



Let us pray... anywhere?

Exploring children's prayer and reflection experiences beyond the church primary school.



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Let us pray... an introduction

In 2023, the Diocese of Hereford held a Year of Prayer. As part of this, the diocesan Education Team developed a project exploring children's prayer and reflection experiences in six of its Church of England primary schools. This research has been funded by the Growing Faith Foundation.

It hoped to build upon previous work with churches and schools exploring children's spirituality and the findings of the NICER report, 'Faith in the Nexus.'

<https://nicer.org.uk/faith-in-the-nexus>

The project was led by Mark Harrington, from the diocesan Education Team, with the support of diocesan colleagues.



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Our research focus

How can we, as churches and church schools, encourage primary school children to develop a prayer life outside of the school setting?



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Overview of the project



Pupils from six Church of England primary schools were video interviewed in small groups (5-7 pupils) about their prayer experiences at school and elsewhere. At the start of the project, the pupils were from years 3-5 (October 2022).

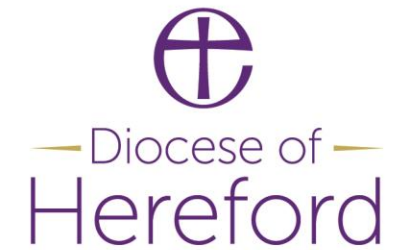
Then, a working group of paired church and school representatives regularly met online with the education team.

They reflected on the children's responses to develop resources to encourage prayer across the nexus of home, school and church.

The six schools trialled these resources for a set period (Summer Term 23).

Then, the same groups of pupils were re-interviewed to review the impact of the resources (November 23).

Parental views were also sought via online questionnaires.



The schools involved

Of the twenty schools that applied to participate in the project, six were selected to represent a variety of school categories from across the diocese. Most were small village schools.



- Cradley CE Primary, Malvern
- Christ Church CE Primary, Cressage
- Kingsland CE Primary, Leominster
- Lydbury North CE Primary
- St Laurence CE Primary, Ludlow
- Stottesdon CE Primary



Initial Pupil Interview Questions

1. What do you like about praying at school?
2. What different ways have you tried praying at school?
3. Is there anywhere else that you like to pray?
4. Do you pray at home? If so, who do you pray with?
5. Do you have any special family ways to pray, like before food or bedtime?
6. If you were trying to tell a friend what prayer is, what would you say to them?
7. Can you think of different ways of praying? You will have seen people read out prayers, but are there other ways of praying?
8. What makes it easier for you to pray?
9. What makes it harder for you to pray?
10. Is there anything that you can think of that has helped you to pray before that might help other people to pray?
11. Is there anything else you want to tell us about praying?
12. Do you prefer the word prayer or reflection?



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Initial Analysis



The videos were transcribed, and patterns were looked for in the children's responses.

These have been summarised with examples on the following slides.

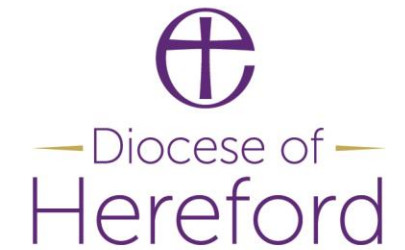
Parental responses

The anonymous online questionnaires did not elicit sufficient responses to provide patterns in their views.

The respondents (7) were likelier to be churchgoers who clearly understood prayer. Their responses revealed a concern about how to help their child navigate grief through prayer.

One wondered whether a small group exploring prayer might support their child's spiritual development.

We tried a follow-up survey at the end of the project using the word 'reflection or prayer' to see if a more inclusive approach might work. However, this only elicited three respondents, all from the same school who were positive about the project.



Sometimes our teacher says a prayer and we can join in with the Amen at the end to make it our prayer.

If he hears that prayer then he could change the world and maybe those bad things would turn into good things and the world might be as he wanted a better and happy place.

*I like praying because I know that either God or Jesus is listening.
(an uncommon view)*

Prayer at School

- Prayer is central to collective worship in schools.
 - The focus tends to be on praying for others for world situations (Ukraine, other wars).
 - Reflecting upon things done wrong was a common theme.
 - Only a couple talked about giving thanks.
 - A few mentioned praying the Peace, school prayers, and prayers before meals.
- But this was not common.
- Mindfulness reflections and calming prayers were common when they were frustrated.
 - Prayer is predominantly seen as being led by an adult or another child that they can join in with or end with Amen.
 - Writing prayers for special events such as Remembrance was how they defined the times that they prayed.



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'When in assembly at the end we get into bubbles. You go into your little own space and close your eyes, and reflect on the story and things that happened and that the teacher had said about.'



