

*Christian Meditation
for Beginners*



Christian Meditation for Beginners



Thomas Zanzig
Marilyn Kielbasa, Editor



Contents

Introduction	7
<i>Optional Orientation Session</i>	
An Invitation to Participate	17
<i>Session 1</i>	
Getting Started	24
<i>Session 2</i>	
Resting in God	35
<i>Session 3</i>	
Life Goes On	44
A Guide for Meditation	55

Nihil Obstat: Rev. William M. Becker, STD
Censor Librorum
9 May 1995

Imprimatur: †Most Rev. John G. Vlazny, DD
Bishop of Winona
15 May 1995

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat or imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed.

The publishing team included Joellen Barak Ramer and Mary Duerson, copy editors; Lynn Dahdal, production editor; Holly Storkel, typesetter; Maurine R. Twait, design consultant and handout designer; Proof Positive/Farrowlyne Associates, Inc., cover designer; Wayne Aldridge, International Stock, cover photo photographer; Sam Thiewes, illustrator; pre-press, printing, and binding by the graphics division of Saint Mary's Press.

The acknowledgements continue on page 81.

Copyright © 1996 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1318, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce only the materials intended for distribution to the program participants. No other part of this text may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 2

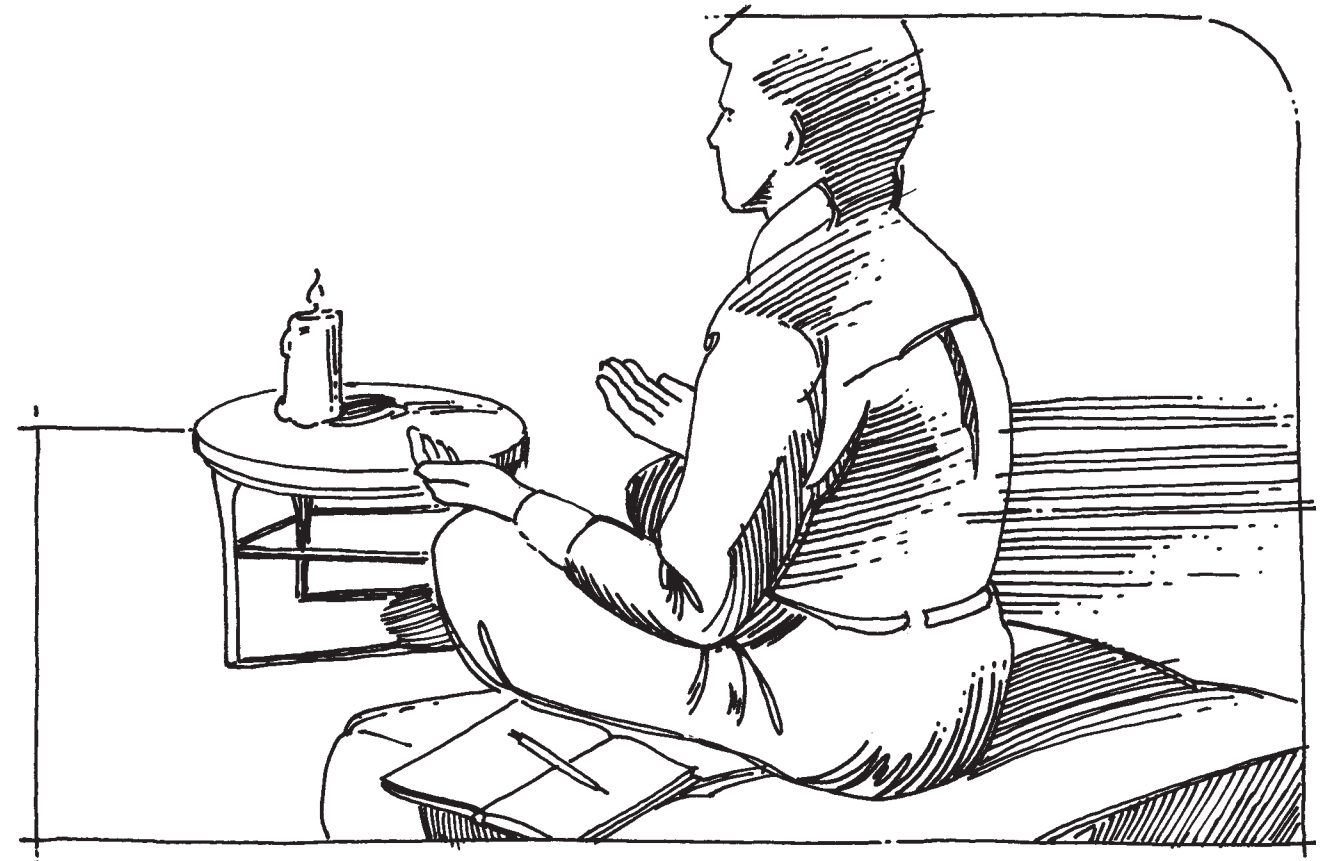
Year: 2002

ISBN 0-88489-361-8



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste. Printed with soy-based ink.

