DIOCESE OF GLOUCESTER

SEEKING Shapes FOR LIVING

A Lent Course for the Diocese of Gloucester

Life

Wisdom from history

**For an extended time in history
life in Europe was so chaotic and dangerous
it is remembered today as the 'Dark Ages'.
But in a corner of Italy a man had a vision for Christian 'shapes
for living' in troubled times. His name was Benedict and he
wrote some simple and practical guidelines to help people
develop the nurturing, securing and sustaining
shapes for living that those
times so sorely needed.**

**Benedict's 'Rule of Life' has been used
by communities and individuals
around the world ever since.
It is important to remember that although his Rule
is associated with monastic life
he originally wrote it for ordinary people seeking to be
faithful disciples of Christ in the midst of the challenges
and dilemmas of daily living.**

Introducing the course

Jesus says, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). As faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called 'to work for the flourishing of all people and the flourishing of the whole of creation'*. 'Life in all its fullness' is the gift God wants for all of us. But if we are to live that calling well we will need to find a sustainable, nurturing shape for our own lives, so easily over-busy with the stressful and overwhelming demands of modern living.

Seeking Shapes for Living

- offers a fresh way of exploring what is traditionally called a Rule of Life
- is about the whole business of being alive - with ourselves, each other and God
- is a way of growth, transformation and flourishing
- helps to hold us true to our beliefs, values and priorities.

***Bishop Rachel's introduction to the LIFE vision.**

The shape of the course

Each week will have a particular focus, introduced in the pages of this booklet:

Relating / Praying / Working / Playing / Growing

Some simple questions lead you into each theme and suggest some ways of exploring it.

You may like to use the material for your own prayer and reflection, with friends over coffee, in small groups or in a church community. There is no one way of doing it.

Whereas groups might find it helpful to use a flip chart to make people's ideas visible to all, individuals and smaller groups may find a journal useful for gathering insights and questions. Some express themselves more visually and find it helpful to draw, paint or make diagrams. It may be fun to experiment. Week by week choose whichever approach seems helpful.

On pages 16-17 a graphic gathers all the shapes with spaces to write in each any key thoughts or insights.

Prayer of examen

At the end of each session, or your day or week, you are encouraged to use the prayer of examen (see back page). This is a really helpful way of noticing the ways in which God has been present or speaking to us.



Website resources

gloucester.anglican.org

For each week you will find online resources to help you explore the theme. You will need to be selective - but do take a few minutes each week to see what is there. They will typically include:

- a video talk by Bishop Rachel
- bible study and other resources for personal reflection and group discussion
- ideas for children, families and schools
- a guide for group leaders.



Prayer and bible reading resources

Regular prayer and bible reading are always found at the heart of a deepening Christian faith. Finding a method that works for each us can need some exploring. There are plenty of resources available at gloucester.anglican.org

WEEK 1

Relating

A place to start

Some relationships are joyful and life giving. Some are challenging or painful. Our lives are full of relationships – with people, places, politics, creation…. Can you expand this list?

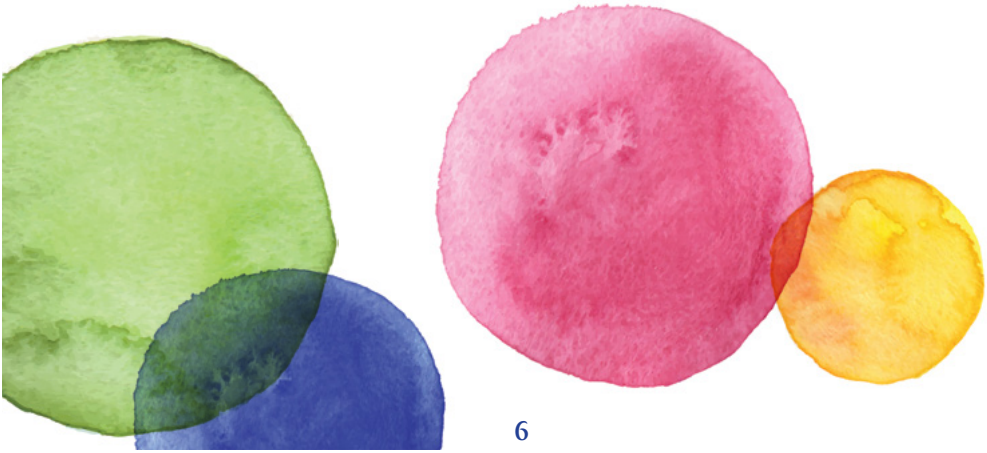
Gathering

Think of the different relationships in your own life. These will be very varied. Identify the ones that are most important to you.