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'It feels like you're connecting to God when you pray and you have a candle lit, and God can hear you as the flame is pointing up in the sky. It shows God because God is like a light and God listens to the things that you want to tell him. It gives you the independence to pray.'



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I like to sit on nice puffy grass outside in my garden and start praying and then I feel like something is talking back to me and holding my hand.

We go to my Nan's church or she has it on the TV and we join in with that.

Prayer Elsewhere

- Prayer and reflection tend to be in solitude.
- Outside spaces are useful to help them be alone and peaceful
- If indoors, they prefer somewhere quiet and comfortable. They would like cushions and blankets rather than a cold school floor.
- Several discussed church, Messy Church, or Open the Book as other prayer opportunities.
- Grandparents were featured leading them in prayer, or those who used to pray with them but don't anymore. This tied into the Faith in the Nexus research.

I pray in my bed because when I feel that I am struggling a bit I need my own quiet space.



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I sometimes pray with my sister. I choose to do this. Sometimes we go into the living room on a mat and have reflection time and pray. We pray whatever comes into our mind.

When mum got her hand injured I prayed for her and it was alright.

Prayer at home

- Most did pray or reflect at home in some form, often when frustrated or about world events.
- This was mainly on their own. Very few pray as a family or with adults except during festivals, such as Christmas or at a funeral.
- Those who did pray with others tended to pray at church or whilst watching an online service.
- Often, the children pray with pets/animals.
- A couple prayed with siblings. Others expressed how being away from their siblings was more helpful.
- Prayer before meals with relatives or on Christmas day; often, parents used the Lord's Prayer on such occasions.
- No other routines were offered apart from praying during football matches

