

Prayer Spaces in Schools: an new enquiry into creativity and children's prayers in a Gloucestershire (UK) school.



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Abstract

Prayer Spaces in Schools commenced in British schools in 2008 more by accident than design. Though there were only a small number of events initially in southern England, the movement has rapidly spread across the United Kingdom. There is general good will of Head Teachers who are keen to give children the opportunity to be creative in a Prayer Space in their schools.

This research project is an initial enquiry as to whether the creativity that a Prayer Space offers assists the participating children in personal reflection and simple prayer. Research was carried out in a Roman Catholic Primary School in Gloucester, England. Children's responses were either written, photographed or recorded verbally.

The results showed that children do feel able to reflect and pray freely with the help of the creative activities in a Prayer Space. The study demonstrates that creativity enhances openness in prayer: the findings are consistent with scholarship on the spiritual development of children. The study concludes with brief reflections on mission and by highlighting some further research that is needed.

Introduction

This is a case study of one Prayer Space in one school in Gloucester. It reports the responses of children and assesses the ways in which creativity assists them in prayer. Simple but creative activities of a Prayer Space assist participants' reflective thinking: they lead children to whisper heart-felt prayers to God.

I wanted to examine this to see whether these activities and spaces really did lead to young people engaging with God in some way. I wished to see if creating a space designated for prayer, and also providing creative activities, does actually assist in prayer and personal reflection. Behind these questions was a deeper one: could Prayer Spaces be conceived of as missional in some sense?

I have been involved in a team which has set up and run Prayer Spaces in schools since 2008. We have worked solely in high schools with young people aged between 11 and 16. There are now dozens of Prayer Spaces in Schools each month across Britain. I have been struck by the ways in which the young people have chosen to participate in the creative activities: they have shared with either a school staff member or a member of the team what

they have been thinking, feeling or experiencing. In Prayer Spaces, an invitation is given, but non-one is coerced.

A Creative Prayer Space

A Prayer Space is not something you would see in a monastery: it is not a small room with a candle burning in a corner. A Prayer Space in a school is rarely quiet or orderly. To date, we haven't used Cathedral music or incense (although, in the long term, we may well use these, but in new ways!).

It is quite the opposite of the monastery image. In a Prayer Space in School, there may be a tent in the room, or a couple of gazebos; soft cushions and draped materials; fairy lights and coloured shades; a bubble tube and static electricity globe; pegs, string and washing lines; glue and glitter; post-it notes; pipe cleaners, tissue paper and card; sand, clay and play doh. Any room will do: an unused classroom; a foyer; the school hall.

Each Prayer Space has a theme: we have run them around The Lord's Prayer, Community Awareness, God our Father, The story of Easter, Christmas. The individual activities – we call them 'stations' – unpack that theme. The visitor takes part in each activity, using the sample prayer offered beside it. The stations are explained to the children, but generally the children are left alone to decide what it is they want to write, pray or create.

For example, at one popular station, a child drops a small vitamin C tablet into a vase of water: it effervesces until all trace is gone. This is used to illustrate forgiveness. The participant is invited to think of something they need to say sorry for, and then to say that prayer as they drop the tablet into the water and watch it dissolve. The activity invites reflection on the need to forgive. This can be quite powerful as Tim Abbot, director of Sanctum, a leading Prayer Space organisation notes:

The encounter that moved us both today was the girl who, having done the Forgiving activity came and sat with Amy at the Character activity, tears flowing down her face. She talked about how she'd been able to let go of some things that she'd been holding in for a long time. Conversation turned to her beliefs – atheistic until something that happened at the weekend – and now the surprising sense of God's intervention in her life that had arisen from her short time in [the Prayer Space] Sanctum. Later she shared with the teacher and myself, struggling to put into words what she had experienced, and yet full of joy, as if discovering something for the first time. (Abbott, 2011).

Prayer Spaces in Schools redesigns a designated space within the school for anything between one day to two weeks. The space, theme and general approach is negotiated with the Head Teacher and staff so that all arrangements are understood. The room is decorated to take away the classroom look and give it the feel of a place that is restful so the children can quickly quiet themselves. A selection of prayer stations is set up around the room inviting

children to participate in prayer at each activity. The instructions beside the station will usually use the words, 'If you want to ...', putting the emphasis on the invitation.

