

Praying with Sixth-Formers –A Case Study

A Week of Guided Prayer can do wonders for the College community's soul

'I've never heard of doing a Week of Guided Prayer with sixth-formers!'

This was a refrain we would get used to hearing, as we talked with prayer guides and other supportive individuals in our preparation for a January week that showed itself free on our calendar. We had never heard of doing it either, and count ourselves lucky—in hindsight—that we also never thought of asking the question as to whether or not this was possible. In our capacity as chaplains in this particular South London sixth-form college, we just felt it was an opportunity we could not possibly turn down.

St Francis Xavier College is an inner-city Catholic further education college, serving the London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth. We have approximately 1150 students aged 16-19, and 150 staff. As part of the chaplaincy development plan this year, we decided to have an ecumenical Week of Guided Prayer for those in the college community that wished to participate. It was our view to facilitate a retreat experience to help students on their own prayer journey, and to give an opportunity for busy and dedicated staff to receive some time for themselves. We thought that if we could find a handful of participants we could offer something that could be worth the time and energy of the guides, and provide us with a platform for cultivating wider participation in forthcoming years. With this happy plan, we submerged ourselves in the frantic work of the Autumn term.

In December, even though we had some guides in place, we decided that we needed to find some more—and crucially, a supervisor who would support and encourage the guides in their work. We decided to ask our own spiritual directors and supervisors for potential candidates. The National Retreat Association (delighted with our project) also helped us to find our Supervisor and some extra guides. Prayer guides are skilled in accompanying people, and most are Ignatian-trained.

In January we started proposing the week to a few students who we thought might be receptive to the idea. It was the dangle-the-proposition approach which is our *modus operandi*: 'Hey, there's this Week of Guided Prayer coming up in college ...we thought you might be interested...It's really cool...a way to find out what's going on between you and God...What do you think?...Anyway, stop by later, and we'll talk...' Actually, we did a lot less dangling than we imagined, and the 'later' part of the conversations usually took place right then, with a firm 'yes' on the part of the students. We couldn't believe the positive response. Almost without exception, the students and staff that we approached wanted to do the week. When we got to twenty-five participants, fifteen students and ten staff, including

senior management, we had to stop asking people!

We described the week of prayer as a retreat in daily life, involving those who wished to take part having the opportunity to meet with a guide for up to half an hour a day, whilst committing to half an hour of individual prayer as well. The emphasis on behalf of the guide would be to accompany each individual, encouraging and supporting them as they explored something of their relationship with God.

On Friday of the week before, we got as many participants and guides together as possible for a lunch-time opening session and prayer, during which we walked through an Ignatian-style contemplation of their first piece of Scripture ('Rabbi, where do you live?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' (John 1:38-39)). They were to take this and pray with it for a half-hour during the weekend.

Then came the calm-before-the-storm. Had we done everything? Would the students turn up? Would the guides find their way through the crowds of students and find us in time? The Holy Spirit would have to take care of it.

And it took off. We were like pillars of marble in a sea of turbulence! (How we wish!) Actually, we were more like midwives, butlers, receptionists, coordinators, *confidants*, messengers, fierce mother eagles defending the brood—in short, we were Chaplains On Duty and we fell into the role with gusto. And the week trod on. We arrived early, stayed late, listened, commiserated, encouraged, consulted. We prayed madly. And we reported to the supervisor.

Our guides were fantastic. They included four Jesuit scholastics who each met with a participant at 8.15am in the morning. The rest of the participants met with their guides at different times during and after the College day. Our community here is international: one of the guides from Colombia accompanied a Colombian student, and they conducted their sessions in Spanish; another guide spoke in French with a student originally from Ghana.

The staff were intrigued by the prospect of such individual attention to their spiritual lives, once we made it clear that this was only part of their journey and that they did not have to have things completely worked out in order to start. Some felt the risk of vulnerability perhaps more keenly than the young people. To the tribute of the staff they plunged in fully, and were our main-stays as the week progressed.

The Friday brought our closing liturgy, moving in its depth and simplicity. Every participant was asked to bring a symbol describing something of their experience of the week, or to place a stone on the display, or light a candle. If they wanted, they could share a few words. This closing session will stand as one of the highlights in our ministry for this academic year. The students shared on such a profound and honest level about their need for God, who God is for them, and what prayer is for them.

One student talked of her search for her own individual answer to who God is for her, and how the guide gave her the freedom, space and encouragement to do this. Another said that it was “enriching, self-fulfilling and self-finding”, it was about “finding your inner person”. One student said it was thoroughly enjoyable and would recommend it to others. She said that she was encouraged to make Scripture her own, to get into a text and use her mood in order to connect with God and prayer. The young people were magnificent. We were thunderstruck, and profoundly grateful.

The College Community, a busy and thriving sixth-form college, is like a parish in microcosm. The role of the chaplain is one of huge and immense privilege: as chaplains we walk with the students and the staff, sometimes in quite hidden ways. Often the chaplain hears of much suffering and struggling as a student or staff member shares about loss, bereavement, illness or difficulties at home. Yet daily there are moments of great joy. During this week what was evident was people’s thirst for a deeper spirituality and life of prayer. The Week of Prayer was indeed a joyful week: creative, vibrant, a time of growth and great potential. It was a chance for us to facilitate something that we hope will have a far-reaching effect in the participants’ spiritual lives and for us collectively as a praying and worshipping community.

All in all it can be said that the retreat was a great success. We certainly learnt a great amount in terms of the organisation behind such a week, which is a huge task. We’ve promised ourselves that next time we will start earlier, and be more organised, and have more guides ready, and have no unforeseen events (including snow!) disturb the tranquillity of the week, and... Realistically, we will probably stick to our original game plan: trying to provide opportunities to expand the spiritual awareness of members of the College. And, with the help of God, it will happen.

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