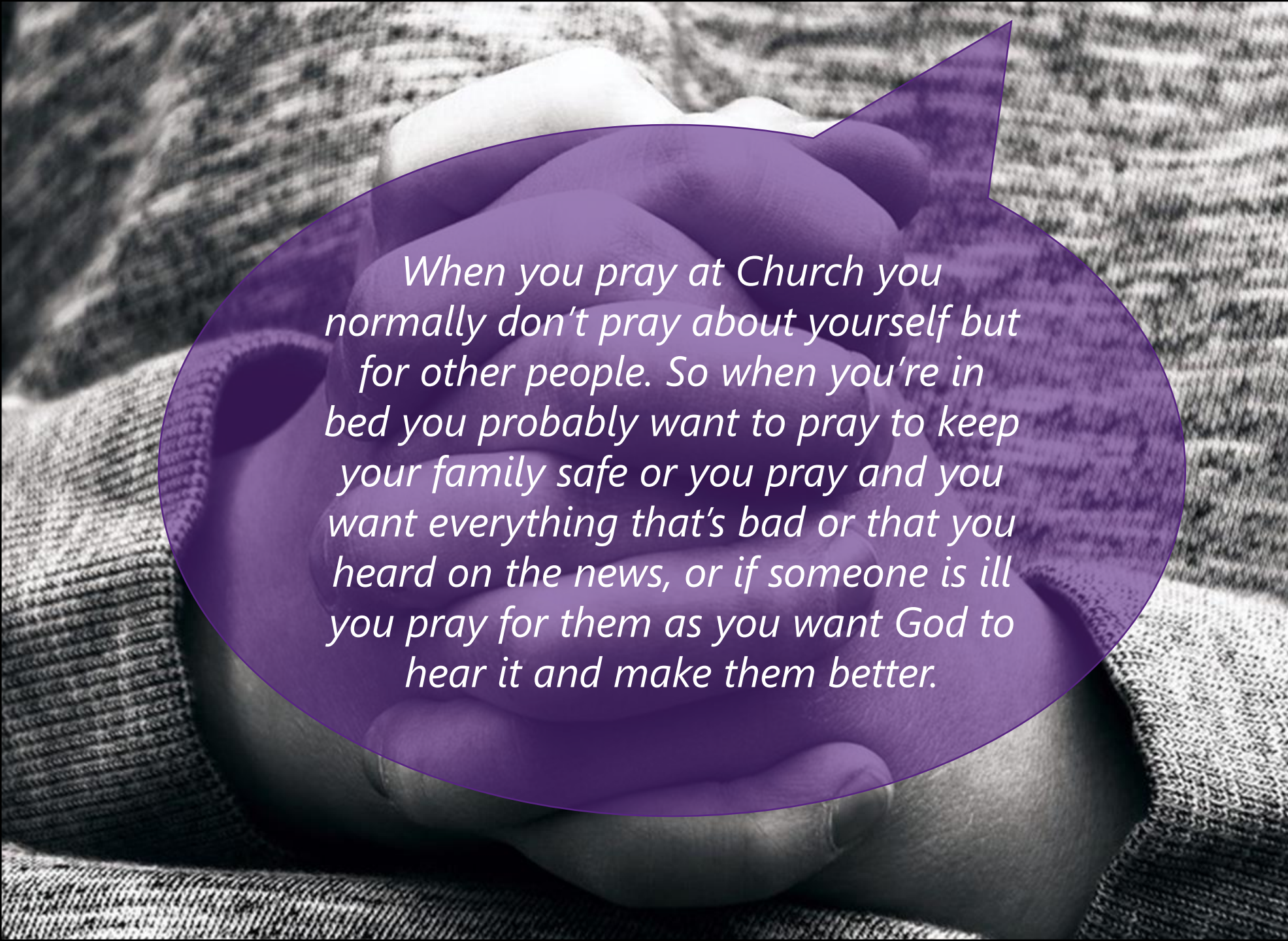


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When you pray at Church you normally don't pray about yourself but for other people. So when you're in bed you probably want to pray to keep your family safe or you pray and you want everything that's bad or that you heard on the news, or if someone is ill you pray for them as you want God to hear it and make them better.



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What is prayer? (some of the initial responses)

- *When you pray it is a message to God or Jesus.*
- *Prayer is a time when you can relax and think about everything. You might do it in loudness, but I like to do it in silence, so I can hear myself speak and hear everybody else speak.*
- *Prayer is like speaking to God.*
- *Praying is like a time of respect when you can show your feelings to God.*
- *I think it's a time when you can be silent and be respectful.*
- *I think it's a bit like when you are just in the moment and you have time to think about stuff.*
- *I think when I'm being thankful I can hear like the wind whispering maybe.*
- *A prayer is when you connect to God and you're kind of with him when you do it.*
- *It's some time to relax and let all the bad thoughts go out.*
- *I'd say it's a moment to reflect and if you've done something you shouldn't have done that day you can ask for forgiveness.*



*Praying on a blanket
as it's nice and soft
and fluffy and calms
me down to be
comfortable.*

*I curl up into a ball and
get comfortable and
think of people I've lost
or what my happy times
might be.*

What helps them pray?

- Being somewhere quiet came out the most strongly.
- They knew you could pray anywhere but preferred quiet places.
- Need to feel relaxed and comfortable.
- Using special items or pictures to help focus prayers was a typical response.
- Communion was mentioned by one as helping them to pray.
- Known prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, that they can use at other times were also featured.
- Also sitting on their horse- away from distractions (we are a rural diocese!)



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When you're squished together and noisy.

It's harder to pray in the hall than on your own. Because there's lots of other people, especially the younger ones. We like to be on our own.

What hinders prayer?

- Noise and distractions from others around them (e.g. siblings).
- When too distracted by too many thoughts, especially knowing what to pray when someone is hurt or ill.
- Praying for someone who has died recently.
- When angry, but it does help.

Praying in a loud space is really hard as they're lots of people exploding your bubble where it's nice and peaceful and you're reflecting on things.



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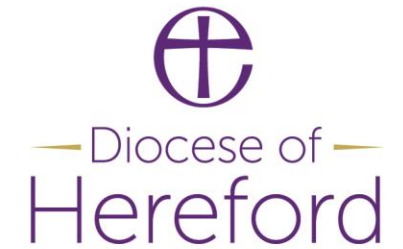


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Prayer or Reflection?

- The children's responses were very context-linked to their school's worship practice and the phrases used to introduce it.
- Some groups had split opinions, whereas others unanimously stated their preference.
- Overall, there was a 50/50 split.
- This would be an area to reflect on and how we talk about and introduce prayer.

Reflection is when you look back on something that has happened, but praying is when you ask God or say something to thank God.



Is there anything else you want to tell us about praying?

- Being taught (about) prayers in RE was common.
- A few children had used creative prayer activities in school or at home, predominantly those who attended church.
- Leading prayers for Remembrance or other events, such as the Jubilee, were a treasured experience for many.

I get anxious so I keep a jar and I put a note about what I want to be I decorate it with tissue and put a fairy light in it and use it every night to remind me of what I want to be. It helps me to not be as anxious I now have control of it. It is a kind of prayer.

I think there are endless things that you can do with prayers as they can go on forever with things that you can be thankful for or to stop in the world.



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Initial reflections

Often in school, we model prayer by an adult or another child reading a prewritten prayer before encouraging others to add their Amen.

This typically happens when sitting on a cold wooden floor in a crowded hall with many distractions.



However, the children preferred quiet, comfortable and distraction free space to pray or reflect.

Very few children understood that prayer is a conversation or were aware of different ways to pray.

Very few children talked about praying in church besides leading prayers during a school service.

The language of prayer or reflection needs further exploration.

The children did seek out times to reflect or pray, but this tended to be on their own or with pets rather than with their family.

