



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

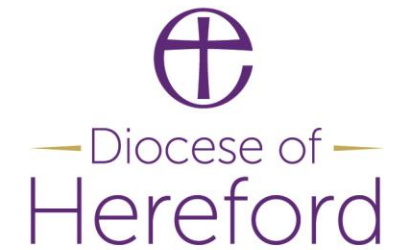


In 2023, the Diocese of Hereford held a Year of Prayer. As part of this, the diocesan Education Team led a research project exploring children's prayer experiences in six of its Church of England primary schools. This was partly funded by the Growing Faith Foundation.

The six schools that were selected to participate were:

- 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

These were from different deaneries spread across the diocese and were mainly small village schools.



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



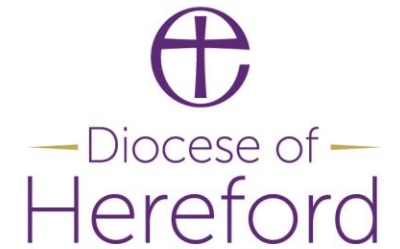
Pupils from the six primary schools were interviewed in small groups about their prayer experiences at school and elsewhere (October – November 2022)

A 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).



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 prefer quiet, comfortable and distraction free space to pray or reflect.

Very few children understood that Christian 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 sought out times to reflect or pray, but this tended to be on their own or with pets rather than their family.

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



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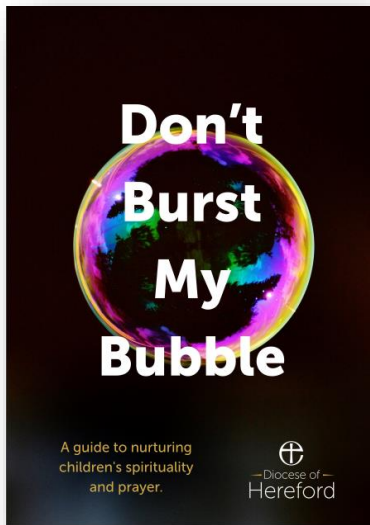
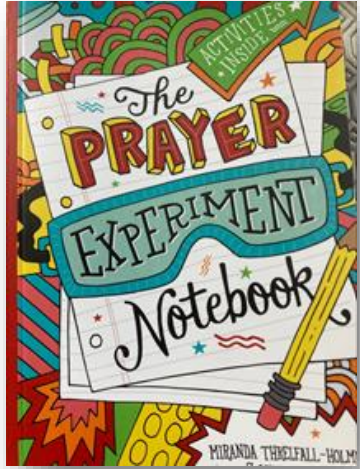
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Resources trialled in schools



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 1 or 2 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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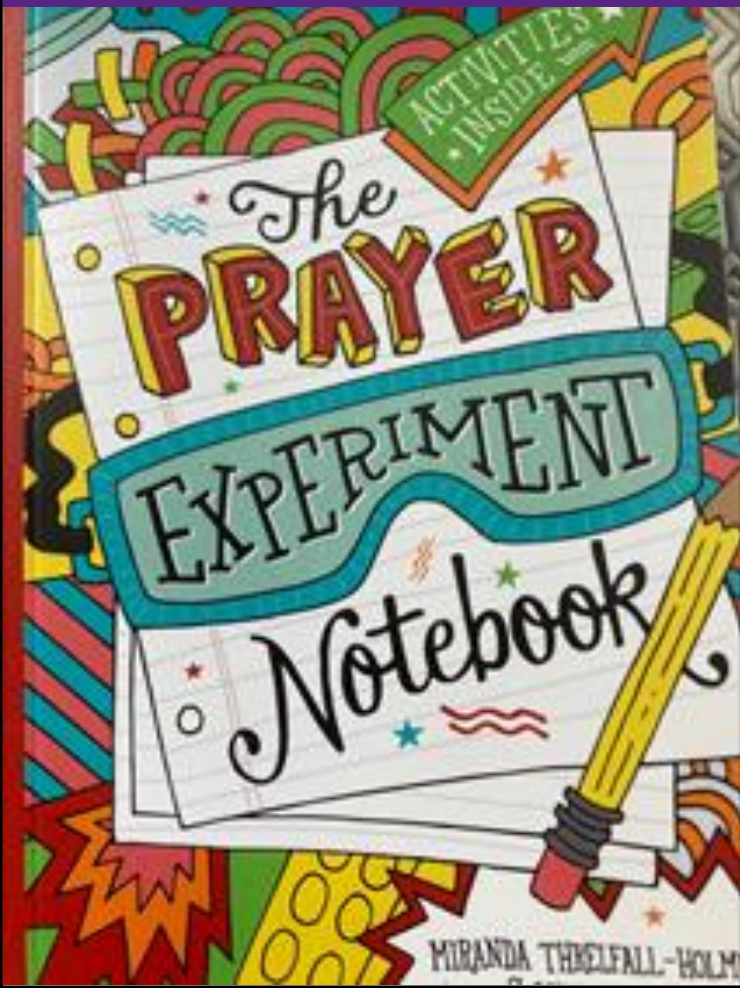
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Recommended Reading