Noticing

What relationships feel good at the moment - give you pleasure and joy, you are glad to be part of? Can you say why this is so?

There may be parts of the relating in your life that are more difficult or painful at the moment. Can you notice what those are? Can you say why they are difficult?



'Relating' explores the many and varied ways our lives relate to and interact with others and our wider world - our belonging, loving, listening, caring, longing, speaking, struggling, sharing and welcoming.

Growing

What would you change in your life and relating if you could – and can you say why? Complete a sentence that begins, 'I'd like to….', or, 'I wish I could…'.

Are there ways any of these wishes could begin to happen?

It may help to share this with trusted friends or a wise guide.

Imagine

You go to your front door and open it. Jesus is standing there. How might you react? What happens next?

Praying

God of all our living, gather all the fragments of our relating and belonging and bring it to the wholeness that is your gift and desire – for in you 'all things hold together' (Col 1.17)

The prayer of examen (see back page)

Use this ancient prayer tool for gathering thoughts and insights to listen to what God, or your friends, might be saying through this theme.

WEEK 2

Praying

A place to start

Praying is an area we can quickly feel inadequate about. Let's start by agreeing we all have more to learn, and seek to encourage each-other.

'Many people suffer years of unnecessary guilt because they seldom manage to pray in the way that they are taught is 'the right way to do so'. (Ruth Fowke)

Is that your experience?

Gathering

Think about the different ways you pray – or have seen others praying. You might consider the time and place, words, pictures, sitting, kneeling, walking…

Noticing

Which ways of praying do you find most natural and helpful?

Which ways of praying do you struggle with? Can you say why?

A note on intercession. Jesus encourages us to come to him in trusting openness with our needs and the needs of others. 'Inter–cede' means to 'go between'. When we pray for others and their needs we are going between them and God. It has been described as being 'before God with people on your heart'. You will find more about this on the website pages.

Praying is making space to be alone with God or sharing a sacred space with others. There are many ways of praying - in silence, with words, together or alone.

Growing

Have any of these reflections suggested ways you might explore further and seek to deepen your praying? What might help you to begin to do that?

Imagine

You have two minutes alone with Jesus. What would you most like to ask, or talk with him about prayer?

Praying

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray to you in quiet trust and with hopeful openness, for a world sustained moment by moment in your love. Amen.

The prayer of examen (see back page)

This is a way of gathering and listening to what God, or others, might be saying through this theme.





WEEK 3

Working

A place to start

God values, delights in and wants to bless you in your world of work – whatever that involves.

Call to mind all the places and activities in your life that you call your 'work'. Create a timeline or map of your 'working life' to the present.

Gathering

If you are with others briefly share something from your world of work, past or present, the different activities and tasks. What would you like to tell people about your world of work? Many people have never shared their story in this way before.

Noticing

Have you ever been thanked for the work you have done or are doing? Where and in what ways has your working life been fulfilling?

Have there been times work has been unfulfilling and a struggle? What would have made a difference?

Work has been called 'a pilgrimage of identity'. This is because much of our sense of who we are, of our sense of worth and value, may come from the work we do, or have done. Is that true for you? Do you feel able to say more?



Our world of work – which is many things. 'Work' may be paid or voluntary, official or unofficial, physical or mental, for ourselves or for others, past or present. Work may feel like a calling or be simply a way to earn a living. It may be forced upon us or chosen. We can sometimes be 'out of work' or feel under-used.

Work and faith

The church is often criticised for:

- *only being interested in people's church work and not caring enough about the wider world of people's 'work life'*
- *tending to value and support certain kinds of work more than others – for example intercessions that tend to only mention ministers, teachers, doctors or missionaries*

Do you think that is fair comment?

Growing

Are there ways you would wish that the relationship of your work and your faith were stronger? What would help?