They found that prayer helped them when grieving the loss of pets or people.



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Most children preferred to pray or reflect alone, without distractions, so that they could be in their bubble, immersed in their thoughts, and for some, to create space to be with God.

They also preferred to be outside to reflect and to pray.

How can we better provide physical space for children in church, home and school to find spiritual space?



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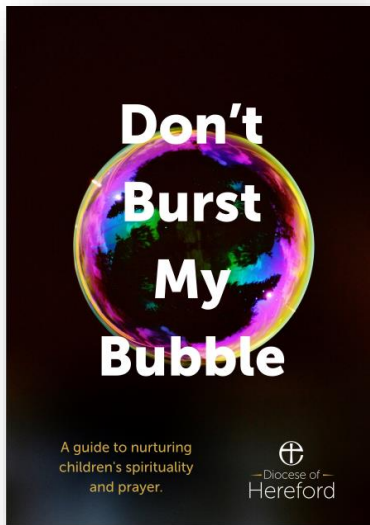
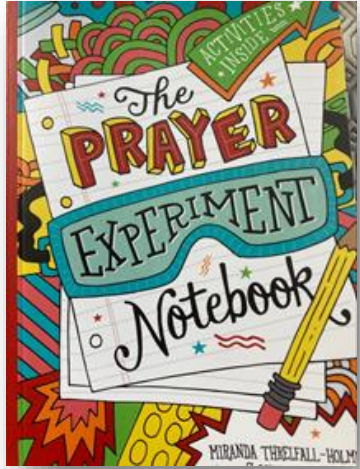
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Exploring prayer resources



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Resources trialled in schools



All the schools were given these to work with. Each chose to utilise them in different ways and at various timescales.

1. 'The Prayer Experiment Notebook', by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes (SPCK).
2. A6 blank prayer/reflection journals, with guidance given to schools to introduce them.
3. A series of online videos on prayer for collective worship, with takeaway worship sheets that could be sent home.
4. 'Don't burst my bubble' booklet for families.
5. Prayer pebble guidance for schools. *(These were only used by a couple of schools).*
6. Creative Prayer Workshop guidance. This was provided by the Headteacher at St George's CE Primary, Clun. She had previously run an event where 27 out of 69 families from the school attended (43% of the school's families).



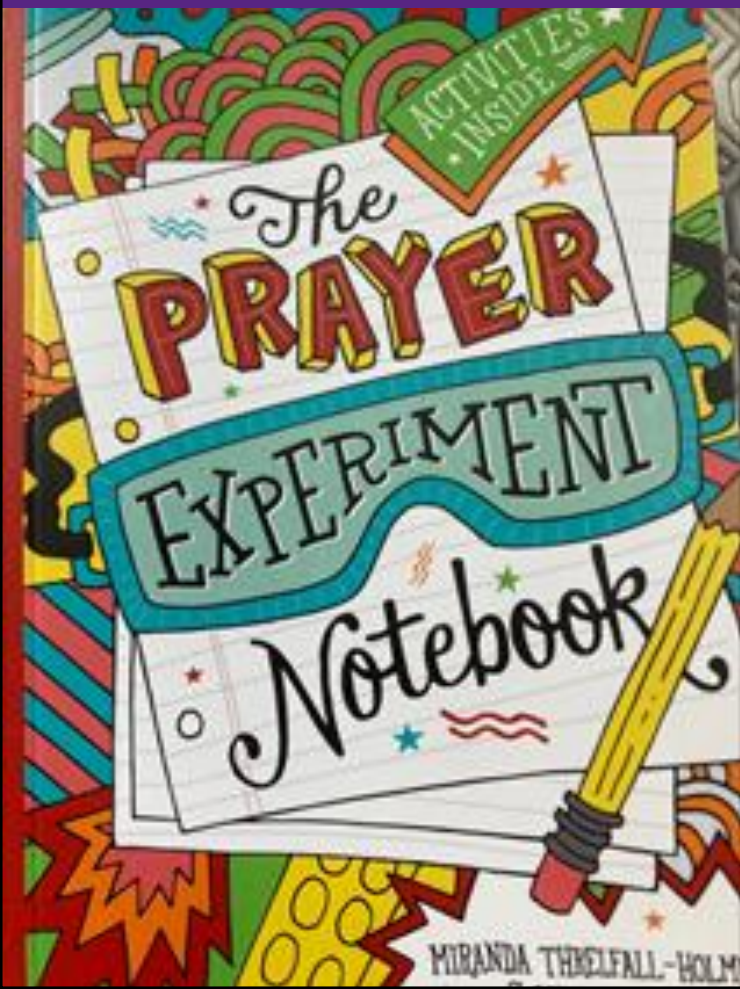
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Recommended Reading



The schools were given class copies of 'The Prayer Experiment Notebook' by Miranda Threlfall Holmes (SPCK).