Accessing A Creative Prayer Space

The Prayer Space is publicised around the school as a special event. This may be a timetabled class event or during break times and after school, for children to visit voluntarily. Either way, the team will always be on hand to welcome the children, to explain what the activities are about, to guide people through the activities and prayers, and to talk further with anyone who has questions. This can be done with a group of children at the same time, or individually.

The children are told that no station or activity is compulsory. The aim is to give the children the chance to explore faith and their spirituality and relationship with God in a safe environment. Tim Abbot of Sanctum:

Feedback has ranged from many who said it had helped them to relax, that they had enjoyed the peace, that they had been able to let go of worries or hurts, and a few who said things like "[Sanctum] helped me believe in God more". Then there are the few who said it didn't change their thoughts about prayer and it didn't really make any difference to them. I'm grateful for these comments too, because they confirm that Sanctum isn't coercing young people into a response but allows them to draw their own conclusions (Abbott, 2012).

Phil Togwell, the Director of Prayer Spaces in Schools, notes that bringing children into the Christian faith is not the main purpose of the Prayer Space. He explains:

[The Prayer Spaces] enable children and young people to explore spiritual themes, to reflect on their big questions about life and existence, and to consider their own thoughts and feelings and actions in relation to others, all in simple, non-threatening ways. And, of course, they help us learn how to pray (Togwell, 2012).

It is an invitation to ask the question 'is there a God and if there is can I talk to him?' Children are free to talk to whomever they believe 'God' to be, if, indeed, they choose to believe in a god at all. Our role is not to convert anyone to the Christian faith, merely to offer a relationship with God.

Children's spirituality

Where might this approach then 'fit' with respect to children's spirituality and faith development? Does a Prayer Space need to be explicitly Christian at all? Robert Coles, Professor of Psychiatry and Medical Humanities at Harvard University has over thirty years of experience listening to children tell about their inner lives. He has concluded that a child realises there is a greater being than themselves and understands that they are 'in touch' with that greater being. Coles believes that this can be witnessed as children talk abstractly about their experiences or thoughts: as adults, we just need to tune in to what they are saying. It could be too easily dismissed as mere childhood nonsense (Coles, 1992, p. xvi, xix).

Rebecca Nye, a leading expert, lecturer and consultant in children's spirituality, makes this more specific. She defines children's spirituality as 'God's ways of being with children and children's ways of being with God' (Nye, 2009, p. 5). This definition suggests that one cannot be judgemental between one child's experience and another's, and that the ways will change as children become adults. In attempting to understand what spirituality entails, she suggests that as adults, we try using similes or a drawing: '.... A love, breathing, water, a puzzle, a journey' (2009, p. 8). Neither scholar is willing to give a precise definition of spirituality. It is more of a fluid, changeable, inner experience that is unique to each person, but involves something of the realisation that there is a greater being with whom children can communicate.

Because of this, Nye explains that children are more readily accepting than adults of the things they experience but don't understand. They don't analyse everything in detail as adults may, so have a more holistic understanding of what is around them. They lack suspicion and, because they are making new discoveries every day, have a 'natural capacity for wonder'. This outlook helps the child accept those things which they know they cannot put into words giving their perception a more 'mystical quality' (2009, p. 8). I have witnessed this 'wonder' and acceptance of things not understood in my own three children: I have tried in vain to answer their unending questions of 'why?' and 'how?', yet still they accept the unknown, without specific rational answer.

James Fowler, a developmental psychologist, has theorised about different stages of faith development, linked to the chronological development of a child. Primary school children, aged between seven and eleven are at stage two – Fowler's 'mythic-literal' faith – where storying gives shape to wonder:

Mythic-Literal faith is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning ... Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience' (Fowler, 1995, p. 149).

The mythic-literal mind of a child works to sort the difference between what is myth and what is real. Their story telling takes shape as they become confident in generating their own ideas and discussing their meaning. Stories become exciting ways of communicating and learning. The interviews Fowler recorded in his book, *Stages of Faith* (1995), illustrate that those who have heard Bible stories have been able to refer back to what they have heard and use the information to consider the world around them. Francis Bridger illustrates this further in that children will form their images of God based on their individual experiences of life and the world around them (Bridger, 2000, p. 68).