Introduction



An Overview of This Course

In an article entitled “Discovering the Jesus Prayer,” Jim Forest says that “prayer has to do with being in touch with reality, which is to say, in touch with God who is manifested in everything and everyone around us. . . . Prayer is being awake. It is life with your eyes open.”

Many adult Catholics were raised with a much narrower understanding of prayer. Prayer is often viewed as rigid. But our concept of what prayer can be is being expanded constantly. Countless books on prayer and spirituality now fill the shelves of Catholic bookstores. Many people are working hard at developing their spiritual life, and they are dis-

covering that exploring a variety of prayer forms can be satisfying and even fun.

Prayer can happen in the midst of a worshipping community or when we are alone with our God. We encounter God in three forms of private prayer. In *vocal prayer*, or *conversation*, we speak to God and listen creatively to God’s response. *Meditation* is a more structured attempt to get in touch with and reflect more deliberately on what God is trying to reveal to us about ourself and the mysteries of life. The third form of private prayer is *contemplation*, the state of simply yet profoundly *resting with God*. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* invites young people to explore the second of these three ways to personally encounter God.

The young people in this course are probably familiar with the concept of meditation. They probably experienced different forms of meditative prayer in various courses in level 1 of the Horizons Program. The minicourse *Praying All Ways* placed meditation in the context of other prayer forms in the life of the church. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* provides the participants with a deeper understanding of meditation as well as the basic skills to do it. It encourages them to make meditative prayer a regular feature of their life. The primary focus of this course is on the act of meditating rather than on specific content or themes. That is, the course is skill centered, focused on helping the young people develop a personal approach to private meditation that meets their own spiritual needs. Participants learn to meditate by doing it, not by studying it. During this course they join with others to pray together, to learn new techniques, to review their experience, and to find peer support and affirmation.

The basic format of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is the same as other minicourses in the Horizons Program. The course is intended to be taught as 2-hour sessions presented one a week for three consecutive weeks. Two significant differences between *Christian Meditation for Beginners* and other courses in the Horizons Program are evident:

- First, the participants are asked to work their way through a series of meditation exercises between sessions. In other words they are expected to do “homework.” The supplementary exercises give the participants a chance to practice meditation techniques learned in the sessions and explore other possibilities. For this reason participation in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* must be entirely voluntary.
- Second, this course includes a recommended orientation session for people who may be interested in participating in the course but want to know more about it before they sign up. The orientation session is considerably shorter than a regular session and is strictly for the purpose of conveying information about the course. The orientation session is one way to ensure voluntary participation in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. The course components and the between-session expectations will be described at the orientation session so that the people who sign up for the course will be doing so with their eyes wide open.

The sessions are structured with a group of about ten participants in mind. In a sense, no minimum

number is required for this course because it is focused on individual meditation rather than group interaction. If only a small number of young people are committed to taking the course, the nature of the weekly gatherings necessarily changes from group discussion to more personal conversation between the leader and the participants.

The first session of *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, “Getting Started,” includes an introduction to the course and to the other participants. The main topics covered in the first session are the basics of prayer and the elements of meditation. In the prayer service at the conclusion of this session, the young people will sign a contract indicating their intent to participate fully in the course, including their willingness to meditate between sessions. The main themes of the second session, “Resting in God,” and its follow-up exercises include guided meditation, meditating on the Scriptures, and an introduction to the Jesus Prayer. The final session of the course, “Life Goes On,” invites the participants to discern through meditation God’s hand in their life by exploring their story and embracing their future.

Though the young people who make the decision to commit to participating in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* may not be able to adequately articulate their thoughts, they know that they want more from their relationship with God. They know that a relationship with God implies the existence of a God who is reachable and in touch with each individual. They also know that to truly enter into prayer means to do more than mouth the words and hope for some mysterious sign from on high. By committing to participate in this course the young people are indicating a willingness to actively work at deepening that relationship and explore what may be a new form of prayer for them. As the leader of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* you may be opening up a whole new world. You are inviting young people to experience a real encounter with a living God, and to do so with their eyes wide open.

Background for This Course

The Adolescent and This Course

Young people in the middle of adolescence may be at a comfortable stage in their development, or at least moving in that direction. Puberty is no longer a new experience but an acknowledged fact of life.