This was recommended as a starting point for exploring other ways to pray. The book is designed to provide activities or experiments where people can find prayer styles that suit them.

The schools used them in different ways. Some used them as a whole class activity, and others were through a 'book club' model for their pupils involved in the project.

At Cradley, they combined some ideas with their

'Thrive' mental health resource boxes for classes to use.

Several children took the 'prayer experiments' home to try out with their families. The books were very popular with the children.

I tried the Thank You Jar Prayer. My dad and I sat down and thought of some prayers. It was good as I don't often see my Dad pray. I took the jar to bed and prayed some of the prayers on my own.



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I enjoyed making the prayer tree with my dad. We worked together to build the tree. After that we then wrote prayers together.

Many students reported that the activities in 'The Prayer Experiment Notebook' helped them to discover new ways to pray.

Some even involved their parents in building prayer trees and participating in 'thankful jar' prayers.

However, some activities did not appeal to them, and they became

distracted from praying because the activity was too fun.

This led to discussions about whether the activity was prayerful or just fun.

As a resource, this had the most impact on family involvement in the child's prayer life.



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I used the Chatterbox Prayer with my family. I enjoyed being able to hear them pray as I haven't heard my family pray before.

I did the bedhead prayer... You can hang it up by your bed and then every morning or night I can take a prayer out and pray for it. Instead of praying for just one thing it helped me to pray for different things each day.



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Kingsland ran their prayer group as a 'book club' where they discussed the prayer experiments with the support of a staff member and a governor.

Combined with using journals, this proved to be a very effective model for developing pupils' prayer experiences that also spread to the home.



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Prayer Journals



'Maybe you could have your own little notebook where you write down your prayers when you make them up and you can come back to them.'

One of the children suggested journaling. So, the pupils were given blank notebooks, and the schools were advised how to use them.

Some children used them to accompany their 'Prayer Experiments', recording their reflections on each activity.

Others used them as a daily journal to remind them what to be thankful for or what to seek God's help for.

Some wrote poems and

drew images to help them pray or reflect.

Being free to use the journal personally was vital to helping them explore prayer and reflection in different styles.

Several wrote prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, to help them know what to pray when they were stuck for words.

Most pupils used their journals and wanted to continue using them.

