

13

Weeks of accompanied prayer

Weeks of accompanied prayer are offered to help people in their prayer without their having to stay away from home. As retreats in daily life they are brought to the local community, where they provide an opportunity for those who cannot or do not wish to make a residential retreat.

Weeks of accompanied prayer have elements of a residential retreat, but as those involved continue in their normal daily lives they have a richness of its own. Prayer remains closely in touch with the daily happenings in each individual's personal life and in the world. And whereas at the end of a residential retreat there is a need to return to daily life, in a week of accompanied prayer the two are already integrated.

Weeks of accompanied prayer are ideal for people with work and family commitments, for those with young children, for the sick, the elderly, the housebound, those with physical and learning disabilities, and those on a low income that is, for all who would never feel able to go away for a retreat. But in fact such weeks can be valuable for anyone, because of the way they integrate prayer with daily life, and they will be particularly successful if they involve a variety of people in the church community.

Although guidance is individual the weeks develop relationships among those who make the retreat, and often those who arrange them invite members of other local churches to join, irrespective of their denomination.

What happens?

Participants are asked to set aside time daily for personal prayer typically 30 minutes, but taking account each individual's situation. They also commit themselves to meet individually with a prayer companion for about 30 minutes each day. This is an opportunity to talk about what is happening in their prayer, and its relationship with their whole faith life.

Individual prayer guidance can be given over various periods of time. Most commonly the week of accompanied prayer is a continuous period of up to eight days in which participants and their companions meet every day. Another approach, particularly appropriate in a period such as Lent, is to extend the Retreat to four weeks or so, with participants and companions meeting perhaps twice each week.

Normally an accompanied-prayer week begins with a group meeting in which all of the participants and companions can meet one another. This session provides an opportunity for introductions, general guidance about prayer, and initial conversations between participants and companions. The group will often choose to spend a short time in quiet prayer together. Thereafter they will be aware throughout the retreat of others who are also making it, and of a sense of mutual support. At the end of the week everyone will come together again to reflect upon and celebrate the event.

Usually it is helpful to hold one or more preparatory events a few weeks before the retreat begins, so that people can gauge whether or not this is for them. It may also be useful to hold a follow-up gathering about a fortnight after the retreat, to discuss its value and to identify future needs of participants.

Prayer companions

Typically the team of prayer companions includes a mixture of people – women and men of various denominations, some lay, some ordained and some members of religious orders. All will have received training in helping others in their prayer.

The role of the companion is mainly to listen: to accompany the participants during the week, encouraging each person to honour his or her own prayer and to be aware of how it may be developed. Each companion will usually accompany between three and six participants. Normally participants visit the companion, but if necessary the companion will visit a participant at home.

There may already be prayer companions who live locally but it is likely that others will travel to wherever the week is being held. Some may need accommodation nearby.



Facilities

A large room will be needed for group meetings and one small room per companion for one-to-one meetings with participants. These may be all together in one centre or scattered around the area, for example in people's homes. Wherever participants meet their companions it is helpful to have a room where they can wait, with drinks and biscuits available.

Involving others

Church members who are not actually making the retreat can still support it. Some may like to help with practical needs during the week, by welcoming people with drinks if there is a central location, by providing a room in their house for meetings, or by helping with transport. And all may support the retreat by praying in advance and during the week that the event will prove fruitful.

Costs

The main cost will be the prayer companions travel expenses, and some groups will also wish to offer the companions a small payment. It is usual therefore to make a small charge to participants, while being careful not to exclude anyone by doing so.

Further information

To find out more about weeks of accompanied prayer or to get in touch with prayer companions, please contact the Retreat Association.

The Retreat Association can provide further information and guidance about retreats, and publishes other leaflets which may be of interest, including:

- Silent prayer groups
- Ecumenical networks
- Open Door retreat
- Choosing a spiritual guide