They may be secure enough in their identity to take an occasional chance at pulling away from the crowd in order to establish their individuality. Because of this they may be open to new experiences. The future—that is, life beyond high school—is getting more imminent, more exciting, and more scary. They may find themselves thinking, writing, talking, worrying, and praying about the future a lot more than they did as ninth graders. In their mid-teens adolescents also continue to explore and deepen the primary relationships in their life—including their relationship with God. They hunger for deeper relationships and are beginning to deal with the questions of intimacy.

All of these characteristics of mid-adolescence are part of the growth process and the developmental context for *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. Unfortunately, negative stereotypes about adolescents also exist, primarily among adults. Adolescents are typically characterized as not interested in religion. The mere mention of a course on meditation for young people may prompt a skeptical response from adults. Although it may be true that many young people struggle to find meaning in their experience of institutional religion, the vast majority of adolescents are interested in their personal spirituality. They are profoundly interested in a faith relationship with God and in sharing that faith with others. Perhaps this is best reflected in the marvelous response of young people to retreats, to creative prayer services, and particularly to guided meditations as an approach to prayer.

In addition to meeting the hunger of young people for a deeper spirituality, *Christian Meditation for Beginners* may appeal to them simply because of the topic itself. For many, the idea of meditation is “cool.” They see and hear references to it in the popular media and generally have a positive attitude toward the concept. By situating this course in the context of a religious education program for adolescents, you can accomplish two tasks: you will increase their skill at prayer, and you will foster an inseparable link between meditation and Christian prayer.

Finally, as young people mature they continue to look to significant adults in their life for care, support, and guidance in those areas that seem to need serious attention. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is an opportunity to introduce the participants to a method of prayer that can enhance their faith life now and throughout adulthood.

The Theology of This Course

Prayer can be defined as communication with God in a relationship of love. Whether formal or informal, private or communal, prayer is necessarily a part of life for every believer. In prayer we experience our deepest self in touch with the deepest dimensions of life. This is the point at which we are most fully in touch with what it truly means to be human. We find and experience God in the most personal and intimate way at this interior level. If we believe in a God who loves us, it is natural to want to open our deepest self to the power and the joy of that love, a love that is infinite. That connection between God and us is the ultimate goal of prayer.

Every great religion of the world has its own traditions of prayer. Our Catholic heritage is rich when it comes to the variety of prayer forms, and a part of that history includes a strong tradition of meditative prayer. In the early years of the church, women and men retreated from the hectic pace of everyday life in order to search for truth and meaning in the silence of the wilderness. They took as their examples Moses, the prophets, and, of course, Jesus—all of whom had gone into the wilderness to confront who they were in the face of God. This led to the traditions of monasticism that emerged in the early church.

From the beginnings of the church, great mystics, theologians, and scholars have had a tremendous impact on the prayer life of the people of God. Their writings were often the result of their own meditation as well as their experiences of deep contemplative union with God. And their works have served as a source of prayer for generations of Christians that have followed. For example, many great works on spiritual life written during the late Middle Ages sparked a revival of prayer and meditation in a difficult period in the church’s history. One of these works, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, has probably been the most widely read and quoted work, other than the Bible, of the first two thousand years of Christianity. The fifteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich experienced powerful revelations from God, which she recorded in a book called *Showings*. The next century produced Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross. The last hundred years have witnessed Thérèse of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, Karl Rahner, and Anthony de Mello. Many modern writers on spirituality have led the church to new appreciation of different forms of meditation, including

those derived from Zen Buddhism and Native American and African American spiritualities.

This Course and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Part 4 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, titled “Christian Prayer,” is a thorough discussion of prayer as a vital, personal relationship with God that stems from living the mystery of faith. The three expressions of prayer—vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation—are discussed in this section.

The *Catechism* acknowledges that “there are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly. . . . But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus” (no. 2707).

The next paragraph in the *Catechism* provides strong reasons for including meditation as part of an active, balanced, prayer life: “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ” (no. 2708).

The tradition of meditation in the church continues to flourish. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is an opportunity to engage a new generation of Catholics in this vital form of prayer and to expose them to the richness of part of our heritage.

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as “the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it, and then to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers” (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry [NFCYM], p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content

and methodology. All the courses explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News. And all the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words the Horizons Program tries to be “good news” not just proclaim the Good News.

Christian Meditation for Beginners is a highly evangelizing course in that it offers a direct invitation to young people to deepen their relationship with God. The primary purpose of the course is to help young people *know* God rather than to *know about* God. There is little information or instruction to stand in the way of a meaningful encounter. Each person’s life experience is the starting point and provides the content and the context of the course. The meditation experiences are simply tools to facilitate these individual encounters.

Your role as the teacher is primarily one of witness. Your willingness to pray along with the participants indicates a commitment to be a co-learner along the journey. Your skill at facilitating discussion among the participants and your attention as they tell their stories will enhance the experience for each person. As the leader of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* you are an evangelizer to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, you are one who hears the Good News, tells the Good News, and is the Good News.

On Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses in the program. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

You may look at the description of this course and immediately feel some apprehension about leading it. Be assured that it takes no special training in meditation to teach this course. Because of the materials provided for the participants and the detailed process outlines in the regular sessions, the course almost leads itself. Reading through the handout material and reviewing the plans for the sessions should ease most of your fears.

However, a unique qualification is required of anyone wishing to lead this course—a sincere desire to pray with the participants. That is, the leader should make the same commitment to meditating between sessions as the participants do. In fact, it would be good if you would sign a meditation contract along with the participants, in the first session. This act would affirm and reflect the ideal that the leader and the participants view themselves as co-learners in this course.

The responsibilities of the leader, other than the commitment to meditate regularly along with the participants, are not substantially different from those for other courses in the Horizons Program. Just as in other courses, it will be necessary to prepare yourself and the learning environment. This course will be successful to the degree that you are prepared and can make it come alive for the participants. The following information is intended to help you do that.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The effectiveness of a course such as *Christian Meditation for Beginners* depends, in part, on the physical surroundings and community environment of the group. Adolescents are likely to respond more positively if the space is comfortable and different from a typical school setting and the atmosphere is conducive to sharing. Here are two suggestions for developing that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the participants to move around. Each session will require the participants to spend some time meditating. It will be easier for them to resist the temptation to visit with other participants if they have enough room to separate from one another. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling, but straight-back chairs will be helpful during certain meditation activities. The traditional classroom arrangement is the least

desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment.

Clarify expectations. Though the focus of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is on private meditation, there will be time for group discussion and debriefing. At the beginning of the course establish among the participants an atmosphere of mutual respect. Stress the importance of listening to one another and of refraining from hurtful remarks or put-downs. When necessary remind the participants of these rules.

Preparing the Material

Before each session read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and the physical setting. Some of the activities will require preparation. This could range from copying a simple list onto newsprint to purchasing special items for a particular meditation. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

All the sessions include brief periods of teacher input. Some of these are informational, but most are intended to bring closure to a part of the session so that the participants might understand the connections between life and faith, between themselves and God. The session plans offer guidelines for these brief talks. Spend time putting these presentations together so that they are clear and hold the attention of the participants. Where it is helpful and appropriate, do not be afraid to share parts of your own story with the young people.

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. In addition, as a co-learner in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, your familiarity with the meditation exercises can provide significant insights. Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one’s personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your

heart. And without saying it, you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:

- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as an adolescent without preaching or moving into the fatal “When I was your age . . .” mode.
- Share only the things that adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.
- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. Be truthful about your experience with the weekly meditations. This will let the participants know that spiritual growth is indeed a process. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Group Meditation

The primary intent of this course is to provide the participants with the basic skills of meditation and to encourage them to make meditation a regular feature of their life. However, we also want to expose them to the joys and benefits of group meditation. Each session will include a period of silent group meditation. The pattern for this group meditation is as follows:

- *For session 1.* Five minutes of silent meditation, with quiet background music
- *For session 2.* Five minutes with natural sounds and with the meditators in a different posture
- *For session 3.* Seven minutes without background music

Each period of silent meditation will begin with some instructions from the leader and a centering process adapted from Anthony de Mello’s *Sadhana: A Way to God*.

Leading Guided Meditations

Almost anyone can lead a group through a guided meditation, but if you have no experience with this form of prayer, it will take some practice to be able to do it effectively. Most “journey prayers,” as they are sometimes called, begin with a guided process to relax and center the participants so that they can focus on the exercise. Scripts are provided for every guided meditation and relaxation process in this course.

When reading a guided meditation or relaxation exercise, speak slowly, calmly, distinctly, and naturally. Use the lower part of your voice range; it tends to be more soothing than the higher registers. Pause at the appropriate times so that the participants have time to imagine the scenes or the encounters, or do the tasks you are suggesting.

If you are unsure of your skill, it may help to try the meditation on other adults or family members and ask for feedback. Or consider making a tape of one of the meditations and allowing yourself to be led through the process. If it works for you, it will probably work for others. If you feel you do not have the voice quality or the skill to effectively lead your group through the guided meditations in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, ask someone whose voice you find soothing to record them for you.

Using Music

Some groups are easily distracted by the sounds around them. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. Some of the group meditation exercises in this course specifically prescribe the use of background music, but it can be used in other places as well. For background music use slow, soothing instrumental selections, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by ocean surf or running streams, or those heard in rain forests.