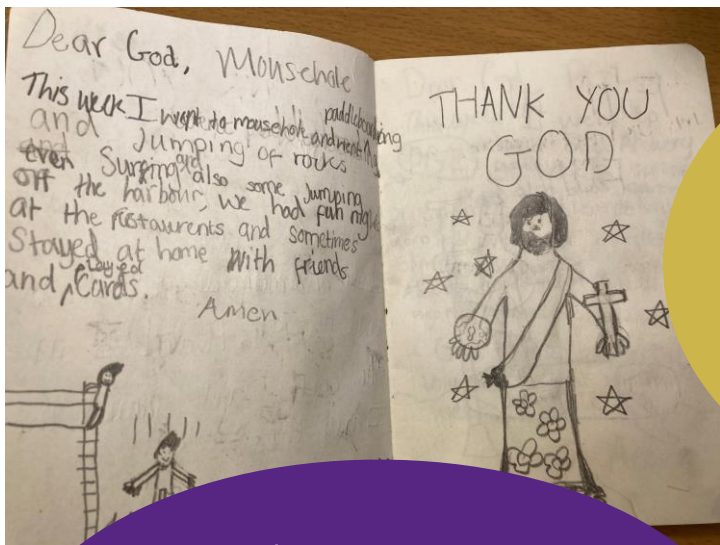


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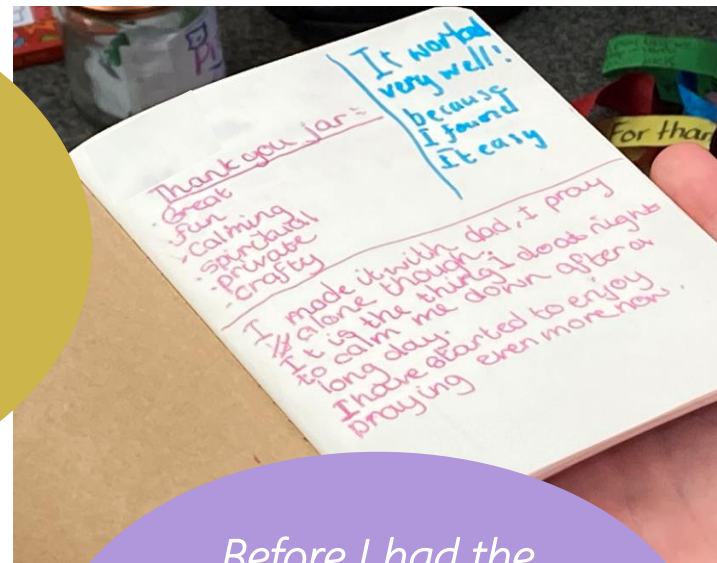
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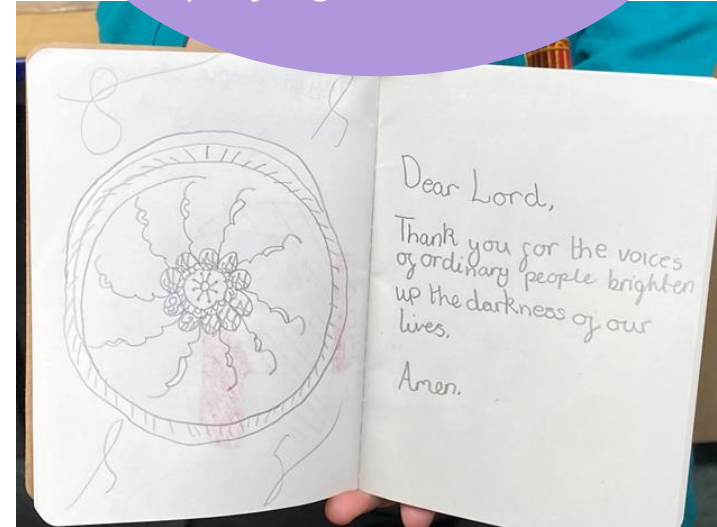
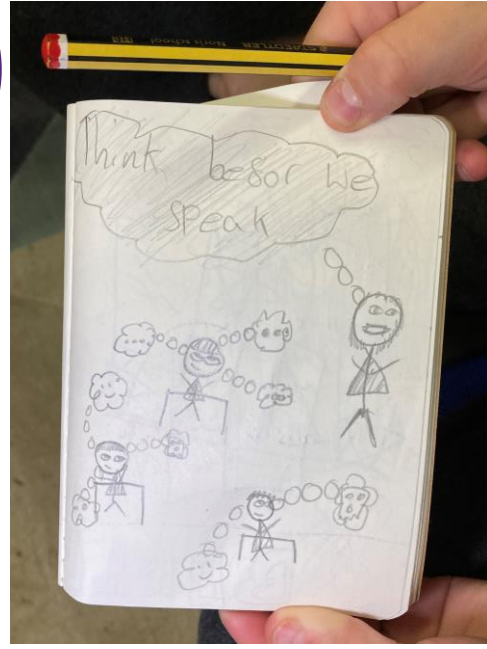
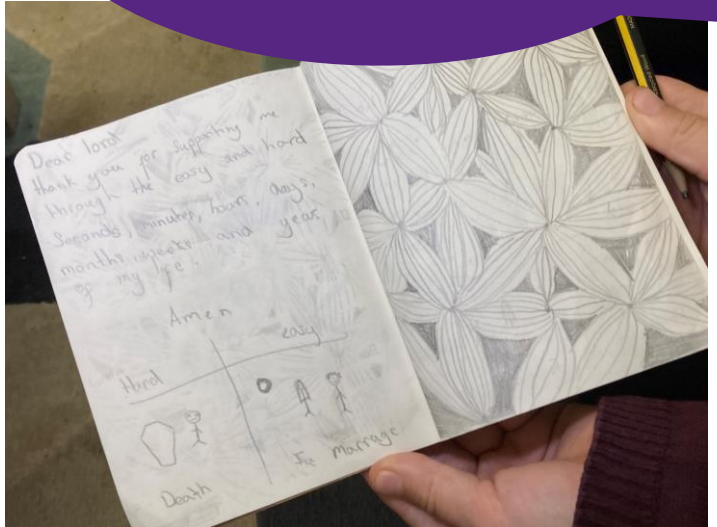


I write down my worries in my book, and then I write down a prayer to make them leave. And it always works.



Before I had the notebook, I wasn't really praying as much. But now I am praying a lot more.

It made me, write more prayers, meaning that I could just think and then just write some more prayers of my own way.



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Finding spiritual space



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I think it's really easy to just take a minute and pray or be quiet or read or draw, because there's loads of nature and there's this really big tree that's been there for ages. And if I just look at it, I can just remember loads of things.



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The pupils at Christ Church redeveloped part of their Forest School into a reflective space. That is regularly used at break and lunchtimes.

After visiting Wenlock Priory with their team rector, they were inspired to redevelop an outside area of the school.



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Before we had the prayer hut, people who wanted to pray didn't have the space to do it. And now that we've got a prayer hut, it's so much easier for the people who want to pray.