Fowler's stage two is helpful in theorizing about how primary school children understand and conceptualise religious ideas. Betty Cloyd, a consultant in prayer and spiritual formation, suggests that those children who have heard and understood stories from the Bible are able to use the information to help to understand not only the world around them, but who or what God is in relation to them. God is seen as a human person but different in some way: different from all the other humans, possibly stronger and more powerful, and maybe even a

superhero. He is seen by children aged six to seven as a giant, an invisible man or a magician. Once a child is around nine they become more understanding of the spiritual nature of God though may not be able to describe it (Cloyd, 1997, p. 27). It may seem that children with a religious background have been led to respond to a deity, yet, as Nye writes, several studies with children have led to other results:

The key finding of all these studies is that spirituality is a common, natural feature of probably all, children's lives. Certainly no studies have highlighted a type of child who does not possess active spiritual capacities. From a Christian point of view, that makes sense, since it would be difficult to understand why some people would be created without an instinctive capacity to respond to our Creator (Nye, 2009, p.9).

Nye is claiming that it is not just the religiously educated child who has an opportunity to respond to what is naturally spiritual within them, but it is innate in every child who wonders. Nevertheless, Cloyd adds that some children are more inclined to be contemplative and reflective than others. She claims that these children are 'more in rhythm with the life of the Spirit of God' (1997, p. 15). Unfortunately she does not give any empirical evidence for this, though it would stand to reason that a child who takes the time to stop and think deeply would become aware of stirrings within their inner selves.

Cloyd notes Fowler's Stages of Faith, and how the next stages are initialised, claiming that it is God who is responsible for leading a person forward, rather than a person being self-driven or determined. Cloyd believes the first prayers of a child are not brought about as a result of a child's initiative, but rather, the work of God in their lives: 'The child's first attempts at prayer are in response to divine nudging from God' (1997, p. 41). This view concurs with Nye's, that it is God and his ways with children that bring about children's ways with God. However, Fowler views the stages of faith as a natural progression brought about by the chronological development of the child. Fowler's model does not presume that that God intervenes in a child's life.

Openness to God's intervention – according to Nye – means that a child of seven or older is also more aware of his/her developing conscience and 'inner life', making them concerned about what is right and wrong and seeking judgement and justice (2009, p. 87). This further affects their approach to their experience of life and adds to their development of characterising who God is. The prayers of these children reflect something of what their conscience tells them and how it makes them feel.

Creativity in Prayer

The wonder in a child is evidence of God's creativity. Surely then, creativity should not be excluded from the expression of prayer. Words in prayer can sometimes be limiting. A child may not be able to verbalise everything they wish to express. Imagination, emotions and their own personalities can sometimes be overlooked when words are taught as the only tools with which to pray. The opportunity to use every part of their being in prayer releases children from the battle to find the 'right' words. As already noted, children still have a sense of wonder and welcome opportunities to see, watch, touch and do new things. One might consider such things to be distractions but Chris Leach, a trainer of Children's Ministry leaders observes, 'it's a lot more helpful if we can learn to use the 'distractions' as aids to

prayer. The denial of the physical is particularly difficult for young children, who meet the world through eager senses' (Leach, 2001, p, 67).

In a similar fashion, the authors of the 24-7 Prayer Manual, express the importance of encouraging creativity in prayer, stating that 'prayer is about using all our senses rather than shutting them down' (2003, p, 110). From my own observation, the idea of prayer meetings using more than words is being more widely adopted in church home groups and other small gatherings. Meg Orr, a school teacher and theologian, explains her experience of the use of creativity with prayer groups:

Over the years I have come to learn that the way we learn something is more influential than the something we learn. I have found that the use of pictures, posters, prayers, poems as well as passages of Scripture help to stir the imagination when we do theology (Orr, 2005, p. 6).

The advantage of creativity is that it is open to interpretation. Visual items can be interpreted differently by every child, stirring a memory, evoking an emotion or taking them on a new path of thought. Brian Draper, lecturer in Contemporary Culture, and Kevin Draper, a tutor on the Oasis Youth Ministry Course, share their views on including something visual in a Prayer Space:

It may be tempting to dismiss this as a 'youth thing' or as a passing whim or phase. Yet if we believe that what is happening is something much more significant, it can point us to the conclusion that, for much more profound reasons, visuals are one of the most powerful tools of communication at this point in history (Draper & Draper, 2000, p. 38).