How do you most wish to be remembered by family, friends or colleagues as a 'working person'?

Imagine

Jesus walks into your workplace (and let that be wherever you choose it to be). How do feel to see him standing there? He says one thing to you. What that might be?

Praying

Lord bless the work of our hands to your service.
Bless the work of our hands - to all who receive it. Amen.

The prayer of examen

Gathering and listening to what God, or your friends, might be saying through this theme.

WEEK 4

Playing

A place to start

In the creation story God regularly pauses and steps back from his work to enjoy it – 'that's very good!' And he builds in one whole day a week for no work at all. God and Adam rest together. There is a rhythm and balance in creation. God knows what we need.

Gathering

Resting, playing, refreshing, 'chilling', 'time out', exercise and creative spaces are vital for a healthy shape for living. We need to re-charge. How easy do you find it to switch off? What helps you to do that? Call to mind all the things that, as time allows, are ways you are refreshed in the midst of the demands of life.

Noticing

We are now a 24/7 world and many struggle to keep a balance at all. How does the balance of your life feel at the moment?





Time for rest, play, creativity, inspiration.

Growing

We do not choose when pressured times come. But it is important to try and plan for refreshment and play where we can – and to help each other do the same. 'Take a step back' and promise yourself one thing. What would that be? If you are with others, encourage each other in what you hear. This is 'very good'.

What is it that you enjoy about any particular hobbies and interests you have? Are there other things you hope to do 'one day'?

If you were heard saying, 'That was fun!' or, 'I found that really relaxing', what sort of things might you have been doing?

God is playful. Fun to be with. Likes being with us.

Imagine

Jesus invites you to have some time out together. 'Let's have some fun,' he says. What do you think he might have in mind? And if he left the choice to you what would you suggest?

Praying

Lord teach us to play, to rest, to savour all the fullness of what you have made. Amen.

The prayer of examen

Gathering and listening to what God, or your friends, might be saying through this theme.

WEEK 5

Growing

A place to start

'How you've grown!' is an exclamation familiar to children being visited by distant relatives. Is that affirmation still true of us? Are we people who are still growing?

Gathering

Some experiences certainly teach us more than others. 'I learned more through that time than any other'. Has that ever been true for you? If so, what times are you thinking of and what did you learn?

Noticing

Each stage of life brings its challenges and opportunities, gift and cost. We are always being invited or forced to grow in some way. What does growing ask of you at the moment?

In what ways does it feel like a gift – an exciting opportunity? Or does it feel painfully hard? It may even be a bit of both.

'Grow where you are planted', the saying goes. But that is not always easy. What challenges are you facing? Perhaps there are struggles you would not have chosen for yourself or those dear to you. Are there …

- questions you are seeking answers to?
- problems that need solutions?
- pressures that need resources to cope with?
- struggles with belief and faith in these challenging and confusing times?

Learning, exploring, flourishing, developing.

Growing

We don't grow in understanding, resilience or wisdom by accident. Nor are good intentions enough. The same is true of our faith. Like taking exercise, a healthy diet, faith needs care and nurture.

Christian communities are called to be places of support, refuge, learning and growing for the challenges of life in the real world.

What might help this to happen better?

Imagine

Jesus is your coach or fitness instructor – for your body, mind, spirit – the fullness of your living. Imagine him saying to you - 'I have come to give you life.' You trust him with your life, and follow him….