Two Special Components

In addition to the three sessions, *Christian Meditation for Beginners* includes two additional components that make the course unique in the Horizons Program. These two components were described briefly in the overview of the course. As the leader keep in mind the following specific considerations:

Orientation Session

Even though the orientation session is optional, you are strongly encouraged to schedule a time before the course begins to conduct this session. You are also encouraged to invite parents to the orientation.

- It gives you an opportunity to emphasize to the young people *and* their parents the voluntary nature of the course. Participants who take the course due to parental pressure or just because of their friends could ruin the experience for the rest of the group.
- You can make it clear to the parents and the young people that *Christian Meditation for Beginners* will definitely require extra work between sessions. By doing this you enlist parental support for the participants and assure those who are serious about the course that they will be among peers who are equally serious.
- It is hoped that this meditation course will not be the only option for religious education open to young people in your program. By scheduling the orientation session before *Christian Meditation for Beginners* and other courses begin, you give the young people who choose not to take the course an opportunity to participate in another option.

Supplementary Exercises

Participants in the course are expected to work their way through a minimum number of private meditation exercises in between sessions. This expectation should be fully explained at the orientation session and in any preregistration contact you might have with young people who are interested in taking *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. The success of the course depends, in large part, on the willingness of the participants to explore different meditation techniques on their own.

For each intervening week of the course, four meditation exercises are recommended, to be done on four different days. Three more exercises are suggested for those who want to do more. Each exercise should take about 15 minutes. The learner’s booklet, titled *A Guide for Meditation*, which you will assemble from the handout pages and distribute at the first session, fully explains these exercises. Time is allotted at the end of each of the first two sessions to preview the exercises for the coming week.

Another important element in the supplementary exercises is the preparation that participants are asked to do for the next session. In the learner’s booklet, the session 1 and 2 exercises are followed by a page entitled Things Worth Sharing. Encourage the participants to spend 10 to 15 minutes reviewing this page after they have completed their meditations each week. As a co-learner in this process, you are encouraged to do the same.

Special Preparation Needs

Learner’s Booklet: *A Guide for Meditation*

Each person involved in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* will need a copy of the learner’s booklet. Some of the meditation exercises used in the sessions and all the supplementary exercises are contained in this booklet. The necessary photocopy masters and instructions for making the booklet are at the end of this teaching guide. Before the first session set aside some time to make up one booklet for each person, or arrange to have someone else do it for you. Creating the booklet is not difficult if you carefully follow the instructions that precede the photocopy masters.

Permanent Memento

Consider using a religious artifact as a consistent part of the closing prayer in each session. If you choose to do so, try to find a crucifix or other artifact of a size that makes it functional for group use (i.e., 4 or 5 inches tall) but that is also available in a smaller version. Then at the closing gathering, present each participant with one of the smaller artifacts as a permanent memento of this experience. If possible, choose an item—such as a crucifix or a religious medal—that may be worn on a cord around the neck or as a piece of jewelry. This may well be treasured by the participants for years to come.

Optional Recording of Supplementary Exercises

In the second week of supplemental meditations, the young people will continue to explore the techniques of guided meditation that you introduced in session 2. They are encouraged to record the instructions for these meditations before experiencing them. However, if you have the time and the ability to do so, it would be helpful to make the recordings yourself or get another adult to do so. You can probably fit both meditations on one tape. Duplicate the tape and distribute the copies at the end of session 2.

Admittedly, creating such a recording is above and beyond the call of duty, but providing tapes for the participants will enhance the experience of the second week for the following reasons:

- You can ensure the vocal and technical quality of the recording. Adolescents at this age, particularly boys, rarely have the vocal control necessary to effectively execute a meditation. Beyond the physical factor, they may not have decent recording equipment.
- You help the participants avoid the awkward situation of having to listen to their own voice on tape. One's own voice can be distracting to a beginner in meditation, no matter what age.
- The young people are more likely to actually do the exercises if the tape is provided. They will have no excuse not to do them.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people's experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the holistic needs of youth. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Offer a parallel program for adults or young adults in the parish. Use *Learning to Meditate*, a thirty-day introduction to the practice of meditation, by the author of this course. *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is an abbreviated form of this program, which was originally designed for older adolescents and young adults.
 - In some exceptional situations you might be able to invite parents to actually experience *Christian Meditation for Beginners* with their child. Having young people and their parents go through the course together could be a powerful witness of faith for both generations.
- After the participants complete the course, have them offer an evening of reflection for parents and other adults in the parish. They could talk about their experiences with the course, present some of their own reflections on prayer, and lead the adults through some of their favorite meditation exercises.
- Connect each participant with an adult or young adult in the parish who would be willing to serve as their prayer partner or companion for the course. This might mean something as simple as keeping that young person in prayer each day. It could also mean asking the companion and the participant to meet once during each of the intervening weeks and once after the end of the course to talk about the experience. Provide guidelines for these meetings that include prayer and some focusing questions.