In a similar fashion, John Leach, a Parish Development Adviser, is keen to see more creativity in the Anglican Church service, recognising the value of 'doing', and advises organisers to ask themselves the question 'where would doing something help people to understand better or experience more deeply the grace of God?' (Leach, 2005, p. 11). People are coming to realise that creativity, whether it be making something, watching something, touching or smelling something, does actually assist in understanding, reflection, and experience. Prayer is something that can include all of these: the temple rituals in the Old Testament are a good example, where drama, personal piety and strong symbol and metaphor all come together in one place. Indeed, a key Old Testament simile for prayer is incense (see for example, Psalm 141:2). The worship event is truly multi-sensory.

A Prayer Space in a Gloucester Catholic primary school

We set up a Prayer Space for a day in a local Catholic primary school in Gloucester in April 2012. Primary school children in a British school are aged between four and eleven. Not all children were involved, as some were out of school on a field trip. The team for the day consisted of Joe Knight (worker for Prayer Spaces in Schools), Anjali Kemp (photographer and general assistant), Rita Rimkiene (parent of one of the school children), myself, and Chris Blockley (Chaplain at Gloucester Academy).

Chris Blockley began the day by leading the school assembly, teaching the children actions to the Lord's Prayer. A early focused event acts as a signpost for both the children and staff,

and sets the tone for the day. Following the assembly, classes of thirty children were brought into the hall at half hour intervals. Their time with us began with a quick Examen type discussion. Examen is a prayer discipline, developed by the Jesuits and others, which invites God into the day. We asked the children what were the parts of the Lord's Prayer and actions they liked and disliked and why. There was considerable uptake on this.

Blockley then explained that each of the stations fitted into the general themes of the Lord's Prayer. These included ways to say 'Thank you', 'Sorry' and 'Please', as well as others that invited the children to 'Forgive' or be forgiven, and to ask 'Lead me' to make a positive change or choose to do something kind.

During each session I interviewed one or two children. These children 'self selected', or rather, I was opportunistic in interviewing them, as they had taken themselves aside to ask questions. I was able to elicit unique responses from these children about the activities at the stations. Others wrote their thoughts or prayers either on paper, card, foam, or in a book. In addition, the Head Teacher had asked each class teacher to summarise their thoughts about the space. I was therefore able to gain three sets of data: personal interviews, written prayers, and formal feedback. I collected data as follows:

- Photographs of prayers/reflections written on post-it stickers
- Scanned copies of prayers/reflections written in three books placed at different stations in the room
- Photocopies of pupils' and teachers' evaluation sheets
- Recorded semi-structured interviews with children who were selected at random

I was seeking to gather as much physical evidence as possible of the children's responses to the Prayer Space. It was more difficult to evaluate the oral responses of the staff or the Prayer Space team, although some were recorded in the one to one interviews. It is impossible to evaluate the unspoken thoughts and reflections that maybe led to personal conversation with God, or decisions to make changes in attitudes and life patterns. Hence the research method was limited solely to physical evidence and oral responses in interview.

Discussion of the Responses

Below is a selection of the raw data collected.

1. 'Thanks!' Prayer Station

Some of the post-it notes written:

- I Thank god for my berthday
- thank you God for all are friends
- thank's for trees
- (Drawing of a person) Mummy
- thank you for getting rid of all the thing i did wrong!
- Thank you for my luck and good family

2. 'Sorry' Prayer Station

Some of the teardrops written:

- Sorry for being angry
- I am sorry being nasty to my sister
- I am sorry for being norty
- I'm sorry for being mean to my familys
- Sorry for lying and winding my sister up
- Sorry for not lukiing after my dog bird and horses

3. 'Please' Prayer Station

Some of the hearts written:

- Please look after everyone in the world who's ill
- Please help me in the futie college and new family
- Please forgive me for what I done
- Please help people in Africa

4. 'Lead Us' Prayer Station

Some of the bricks written:

- Not to fight with my brothers or cheak my mum back
- Lead me to do the right choses forever
- (Drawing of two people) not argue
- Lead me to be kind to others
- Lead me to always to be good
- Please lead me with helping my mother with our new baby

5. Malawi School Prayer Station

A fifth component was added to this school's Prayer Space. This school was running a project to help raise awareness of a partner school in Malawi. Each Prayer Space in Schools is adaptable to the needs of the host school. The addition of the Malawi school demonstrates this for the school we were in. One of the prayers written on the poster for Malawi was Dear Jesus Please help people in Malawi who are sick, ill or injured Amen

6. A quiet space.

The children were told that the 'room' created by the cushions in the decorated gazebo was for time to sit quietly and think. If they wanted to, they could write a prayer in the book there.