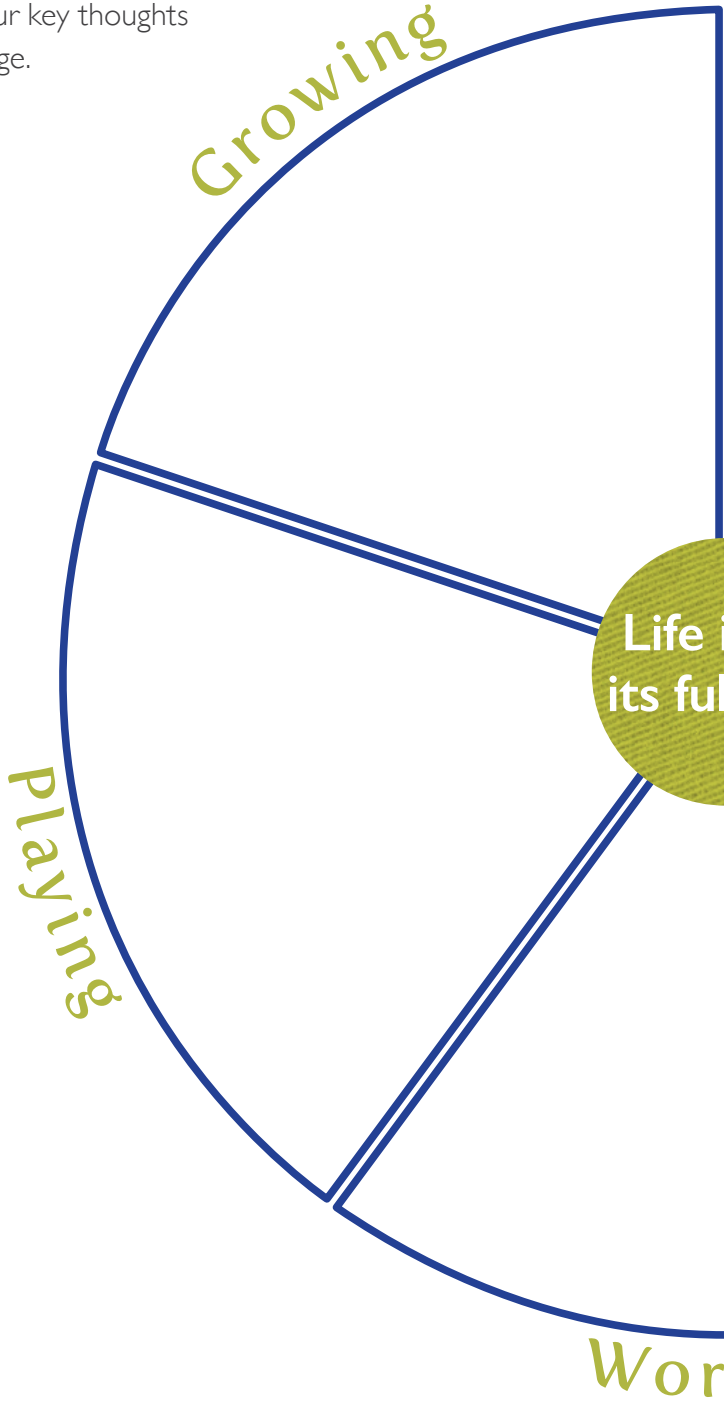
Praying

Lord help us to grow, to flourish and to be fruitful – here and wherever you choose to plant us. Amen.

The prayer of examen

Gathering and listening to what God, or your friends, might be saying through this theme.

Each week, record your key thoughts and insights on this page.




Relating
Praying
in all
llness
king

A place for notes

Prayer for seeking our Shapes for Living

Saviour Christ
in whose love lies the fullness of all life
guide me as I see a shape for living
that all my relating,
praying, working, playing and growing
may be an expression of
disciplined discipleship,
adventurous faith
and joyful service
in your name
and for your Kingdom's sake.
Amen

The prayer of examen

The prayer of examen is about taking time every day to help us see God's hand at work in every aspect of our lives, encouraging a greater sense of his presence and seeking his direction for our lives. This could be used at the end of each discussion, or day or week.

Remembering the day

Ask God to help you to see and to understand how his love has been working within you over this time. Ask him to guide your thoughts. Look back over this discussion, day or week... don't try too hard... At first, just scan all that has happened.

Thanksgiving

Out of all the experiences or insights, what is the one experience that you feel most grateful for? Or where you most felt aware of God, felt love, gave love, felt alive? Relish that experience and give thanks to God. Is there something that God wants to say to you through that experience?

Sorrow and regret

What is the one experience that you feel the most sorrow or regret for? Or where you least felt aware of God, felt love, gave love, felt alive? In the light of God's love and forgiveness - what would you like to say to God and what does God want to say to you?

A gift for what is next

Having reviewed this time, find a word, phrase or image to represent what you'd like to bring as a gift into what comes next. Pray for the grace to move into the new day or week with love, faith and hope... for the grace to bring more of what gives us life... for the grace to continue to recognise God in our daily life...