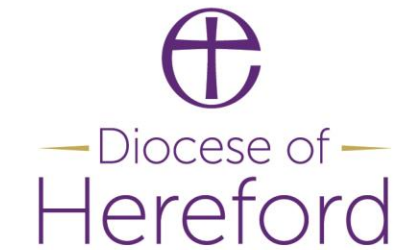
The schools were given class copies of 'The Prayer Experiment Notebook' by Miranda Threlfall Holmes (SPCK).

Each school 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.

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

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

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



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

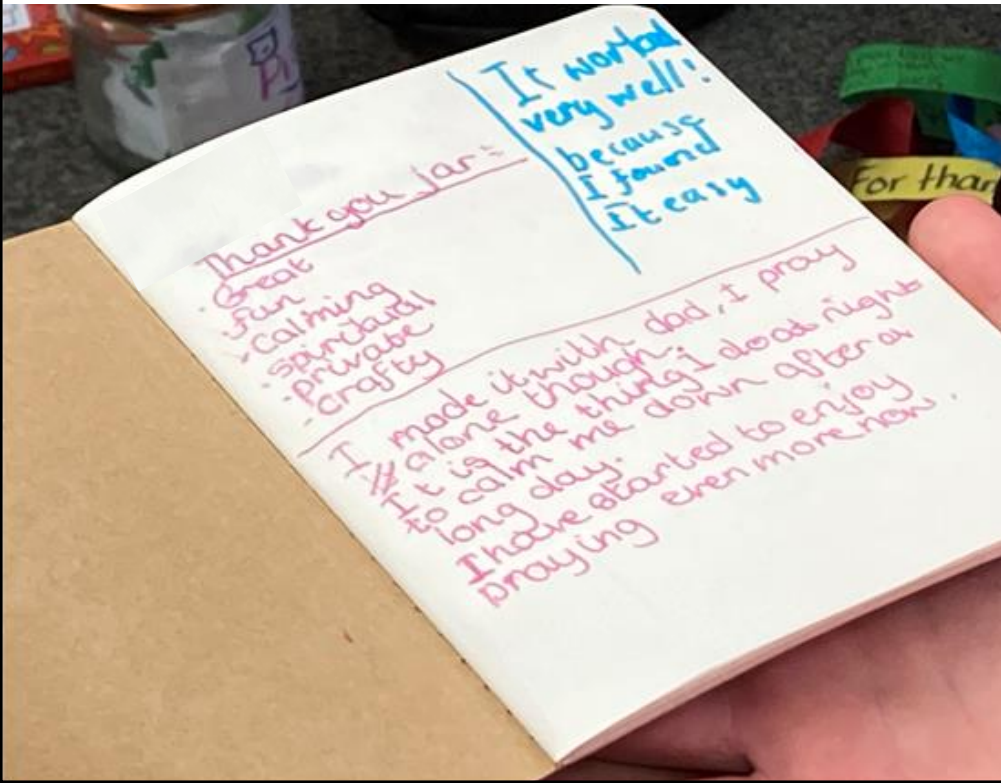


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Prayer Journals

'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.'



Each child was provided with a blank notebook as a prayer journal.

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



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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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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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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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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 own 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. These booklets did not effectively support families to pray or reflect at home.

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 by it first.



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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.



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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

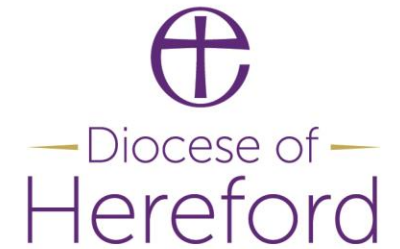
To find out more about this project, including further reports and resources, please visit [Church and School Links - Diocese of Hereford \(anglican.org\)](https://www.anglican.org.uk/dioceses/hereford)

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.

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