- Invite an expert in yoga or t'ai chi to do a presentation for the group on the connection between meditation and these Eastern disciplines. Or invite someone to speak about other faith traditions that rely heavily on meditation, such as Zen Buddhism.

Family Connections

Parents like to know what their child is learning. They may be particularly interested in knowing about *Christian Meditation for Beginners* because such a course was probably not part of their own experience with religious education. You can pass along this information in a variety of ways:

- As noted already, consider inviting parents to the orientation session. Attending it will give them an idea of what their son or daughter will be experiencing in the course. Their attendance may also give you an opportunity to explain the extra support that may be necessary for the participant to complete the supplementary exercises. You can also use this time to explain how family members can help the young person by providing a special place for prayer, by making sure his or her meditation time is not distracted, by inviting him or her to talk about the different meditation experiences, or simply by offering a few words of encouragement and affirmation.
- Hold an orientation session just for parents. At this time you could explain the course content and methods and present the talk on prayer and meditation from session 1. You could also lead parents through some of the meditation exercises outlined in the session plans, such as the exercise on experiencing the senses in session 2 or one of the guided meditations. Such an approach will give parents firsthand knowledge of what their son or daughter will be experiencing. It may even whet their appetite for more!

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their goals and objectives. This observation is based on a com-

monsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination, as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator's manual for the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of *Christian Meditation for Beginners*

Goals

The three goals for this course are as follows:

- That the young people develop a knowledge of and appreciation for meditative prayer
- That they learn and practice techniques for entering into meditative prayer more fully and also for dealing with common problems associated with this prayer style
- That they experience a variety of forms of meditative prayer

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives that will help realize the three course goals. The objectives of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* follow:

*Optional Orientation Session:
“An Invitation to Participate”*

- To provide the participants with information about the nature, the components, and the procedures of this course
- To provide a preview of the course by engaging the young people in a basic experience of meditation
- To issue an invitation to participate in the course

Session 1: “Getting Started”

- To establish procedures that will be followed for all gatherings
- To introduce the young people to the basic components of effective meditation
- To help them become comfortable with the group dimension of the meditation program

Session 2: “Resting in God”

- To reflect on the experiences of the first week of meditations
- To offer the young people a basic introduction to the technique of guided meditation
- To introduce them to centering prayer through an experience with the Jesus Prayer
- To continue providing support for the participants through group sharing and prayer

Session 3: “Life Goes On”

- To reflect on the experience of the second week of meditations
- To offer information on the ways in which God responds to prayer
- To provide opportunities for the young people to prayerfully reflect on significant moments in their life
- To bring the course to a satisfying and prayerful close

Suggested Resources

de Mello, Anthony. *Sadhana: A Way to God*. New York: Doubleday, 1978. A series of spiritual exercises blending the practices of both Eastern and Western traditions. Many of the techniques and exercises used in this course are based in whole or in part on this work.

Link, Mark. *You: Prayer for Beginners and Those Who Have Forgotten How*. Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1976. A program for young people. Developed by an experienced high school teacher—one who has taught many young people how to pray.

Meegan, Mary. *Climbing the Mountain: A Journey in Prayer*. Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1984. Developed as a course to be used in high schools, this book is based on the author’s many years of experience in teaching her students how to pray.

Zanzig, Thomas. *Learning to Meditate*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1990. This thirty-day program is an introduction to the practice of meditation for older adolescents and adults. Much of the material in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* appeared in this resource first.

OPTIONAL ORIENTATION SESSION

An Invitation to Participate



Objectives

- To provide the participants with information about the nature, the components, and the procedures of this course
- To provide a preview of the course by engaging the young people in a basic experience of meditation
- To issue an invitation to participate in the course

Session Steps

Note: Determining an exact length of time for this session is difficult because it depends on the number of participants, whether parents are present, the number of questions people ask, and their willingness and ability to share and discuss. This session may last only 30 minutes, or it may last an hour or more.

- a welcome, introductions, and a mixer (10 to 20 minutes)
- a presentation on the course (10 to 15 minutes)
- a break (5 to 10 minutes)
- a closing prayer (5 to 15 minutes)

Special Notes

In order for *Christian Meditation for Beginners* to be successful, the young people must make an informed and free decision to participate. Whether you hold an orientation meeting is your decision, but it is highly recommended that you do so, as a method of explaining the basics of the program so the participants can make that choice. As you prepare for this orientation session, note these points:

1. If multiple courses are offered simultaneously in your program, it would be a good idea to have this orientation session before any of the courses begin so that participants can choose one of the other options if they feel that they cannot commit to full participation in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*.

