed. Use a calm, relaxed voice and speak slowly.

Centering with Children

This may be new to people. The purpose is to come to a place of inner quiet before

beginning the activity. You can do this in many different ways. Invite people to sit/stand comfortably, close their eyes and focus on their breath. Slowly breathe in, then out. Additionally, everyone could imagine breathing in light and love, and breathing out all agitation (or wiggles!). If the group is highly active, you may need to take a little longer to ground before starting. After several deep breaths, read the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

An opening prayer is provided for each activity. After reading this aloud, and when people feel ready, ask them to gently open their eyes and, without talking, quietly begin.

The Experience of the New Spiritual Practice

There is no right way to pray, and this is not about getting it right. We need to pray as we can, not as we can't. Give people permission to be free, but at the same time to notice what is happening both inside and outside of themselves. This is about "hanging out" with God and experiencing a different kind of prayer. Encourage them to enjoy the movement of their bodies as a way to connect with God.

Noticing (The Examen)

When you are done the activity, ask everyone to pause for a few moments and notice (without judgment) what they just experienced. Ask questions like "What did you notice inside yourself? Did you experience any inner nudgings? What was fun and joyful? What was a struggle? Did anything shift inside as you did this?" Give them time to be reflective and thoughtful.

Sharing

If there is time, sharing can be done, but it is not essential. Children can share their experience by writing in their journal or sharing with a partner, small group or the whole group. **It is essential that you as the leader create safe space for sharing.** These are very personal experiences and need to be held as precious: everyone needs to engage in "Holy Listening" so that collectively you can all create safe space for each other. People will need to be taught how to do this, and it is not something that can be assumed. Safety is created when there is confidentiality, no judgment or comment on anything shared, and when people are not interrupted while sharing. **These ground rules need to be discussed and firmly established before anyone is asked to share.** Using a "talking stick" is one way to support this.

***Everyone must always have the option to pass when the talking stick is going around the circle. It is often helpful to have a few seconds' pause between speakers.

Holy Listening

Holy Listening is a way of listening that requires every participant to:

- be respectful and do not interrupt or comment when others are speaking
- hold everything you hear as precious, and do not judge
- be open and accepting
- do not tell others anything you hear *****confidentiality is essential**
- remember that this is sacred time
- listen to others as you would like to be listened to