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The parents' group at Stottesdon purchased a Prayer Hut to support pupils wanting somewhere quiet to pray or reflect outside.

Pupils use this space regularly, though it has had to be relocated due to recent flooding.



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At Cradley, the pupils helped create an indoor reflective prayer area used by pupils from across the school.

They found this helped them to be more personal in their prayers.



Prayer Pebbles

All the schools were given a guide to using prayer pebbles.

A couple of schools explored this, but only a few children commented on the painted prayer stones.

However, more pupils did discuss how using pictures or holding personal items helped them focus.

This was often linked to remembering people or pets that had died.

I think it's nice to pray if you're holding something.

We made stones in art and painted them and put different things on them and I sometimes pray with that.

Looking at pictures of things, of people and things that maybe you've lost or have gone to heaven is really helpful because you can just memorise them and just pretend they're with you... you can just think they're up in heaven, smiling down at me and watching me do what I do.



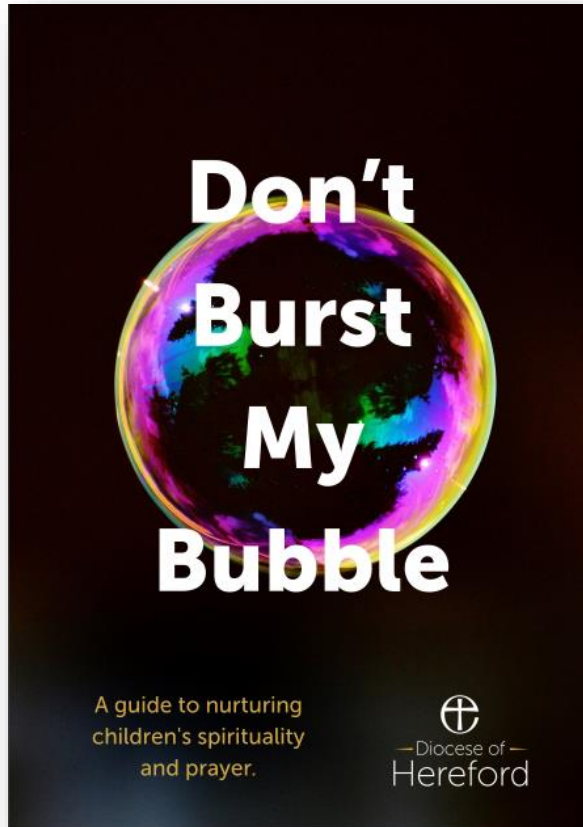
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Don't Burst My Bubble



The title of our booklet was developed from comments made by pupils at Stottesdon. They regularly use the bubble analogy in their collective worship. Pupils enter their reflective bubbles and try not to burst other bubbles by causing distractions.

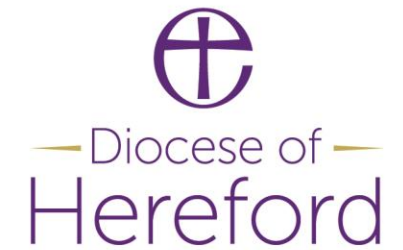
The booklet contained further ideas for families to try at home, including a simple Examen prayer.

Two schools had yet to give them out as they wanted to save them for the next phase.

Where they had been given out, the children commented that they may have been briefly looked at, but their families hadn't used them.

Yet the same families had been engaged in the prayer experiments, as the children's excitement inspired them to pray together.

Providing a resource for parents is only effective when the children are engaged and inspired by it first.



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The digital booklet and a pdf version can be accessed here:

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/schools/being-ae-church-school/church-and-school-links/>

Prayer Videos

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Let Us Pray

What to pray?

This week we continue our series about Christian prayer. We think about what we can say in our prayers and about different answers to prayer. We also tried a different way of praying. You can watch the video again here: <https://youtu.be/mByGt5EH-gQ>

Further ideas for reflecting

When have your prayers been answered?

THANKSGIVING TREE

Diocese of Hereford Education Team – Summer 2023

In the summer term, the schools watched five collective worship videos focussing on prayer.

1. [Why pray?](#)
2. [The Lord's Prayer](#)
3. [What to pray?](#)
4. [Listening prayers](#)
5. [Being thankful](#)

These were accompanied by a 'further reflections' sheet for use in class and sent home.

The content was designed to deepen the children's understanding of the nature of Christian prayer. This included teaching about the Lord's Prayer.

Only one pupil specifically mentioned learning prayers from videos in the final interviews. This may be due to the time between the videos in the early summer term and the final interviews in October.

However, the depth of discussions about the nature and relevance of prayer was markedly stronger in those interviews, particularly about prayer being personal and a conversation with God or as a One-2-God.