2. So that parents have an idea of what this course is all about and what will be required of the participants, consider inviting them to this orientation session. Their knowledge of the components of the program is important, and their support and encouragement for their son or daughter is essential.

On a practical level inviting parents makes good sense. Most participants in the course will not be able to provide their own transportation and will have to rely on parents. This session will not be as long as a regular session and could, in fact, be considerably shorter. Parents would have to wait for their child anyway.

3. The plan for this orientation session presumes that the young people attending already know enough about the course to have their interest piqued, and simply want to know the details. That is, they probably know that *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is different from other courses in the Horizons Program in the sense that it focuses on a highly personal prayer form, is less active and interactive than most other courses, and requires a commitment to meditate between sessions. They may have learned these things in a number of ways:

- an explanation of the special nature of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* at the end of the core course that preceded it
- by talking to you, the program coordinator, or another adult familiar with the course
- a flyer, letter, or other communication describing the course and its unique characteristics

The purpose of this orientation session is simply to outline the design and demands of the course.

The ultimate goal is to give the participants enough information to make a decision about whether to return for the first session. It is then that they will commit themselves to participate fully in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. Getting everything out in the open before the course begins will help the young people thoroughly understand what they are getting involved in before they make that decision.

Preparation

✓ Materials Needed

- pens or pencils
- name tags, if necessary
- newsprint and markers
- index cards or slips of paper
- Bibles
- a completed copy of handout A, "*Christian Meditation for Beginners: A Course Description*," for each participant
- at least one assembled learner's booklet, *A Guide for Meditation*
- a tape or CD player, and reflective music (optional)
- refreshments (optional)

✓ Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A.* Prepare a name tag for each participant, if you think it is necessary.
- For step A.* Think about your own expectations, hopes, and dreams for this course. Prepare to present your thoughts to the group as part of the opening activity.
- For step A.* Prepare slips of paper or index cards with various popular Scripture verses, as directed in step A.
- For step B.* Prepare a presentation on the nature and the components of *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, incorporating the information on handout A.
- For step B.* Make a copy of handout A, fill in the appropriate name(s) and phone number(s), and then make a copy for each participant.

- For step D.* Read through the closing prayer and determine which elements you want to use.
- Determine if you wish to change this session by using the alternative approach described at the end of this session plan.

🕯️ Opening Teacher Prayer

Before the session sit quietly in a favorite spot for a few moments or take a walk. Think about these two questions:

- Why did you agree to lead this course on meditation? Consider your motivations, your own experiences with meditative prayer, your knowledge of the participants, and any other factors that may have contributed to the decision.
- Apart from the stated course goals, what do you personally hope to accomplish? What are your hopes and dreams for this course?

Pray the following Scripture passage:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But . . . how are they to hear about God without someone to tell them about God? And how are they to proclaim the good news of God's greatness unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!" (Adapted from Rom. 10:13–15)

Conclude with a simple prayer for God's blessings for you and for the young people who will face a moment of decision that could have a profound impact on their relationship with God.

Procedure

A Welcome, Introductions, and Mixer (10 to 20 minutes)

Depending on the familiarity of the young people with you and with one another, and whether parents are present, a formal introduction may not be necessary. If they know you and the other participants, this part of the session can be quite relaxed and informal. If not, or if parents are present, you may want to go through the process outlined below.

Before the session. Prepare a name tag for each participant.

Think about your answer to the question you reflected on in the opening teacher prayer: What are your hopes and dreams for this course?

Write the first half of each verse listed below on a separate index card or slip of paper. Write the second half of each verse on a separate card or slip of paper. Include the citation with the second half of each verse. You will need enough verses to provide one complete verse for every two participants. If you have more than twenty people attending the orientation session, repeat some of the verses or find other verses in the Scriptures that naturally fall into two phrases like the examples given. Or if parents are present you may want to do a set for parents and a set for young people on two different colors of cards.

- "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20).
- "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccles. 3:1).
- "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3).
- "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1).
- "My soul magnifies the Lord, / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46–47).
- "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9).
- "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9:13).
- "Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight" (Matt. 3:3).
- "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry" (John 6:35).
- "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

1. As participants arrive, warmly greet them and give each person a name tag if you prepared them before the session.

2. Welcome the participants to the session. Briefly tell the group about yourself. Then ask the participants to introduce themselves, stating their name, school, and grade—or whatever information you think would be appropriate.

3. Randomly distribute the halves of the Scripture verses that you prepared before the session. Have a few Bibles available for those who need to look up their verses. Tell the participants that each

person has half of a verse from the Scriptures. The task is to find the person who has the other half of the verse. If parents are present explain that adults will be paired with other adults and young people with their peers. Explain that the scriptural citation is included for those participants who have the second half of a verse, and Bibles are available if they need help finding the companion phrase. When they find that person, they are to introduce themselves and then sit down and wait for further instructions.