- Dear God, Thank you for forgiving my bad Amen
- Dear god, You're the best forgiving me Amen
- Dear God, help me do great work very hard
- dear god please help me when I am in trouble
- Dear god help us Be more like you Amen
- Dear God keep me safe amen

7. Pictures Station

Pictures that related to the Lord's Prayer were placed on a table with a book.

- I love the picture of the crashing waves because it reminds me of God's power.
- I like the picture with Jesus because it helps me be a better person.
- I love the cuddly pengwins because it reminds me of god next to me all the times
- I like the tree picture because it makes me think of all the miricals Jesus made
- I like the poppy because they bring memorys of dead soldiers that helped stop wars.

8. Poetry Station

Some poems relevant to the Lord's Prayer, written by Chris Blockley, were placed on a table and the children were invited to read and comment on them in a book placed nearby.

- I like the poem 'are you there' because it reminded me about when I do wrong things.
- I like thank you because you say thank you.
- I like "when the evening comes because encourages me to right things.
- My fav is Father to son because it shows how much they love each other.
- Lol lol its epic lol lol lol lol.

9. Interviews I held with 12 randomly selected children.

There were three main questions:

- Do you think it (the Prayer Space or specific activity) helped you to pray?
- How did it help you to pray?
- What did you say please/thank you for?

Ten of the twelve children believed the Prayer Space helped them to pray. Some of their response to 'how did it help them to pray' include:

- Made me feel about what things God does.
- I think about why Jesus died
- I dunno, it just helped
- Makes me remember stuff

Their responses to the question "what did you say 'please/thank you' for?" included

- When I said please..... my sister ...she's a little bit poorly so I said please asked God to make her better
- Thank you My family and my life

Other comments during interviews included

- The only thing I like about this is the arty stuff.
- I think the colours represent all the creatures
- I think it's all helpful.
- Helps me think makes me feel bad.

I did not realise then the influence that a Roman Catholic school would have on the children and how this context might influence their responses to the creative prayer stations. It was during the interviews that I discovered that the children had been well educated with regard to the Christian faith and were familiar with many Bible stories and common prayers. The Catholic priest often visits the school and they share a Catholic chaplain with their connected High School. The children had recently celebrated Lent and Easter so were well aware of the Bible stories and prayers of the Easter season. This broad knowledge and understanding gave them a starting point when they arrived.

The disadvantage was that the children already had a bias and presumed that they were fully expected to take part in the activities, as they do when the priest or chaplain visits them. This may well have stifled their spontaneity. They were also used to the religious language: some seemed overly eloquent when interviewed.

Nevertheless, the children had previously only used prayers from books or those that had been taught to them or those they remembered and recited on set occasions. The children's responses ranged from those who followed the guidelines rigidly, copying the suggested prayer word for word – perhaps betraying their more formal Catholic context – to those who did or wrote just what they wanted to. In the Prayer Space we gave them the opportunity and the freedom to say, write or draw their own prayers. It was something different to the prayers they often said by rote. This impromptu context was new and refreshing for many.

Analysing the Responses

The prayers written on post-it notes at the 'Thanks!' station were mainly focussed on the things and people in the children's day to day lives: friends; Mummy; family; birthday; love; food; computer games; football. This is how both Fowler and Cloyd would expect them to pray – the children were being thankful for what is in their daily experience of life. There were a few thanks that reached out further than the home or school: trees; animals in the world. These children were thinking outside of the 'home' box and relating God to these things as creator. There were a couple of prayers – using Coles and Nye's categories – that would be recognised as the children responding from their inner selves, or, 'spiritually': thank you for getting rid of all the thing I did wrong; thanks for giving me life.

