

Contemplative Toolkit (Working Title)

Background

The Toolkit has emerged from a collaboration between **the Oxford Diocesan Board of Mission** team and **Board of Education** team, in order to think creatively about how school communities and church communities can cross-fertilize and grow together. It has derived wisdom from a particularly interesting model from **Townsville Diocese** in Queensland, Australia, as well as practices from *The Chemin Neuf* Community based in France, but is a new piece of work to support the objectives of The Oxford Diocese.

Purpose

The Contemplative Toolkit is designed to meet a number of objectives

1. Contemplative practices have an established and recognised effect for **well-being, flourishing and good mental health**. Against a background realisation of the growing mental health pressures amongst our young people, the ancient Contemplative traditions of Christianity, like its secular and partially derivative cousin mindfulness, have a lot to offer.
2. The toolkit aims to draw on **Ignatian spiritual practices** which derive from St Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century, who in turn adopts and adapts practices from the Benedictine tradition, and indirectly, therefore, also the Desert Fathers. These practices are thus foundational to Christian formation over the centuries, and are distinctively Christian, but are also expressed in structures which are very porous and applicable to the non-Christian, and are therefore highly inclusive. This balance makes this particular form of Christian spiritual tradition particularly apposite for our Church Primary Schools.
3. The toolkit can also be a response to the **Growing Faith** agenda, which seeks to understand, nurture and foster the relationship between School communities, Church communities and pupil homes. The toolkit aims, therefore, to be a vehicle for sharing different forms of prayer between church communities and school communities, through collaboration of delivery and training across the church-school relationship. It is also hoped that, by creating tools which are very child-centred and easily memorable and communicable, that children might pass on an interest in some of these techniques to their parents/siblings/other family members.
4. A follow on to **BeSpace/Prayer Spaces UK**. Schools seem almost universally appreciative of Prayer Spaces coming into their schools for 3 days or a week, but are often left wondering how any of these practices could become more enculturated into school life. The toolkit is designed to be a follow-on to Bespace for the other 51 weeks of the year, thus normalising the benefits of the Prayer Space movement.

Delivery

The course will be delivered via a small group of pilot Primary Schools in the first instance (around 5) with a combination of different schools being offered the possibility. This group has almost crystallised, but a final decision is still to be made. This will be baselined in some way, so that we can try to get some sort of 'before and after' assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Presuming that the pilot goes quite well, the next stage would be to widen the pilot to a further two groups of schools over the following two terms of the academic year 2019/20.

Design

It is proposed that the toolkit should have three modes or gears. Schools would be encouraged to adopt all three modes, particularly those schools who really wish to develop their spiritual practice, but realistically many schools might prefer to focus on just one or two of the modes.

1. **A 5 minute daily practice**, which can be used every day as a calming and settling tool after a breaktime, at the start of the day before lessons begin, or at the end of the day in a summative fashion.
2. **A 10/15 minute weekly practice**, which might be used as a focus for an act of Collective Worship. This takes one of the 5 daily practices but focuses more closely and intentionally on it, in order to develop deeper understanding of its interpretative framework.
3. **A 30 minute – 45 minute version**, which might be used for a school trip to a local church, where the church community might host a simple but meaningful prayer/contemplative experience, a little like a more focused PrayerSpaces/Bespace installation.

Outline

It is suggested that the toolkit should comprise 5 different tools, focusing on the human hand as an aide memoire, and to fit within the shape of a normal 5 day school week. The practices sketched out so far are:

1. **Stilling** – teaching young people to adopt appropriate posture for becoming aware of surroundings and the self, with breathing techniques and the introduction of a simplified form of the examen.
2. **Noticing** – this is a cultivation of the Ignatian technique of noticing the presence and absence of God and the Good in your life. By noticing moments of ‘desolation’ and ‘consolation’ young people are encouraged to act, choose and seek consolation, that which energises and inspires.
3. **Dwelling** – this is the cultivation of the Benedictine practice of Lectio Divina (or holy reading of scripture), which was also thoroughly embedded in Ignatian spirituality. By giving young people time to dwell with short, carefully chosen and inclusive phrases from scripture, they are invited to choose words or phrases which they connect to personally. This can also be done by engaging the senses by inviting participants to enter imaginatively into a scene from scripture and drawing out personal meanings and reflections. The listening skill can then be further developed by asking each of a partner to summarise the meaningful phrase or word from his opposite number, and vice versa.
4. **Mending** – this is focused on the central Christian theme of reconciliation, which is also a prominent and pivotal feature of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and the focus here is on the cross as a symbol of both human brokenness and the power of redemptive expressions of love. Techniques may be borrowed from circle time activities/bespace stations. Currently the ‘web of wool’ technique is favourable
5. **Blessing** – This final tool is still being considered. Ignatius talks of the spiritual exercises leading to contemplation in action (i.e. they do not exist for their own sake, but rather to build ‘the kingdom’). Consideration is therefore being given to blessing as the 5th tool. Having received blessing through the other 4 tools, how do we move forward to bless our families, homes, schools and communities...

Intended Results

The intended results of the toolkit is that young people would receive an upskilling in reflective and contemplative practices which would deeply enrich their personal wellbeing, their lives and their relationships. These practices are deeply rooted in ancient paths of prayer, which have resourced people of faith for generations, but they are specifically selected and articulated in such a way as to remain completely inclusive. However, it is hoped that a renewed interest in these Christian practices would lead to openness for pupils to experience further deepening of contemplative Christian experiences through possible Retreat days/half-days.

Another hoped-for result is, through the training of the various skills to teachers and members of the church communities, that in turn these trainers would become not only wise and experienced practitioners of the skills, but also bridges would be built between the two communities through this shared skill-base. This could enable potential contemplative retreat days for both school and church members for those involved in delivering it, and thus deepening Church School Relationships. In mission terms we are keen to adopt a working hypothesis that sharing and deepening of faith should not necessarily only be content/thinking/theologically led, but also practical/skills-based/ being/ and doing led: 'we are what we do'.