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The videos can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoyFzhgwY9NI9oJ8ggHNvVtYqj5pyTkeg>

Missed Opportunities

We found a few challenges during the project. The first was due to running across two academic years. Due to staff changing year groups or leaving the school, this affected how well the pupil groups were supported. Also, one pupil withdrew from the project due to personal reasons.

A few of the schools asked their local clergy to be their church contact. However, with the complexities of rural ministry and changes in local clergy, they could not be involved as much as we had hoped. Where Foundation Governors took on this role, there was a noticeable difference in how the project was sustained and to the children themselves.

Although this project has had a limited

impact on the churches so far, we hope that by sharing this more widely, we will be able to encourage more lay members to nurture prayer groups in their local schools and journey with them as they spiritually flourish.

Finding a suitable time for online meetings that could accommodate both church and school leaders meant that often we did not have all the right people in the virtual room. The project timescales provide some freedom for schools to manage the project to suit their context. However, this meant no school had been able to fit in a creative prayer workshop for families before the final interviews. Future projects would be better managed over one academic year.



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Summary of findings

When given support to explore prayer, children discover there is more to prayer than listening to someone else reading a prayer.

They discovered that they enjoyed prayer. They made more time and space for it at home, often creating their own space.

Providing physical space inside and outside is crucial to developing their spirituality.

They learned that prayer is conversational and that they like to be alone with God and their thoughts. That prayer can be creative and active, but they also value quiet prayer.

They believe prayers are answered but not always and that everyone should be encouraged to pray more.

They know God always listens to your prayers even if you aren't sure if he exists.

Prayer and reflection enable children to discuss bereavement and to grieve more freely.

Pets, even horses, play an essential part in the spiritual life of children as they voyage through grief and find comfort with their animals. One that shouldn't be ignored.

The children themselves become advocates for prayer; they are the ones who take it outside of school, into their homes and beyond, encouraging others to join them.

This worked best when they were supported in small groups with adults from school and church who explored prayer alongside them (see the next slide).



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Let us pray... prayer book clubs

Purpose:

To develop small exploring prayer groups in church schools that would support the development of children's understanding of prayer.

Who would run them:

School staff and local church members, including foundation governors. The diocese would provide online training for those running the groups.

Timing:

They would meet weekly over six weeks for 30-45 minutes.

What would they do:

They would read and discuss a book like 'The Prayer Experiment Notebook'. In each session, they would try out ideas and discuss what they had learned about prayer. They would discuss possible activities to try out at home. All group members, children and adults, would be encouraged to keep a prayer journal to record their thoughts and prayers in whatever format suited them.

Follow-up:

These could be followed up by a creative prayer workshop for their families. As a result, the children may want to take on pupil worship leader roles in school.



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Further resources

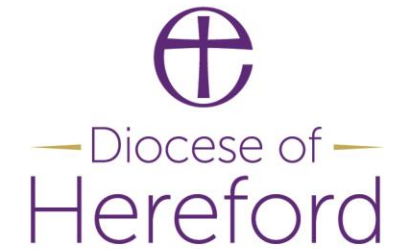
To find out more about this project, including further reports and resources, please visit [Church and School Links - Diocese of Hereford \(anglican.org\)](https://www.anglican.org.uk/dioceses/hereford)

There you will find:

- A comprehensive presentation of the entire project.
- A video of the children talking about their prayer experiences to prompt further exploration
- Access to other resources linked to this project, including the booklet for parents and worship videos.

If you want to discuss aspects of this project, please email the project leader, Mark Harrington, from the Diocese of Hereford Education Team.

Contact: Education@Hereford.anglican.org



Questions for further reflection

- How can we better model prayer in schools and churches so that they see it as conversational and not just a corporate-led activity?
- How can we provide physical space for children's prayer and reflection in both church and school?
- For churches, when do children see adults praying in small groups rather than leading a prayer with a congregation?
- When are children invited to church prayer meetings to see different forms of prayer?
- How do we open space to listen to God in our prayers with children in school?
- Do we need to change our vocabulary when discussing prayer and reflection with children and families?
- How do we develop prayer and reflection opportunities that enable families to talk about grief more freely?



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Thank You

- To the pupils for their willingness to be involved and to tell us about their prayer and reflection experiences.
- To the parents for allowing their children to participate in this project.
- To the school staff and governors, clergy and church members for their support, ideas and enthusiasm.
- To the diocesan ministry and education teams for supporting this project.
- And finally, thanks to the Growing Faith Foundation for helping fund the project.

To find out more about this project, including further reports and resources, please visit: [Church and School Links - Diocese of Hereford \(anglican.org\)](https://www.anglican.org.uk/church-and-school-links)



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