Similarly, at the 'Please' station, the children wrote prayers focussed on their close life experience (please help me in the futie college and new family), with a few reaching out further afield: please look after everyone in the world who's ill; please help people in Africa. The response from the inner self said: please forgive me for what I done.

Where the children were prompted to think of something they might be sorry for, there was a general response of apologies for specific things that the children recognised as wrong: being angry; nasty; norty; mean; lying; annoying; being cheeky; stroppy and abrupt. Nye (2009, p. 87) interprets this as the developing conscience: an ability to judge between right and wrong. An interesting response that, hopefully, will raise a question with the school staff was: I am sorry for being bad at math. I would suggest that a response from the inner self was: I am sorry I disobey you.

The 'Lead Us' station was very limited in the scope of responses, the majority being very closely related to the children's home life: not to fight; not argue; help my mother with our new baby; do more sporty stuff. Some were asking for changes in attitude: sharing; be kind to others; always to be good; clever and brave. Fowler (1981, p. 149) and Nye (2002, p. 93) refer to the affect that stories have on children at this age. It is possible that this type of response was a reflection of a character the child had heard of in a story and admired or esteemed to be like. It is difficult to say which category this prayer falls into: lead me to do the right choses forever. But it is a perceptive one nevertheless.

The children were invited to write a prayer for a school in Malawi. It was noticeable that these prayers were focussed on what the children had learnt about the school and the community and environment it was in: Dear Jesus Please help people in Malawi who are sick, ill or injured Amen.

The pictures station was noted for its variety of responses. Each picture card could have a very wide range of responses. Chris Leach, in his book *How to Use Symbol and Action in Worship* (2005) constantly refers to the power of the visual. It will resound in different ways with different people, as we found with the children. There were two completely different responses to the picture of an ocean wave: I love the picture of the crashing waves because it reminds me of God's power. In contrast, another wrote [I like] the wave because its so peaceful. Some of their responses to the wave specifically referred to God or Jesus: it reminds me of God's power; god next to me all the times; all the miricals Jesus made; god

loves us and hugs us. I would suggest that these were such because the children thought they were expected to connect them to God or Jesus, as there were other pictures of Jesus on the table, rather than a connection with their spirituality. Others were straight forward reactions: I like the treas with the perpall flowers because it reminds me of naicher. I like the [football] goal picture because it is funny. The most curious response – which I simply couldn't fathom – was I like the one with jesus because it reminds me of Rasputin. Rasputin was a Russian mystic monk of the Orthodox church, and advisor to the Romanov imperial family in the early 20th century. I can only explain this as due to a child from another nationality – probably Russian – who must have had some respect for Rasputin inculcated at some point.

In the poetry corner, the children wrote some of their thoughts in a book. Comments refer to the affects the poems had on their conscience: reminded me about when I do wrong things; encourages me to do right things; say thank you. Another referred to how much love was shared: My fav is Father to son because it shows how much they love each other. Were all the prayers serious and genuine? Probably not. One seemed rather flippant: lol its epic lol... There are always one or two visitors who deliberately choose not to do what is suggested. Some stand back and observe: others deliberately do something completely different; some may even sabotage a station. Yet sometimes, it is because there is something in the room or at a particular station, that has hit home and they are not sure how to deal with it, so making a joke or unusual comment seems to be their way out. Other times we recognise that the child simply does not wish to participate.

The other stations in the room were 'forgive' and 'kingdom'. Rita, a member of our team, reported a child saying to her, 'my heart feels lighter,' after dropping the vitamin C tablet and watching it dissolve. We are assuming that this was that child's spiritual experience. Dewar writes 'Children are incredibly direct and what comes out can sometimes be amazing and profound' (2002, p. 22). Her words simply described what she knew. The words had not been said at any point of the day by any adult or anyone else in the room. Another child is reported on the evaluation sheets, to have enjoyed the saying sorry activity – felt something inside when the fizzing was happening. Other than this we cannot know what responses children may have had, but that station was most popular!

The 'kingdom' station gave the children the opportunity to make flowers which the children connected with making God's kingdom colourful. It was a time for conversation with the children about what they had done in the Prayer Space and for reflecting on the glory of the Kingdom. There were no written responses for this station.

