

# Spiritual Development

Margaret Wickings, London, England. Global Exchange, April 2003

## Spiritual exercises to try together and develop alone

**T**here are many ways to approach prayer — as many as there are people. Here is a series of spiritual exercises to try with a group. They can also be used during personal prayer times.

### **Focusing**

It is important first to relax in God's presence, to focus on Him. Sometimes we rush in, demand, complain or offload, and then rush out again. In any relationship, quality time requires relaxation and focused attention together.

### **Exercise 1: Give Him Your Attention And Time**

This exercise consists of five stages, designed to be followed in the order given here. It is important not to rush any stage. Take all the time you need before moving to the next stage.

- As you sit, find a comfortable position for your body to be relaxed but your mind alert.
- Tighten and then consciously relax your muscles, beginning with your toes and working upwards.
- Listen intently to the sounds around you in the quietness.
- Become aware of your own breathing.
- Gently lengthen your breaths, by counting perhaps, until body and mind are still.

Now we are relaxed and focused — and prepared for the next exercise.

### **Exercise 2: Praying The Jesus Prayer**

Begin to focus on Jesus, using repeated words. For example: Say the name 'Jesus' very slowly,



in time with your breathing. As you breathe in, say the first part of His name, as you breathe out, say the last part: 'Je ... sus...'

Alternatively, repeat the following sentences several times very slowly, again in time with Your breathing. Take a long, slow breath, in and out, between the first and second lines: 'In You ... my Lord ... I live ... and move ... and have ... my being ... In me ... my Lord ... You live ... and move ... and have ... your being...'

*Notes for leaders: Each person's breathing will differ in length. Therefore, when using this*

*exercise within a group it might be better for each to say the words in her own mind rather than aloud. (When using it alone, of course, it does help to say them aloud.)*

When we have repeated this exercise until we are settled in heart, at peace, and in tune with Jesus, we will be ready for the next group of exercises.

### **Symbols**

Visual objects and actions help us to express our feelings to God or to realise what He wants to say to us.



### **Exercise 3: Looking At Nature**

A waterfall or river, the sea, a large shady tree, animals grazing or chickens pecking for food, through any of these and more — God can speak to us. If none of these is available, a picture, or a clay model or carving, can be used instead. Still with relaxed body and slow breathing, take time to gaze at the scene. What does it say to you about God's strength ... love ... beauty ... power ... gentleness ... or patience?

Perhaps a Bible verse will come into mind. It might lead you naturally to prayer as you

allow God to speak to you.

*Note to leaders: After spending some minutes in quiet reflection like this, it is helpful for individuals to share voluntarily the thoughts and verses that have come to their minds.*

### **Exercise 4: Expressing Feelings Through Gestures**

We can also use our bodies to express feelings, desires and yearnings for God. This helps us to communicate with Him as whole people. We have reflected on nature in Exercise 3. Now, as we respond, try some of these:

**Hands:** Place them in your lap, with palms facing upwards, to express your openness to Him, while you think of Him. Or raise them to chest level, or above your head, in worship. Or stretch them out in front of you, palms upwards, reaching out to God in longing for Him.

**Eyes:** Close them if you wish, to help you focus on God. Or, as you worship

Him, open your eyes and continue to gaze on the world around you — His world, which he made. Tell Him what you feel about His creation.

**Whole body:** In some places people honour a king or chief by kneeling, or even stretching themselves on the ground in his presence. Why not in honour of God — who is King of all kings, Chief of all chiefs? If that seems the most appropriate way for you to respond to God just now, do it. Or sit in His presence, as a child with the Father, or friend with Friend. Or sit on the floor, with your arms on a chair

seat or bench, and rest your head on your arms like a child sharing love with a parent.



*Note to leaders: This is personal and individual. It is important for each one in the group to find her own way to express herself, not just to do what others do. Encourage each to feel comfortable and free to use the ways most helpful to her. Allow time for each to truly worship.*

It is possible that some in the group might become very sleepy as they work through the exercises. Please do not worry about this. It shows that they are relaxing in God's presence. If it happens by the end of this exercise, bring them back to reality gently. The next exercise will help them to become alert again.

### **Exercise 5: Movement**

Responding to God, talking with Him, can be helped by movement. Here are some ideas:

**Walk:** Alone, around the room or outside, as you talk with Him. The rhythmic action of walking, together with prayerful thoughts, can make you alert to His voice or still your heart, if it is restless. Or walk in twos, like the disciples walking to Emmaus. Read together Luke 24:13-15 and then, as you walk, share with each other some of the blessings and thoughts which have come to you during these spiritual exercises.

**Dance:** David did it (2 Samuel 6:12-15)! For some it comes easily and naturally, others can feel shy. If dancing expresses best your response to God just now, feel free to dance.

*Note to leaders: Here, also, allow time for group members to respond in whichever way is appropriate for them. It is not always necessary for everyone to do the same.*

And so we reach our final exercise.

### **Exercise 6: Singing**

This you all can try together. Choose a song which all will know and which summarises your collective response to God today, as you conclude this spiritual exercise period.

*Note to leaders: All the exercises outlined here can also be used very effectively in personal prayer. Encourage the group members to continue using them at home, or to develop new spiritual exercises for themselves.*

#### *Acknowledgements*

*Some of the ideas expressed here contain influences from the following sources: Coming to God in the Stillness, Borst, Jim 1992, Guildford (UK); Eagle; Open to God, Huggett, Joyce 1989. London (UK); Hodder & Stoughton; Heaven on Earth: A Personal Retreat Programme, Ramon, Brother 1991. London (UK); Marshall Pickering.*

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