

Sacred Spaces

Creating spaces for children to develop their relationship with God through creative prayer and contemplative response stations

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St Gregory the Great (6th Century) referred to contemplation as 'resting in God'. A contemplative approach is one where you create space to experience God through your whole being.

Response stations are different activities set up around a room that give children a variety of options for interacting with a Biblical text or theme. Children can move around them at any speed and in any order.

Benefits of using a response stations approach

- Contemplative response stations give children an opportunity and space to develop their own relationship with God. We create the opportunities, and trust that God will meet the children as they engage, ponder, question, and reflect while doing the activities.
- It is a very flexible approach that means you can cater for a wide variety of needs easily. Children can move at their own pace and make choices about what interests them to do. They can choose to do the stations alone or with friends. You can provide stations that suit children who prefer to be active or to be quieter, and you can provide options like 'draw or write' to cater for different academic levels.
- If you use open ended stations, people can engage with them at various levels of spiritual development. You can use the same stations with a wide age range, even a group that includes adults and children.
- The amount of time your group spends on stations can be flexible to fill the time you have available as needed.

Things to consider when using a stations approach

- **Content:** You need a strong backbone to give the stations a purpose, rather than just providing a random collection of activities. Structure it by giving some sort of input before the children do the response stations so that there is actually something they can respond to. Your input could be a Biblical text, story or theme, or a story about an inspiring person. Of course you can present this in any creative way you want: story-telling, drama, liturgy, YouTube clip, singing...
- **How many?** It usually works well to have 3 - 5 options for stations. While you are teaching the children how to use stations, just have 2 or 3, otherwise you have to spend too long explaining them. Later when you are repeating generic stations that the children are familiar with, you can build up to 4 or 5. If you have large numbers of children, consider duplicating stations so that more children can have access to the same activity at once. Children who are waiting can become less than contemplative very quickly.

- **Place your helpers strategically:** Some stations may need an adult sitting with them to help the children use the station effectively, or to encourage the children to think more deeply by asking them probing questions. Other stations can be used independently, but you should always have a floating helper around who can troubleshoot problems, interact with children at special moments, guide children to another activity as they finish one, and keep an eye on behaviour.
- **Instructions:** Give a brief introduction to each station while the group is together, demonstrating what to do if necessary. Have very simple written or pictorial instructions to remind children of what to do when they get to the station. You may have to have sessions where you teach the whole group how to do activities like labyrinths before you can have them as an option.
- **Talk about expectations for behaviour:** How should children move around? How loud can they be? What should they do if there's a crowd at the activity they want to do? Are there rules about how many candles they can light, or safety, or what they can do with the sand? Who can they ask if they don't know what to do? What should they do if they see someone looking left out and unsure?
- **Consider the overall environment,** and how that will set the tone for children to be able to be contemplative. Can you have enough space between stations so that they don't impact on each other, and children can move around easily? Would meditative music help make the atmosphere contemplative? Can your floating helper see all the children easily?
- **Aim to have a range of types of activities to suit different needs.** Some children need to be active, others may like a space to be alone. Some children enjoy writing a response, but others find that off-putting, and would prefer to draw or make something 3-dimensional out of clay or a pipe-cleaner. Some children like very open-ended activities, others prefer more guidelines to get them started. You may not be able to cater for the full range in one session, but try to cover a variety over a few weeks.
- **Don't be afraid to repeat stations** from session to session. Many contemplative activities are very open-ended and can be tweaked to suit different themes. Then the children don't have to concentrate on the logistics of the activity so much, and can put more processing power into experiencing and thinking and being with God.
- **A reflective time** at the end of your response stations time is useful to draw the group back together again, to enable children to share what they experienced with each other, to troubleshoot any problems to work on next time, to look in the question box if you have one, and to round off the time together with a benediction.

Some useful questions:

I wonder which station was your favourite? Why?

I wonder if you noticed anything interesting today that you'd like to share?

I wonder if there was anything that you found surprising today? Tell us about it.

I wonder what you discovered about God or yourself today?

Ideas for Creative Prayer and Contemplative Response Stations

Make an action as a symbol of your prayer

- lighting votive candles or LED candles
- drop something in water – a small stone or LED underwater light or something that floats
- break a glow stick
- add a block to a tower, or a rock to a cairn, or a flower to a vase, or a star to a tree or black cloth
- tip water over your hands over a bowl or shallow pool
- bend a pipe-cleaner into a shape or use play-dough to make something that symbolises your prayer

Draw or write your prayers

- letters to God
- on fabric
- on a paper covering over a glass, then put a candle inside the glass
- with charcoal on rough paper
- in shallow sand trays with a chop stick, or on an etch-a-sketch, or mirror with white board marker, then erase (these are good for prayers of confession)
- put the prayers into a book, or letter box, or into a crevice in a pile of volcanic rocks
- burn prayers of confession or put them through a shredder

Hold something to prompt a prayer

- world globe
- rock
- glass stone
- nail
- LED light
- picture or photo
- mirror
- something natural, like a shell or flower or stick
- model of character from a story

Meditative activities

Doing something simple and repetitive can help us create a quiet space to become aware of God

- Walk a labyrinth, perhaps carrying something in to leave in the centre (written or drawn prayer, rock, photo, world globe...)
- A prayer walk laid out like stepping stones around the room or up and down a flight of stairs, with words to say as you take each step ('God is with me' or the St Patrick Breastplate prayer)
- Sand mandalas
- Bead prayers, with a simple liturgy to repeat for each bead

Quiet spaces

- Small tents or mosquito nets or large boxes to create a space for one person to pray

Repetitions of the focus story

- Bibles and Bible story books with the story bookmarked, and laminated cards of relevant background reading laid out invitingly by a sofa
- Short 2-3 minute looped YouTube clips of the focus story, with headphones
- Characters and objects to use to act out and retell a story to themselves or a friend – like a Nativity set

Communal artworks

- Painting a Bible verse on a large canvas
- Drawing or writing on small tiles or stones, and gluing them on something, like a post, canvas, birdbath...
- Making something individual (eg a clay star fish or God's Eye weaving) that is put together with everyone else's to form a whole
- Individual pieces of fabric, sewn together into a banner or bunting or jacket
- Colouring parts of a huge puzzle, or enlarged, cut up picture, and then putting it back together to display once everyone has coloured their part

Question Box

- Consider having a question box for children to put written questions in that may arise as they do the stations, if they don't want to ask someone straight away. These can be discussed in a group reflective time at the end, next session, or one-on-one with the child when there's an opportunity, or even via written letter. Don't be afraid to ask the children what they think might be an answer to the question, or to say if it's a hard question that many people spend their whole lives puzzling over.

Reference

The ideas in this workshop were developed from Mark Pierson's approach to creating worship spaces, which he outlines in his excellent book *The Art of Curating Worship – Reshaping the Role of the Worship Leader* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2010, 2012)

Useful Resources

Ultimate Creative Prayer by Judith Merrell (Scripture Union Publishing, 2008)

Multisensory Prayer by Sue Wallace (Scripture Union Publishing, 2000)

Top Tips on Prompting Prayer by Vicki Blyth and Sarah Bingham (Scripture Union Publishing, 2008)

<http://www.orisonschools.org.uk/zones/image-zone>

<http://uk.24-7prayer.com/schools-and-youth/>