The interviews conducted with the children took place in the same room as the Prayer Space. Some of the children spoke very quietly and, unfortunately, were not totally picked up by the voice recorder. This is a common enough challenge in gaining primary source material. However, I was able to get clear responses to the main question which asked if doing things in the Prayer Space helped them to pray. The response was 80% positive (of the 12 I interviewed). I do not want to put much weight onto this response because, again, I think the children in this case were expecting to participate in the activities and joining in with school prayers is something they do every day. Because it was a Prayer Space, and because it was a Catholic school in which they are expected to pray, then this response shouldn't be surprising. Nevertheless, the spontaneity, creativity and freedom of a new way

of praying may still inform this high response. Adding the opportunity to be creative makes the invitation to pray more welcoming.

Unexpected Findings

The 'please', 'thanks', 'sorry' and 'lead us' stations were the main places where children were asked to write their thoughts or prayers on something individual and add it to a whole, that is, a 'please' heart was dropped into a hand, a 'sorry' teardrop was glued with the many others onto large teardrops, the 'thanks' post-its were stuck onto a window with others and the 'lead us' bricks were added to a yellow brick road. We believed these activities could contribute to fostering a sense that prayer could be a community event: it both represented and built community. The Head Teacher and staff were quite moved when they read some of the heart-felt prayers the children had written. The Head spoke of her wonder at the honesty the children had expressed and saw how the different stations had given them the freedom to be so truthful and open without fear of judgement.

The outcome that day was that the Head would like more Prayer Spaces and perhaps something permanent in the school. She is also interested in the team doing a Prayer Space for the parents and local community after school.

Conclusions

The children's prayers were consistent with scholarship on children's spiritual development. The prayers represented a 'perception of religion as continuous with everyday life' (Nye, 2002, p. 92). Some of the stations pricked the developing consciences of the children while others made them think about what is good in their lives. Some responded with thoughts that ranged across the wider world. The discussion has led us to expect nothing less than this. This is how children pray. It is how they bring their thoughts, concerns and dreams to God, whomever they conceive God to be. The children responded to something that aroused them spiritually and, whether they understood it or not, they had the freedom in the Prayer Space to write, pray and create a response.

The creative prayer stations were distinct and specific in their intention to stimulate reflection on one particular aspect. It was up to the child to offer this thought or reflection as a prayer to God, whether something was written down or not. Many prayers were written in the Prayer Space and many responses were shared in the books. It would be wise to acknowledge the variety of responses and motivations: not everything was a heart-felt prayer to God. Nevertheless, the possibility that many were precisely that cannot be ruled out either. They represented God-punctuated moments. Giving children the opportunity to explore their big questions of life and offering a method for them to express their developing spirituality is in effect offering an invitation to experience God intimately. Children have a spiritual nature: creative Prayer Spaces give them the chance to explore that which is spiritual.

Overall, judging from the feedback on the evaluation sheets, the children enjoyed their experience in the Prayer Space. They liked having the freedom to write their own prayers in a variety of ways and sharing the time with their friends. The quiet space in the tent was popular and the children said that they would have preferred more time to do some of the things they didn't get to do in the thirty minutes allotted.

This preliminary study has been merely introductory. The research methodology was qualitative, based on written content and interviews. Because of the religious nature of the school, there was undoubtedly a bias on what the children felt they were expected to do and say in response to the interview questions and to some of the activities. This is evidenced especially in the interviews and the responses to the poetry and pictures. I suggest that research needs to be carried out in a non-Faith school, where children have not been taught anything religious except that which is included in the compulsory religious education curriculum. If this was undertaken, then a stronger indicator may emerge as to the relationship of creativity and prayer.

Prayer Spaces are creative and can appeal to all the senses. This case study focussed mainly on sight and touch. In the future, we could devise activities that use hearing, smell and taste. It would be interesting to include a station for each of these, or even make them part of the Prayer Space as a whole, to discover if they too assist in children's reflection and prayer. There are other issues that may affect the way children respond in their prayers or reflections. These might include cultural background, social and economic context, age and maturity, physical or mental ability. Whatever these future studies reveal, I submit that indeed prayer and creativity are linked, and moreover 'a mysterious bond exists between God and the child, and the adults in the child's life have the responsibility to see that that relationship continues to grow' (Cloyd, 1997, p. xv).

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Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

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