4. When all the pairs have been formed, tell them they have 5 minutes to brainstorm with their partner answers to the following sentence starter.

- Five words that come to mind when I think of meditation are . . .

Tell them to write their answers on the back of their Scripture verse.

5. After time is up invite the participants to share their answers with the large group. For future reference you may want to list the answers on newsprint or collect the Scripture verse cards that the participants wrote their answers on.

B Presentation: *Christian Meditation for Beginners* (10 to 15 minutes)

1. Distribute copies of handout A, “*Christian Meditation for Beginners: A Course Description*.” So that everyone has a common understanding of the word *meditation*, briefly paraphrase the following definition:

- Meditation is a structured attempt to get in touch with and communicate with God, to center our heart and thoughts on the Mystery that is God, and to reflect more deliberately on what God is trying to reveal to us about ourself and the mysteries of life.

2. Give the brief presentation that you prepared on the nature and the components of the course. Have at least one learner’s booklet available for demonstration purposes.

3. Ask if anyone has any questions and respond to them as clearly and specifically as possible. Remember, it is important that all the participants thoroughly understand what they are getting involved in before they agree to sign a contract to fully participate in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. Conclude your presentation by offering your own thoughts, hopes, and expectations for the course and by announcing the dates and times for the sessions.

C Optional Break (5 to 10 minutes)

You may want to break for a few minutes to give the participants a chance to socialize and ask you questions they may not have felt comfortable asking in the group discussion. Allow the participants to browse through the booklet *A Guide for Meditation*. Provide refreshments if possible.

D Closing Prayer (5 to 15 minutes)

This closing prayer can be a simple reading of the Scriptures and a closing invitation, or it can involve something more. Based on your experience of the group and your perception of the openness of the participants to engage in a brief period of meditation, design your own prayer experience using all or some of the following steps. If you have a limited amount of time, consider cutting steps 2, 3, and 4.

1. Invite the participants to gather in a circle and sit in a comfortable position. Or if you have adequate room, invite them to lay down. Then explain that you will lead them through a prayer that incorporates some of the meditation techniques they will explore in greater depth in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*.

2. Ask the participants to close their eyes and relax. After a few seconds read Mark 6:30–32. This passage tells the story of Jesus and the disciples going away to rest for a while.

3. Invite the participants to be silent for 3 minutes. Explain that in their silence they are to focus on their own breathing, trying to deepen it until they feel relaxed and peaceful. Then lead them through the following meditation:

- Imagine a scene where you are telling Jesus about how busy you were this week. What would you tell him?
- Jesus invites you to go away with him and rest for a while. Where would you go? What would you do? What would you say to Jesus when you went away with him?

4. If you have reflective music available, after 3 minutes is up, play the recording. Start with the volume set at zero, then gradually increase the volume until the soft sounds gently fill the room. Allow the participants to meditate for another minute or so.

5. Read John 1:43–46, the story of Philip’s invitation to Nathanael to go and meet Jesus. Nathanael is skeptical, but Philip encourages him to “come and see.”

6. Close by issuing a final invitation to participate in the course, that is, an invitation to “come and see” how the experience of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* can bring them closer to God.

Alternative Approach

For step A. Ask the pairs to talk about their schedule for a typical week. You might even copy a page from a weekly planning calendar or make up your own and have the participants fill it out while they are waiting for the session to begin. Tie this activity into your opening remarks by noting that most people feel the need to make a space in their life for God.

Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Closing Teacher Prayer

Reflect on Jesus’ invitation to the disciples to come away and rest. Allow yourself a few moments of peaceful silence to do just that. Conclude with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, seeking wisdom for the young people as they make their decision to participate in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* and guidance for yourself as you prepare to lead them.



Evaluation

Take a few moments after the orientation session to evaluate how it went. Think about the following questions and write your thoughts in the spaces provided, for future reference:

1. What really worked well in this session?

2. What would make this session better next time?

3. What other thoughts do you have about the design, the flow, and the results of the session?



Christian Meditation for Beginners is a course that explores different ways to engage in a prayer form that is both challenging and rewarding. The following description of the program can help you make a decision about your willingness to participate.

- ◆ **Three regular sessions.** As with other minicourses in the Horizons Program, *Christian Meditation for Beginners* has three regular sessions. The primary focus of these sessions is on learning new skills and different techniques of meditation. It also presents you with opportunities to talk about your experiences with different meditation techniques. And finally, during these sessions we gather as believing friends to pray together and share experiences of God.
- ◆ **Supplementary private meditation exercises.** Each participant will receive a booklet entitled *A Guide for Meditation*. In addition to some material that we will use in the sessions, the booklet contains four recommended and three optional meditation exercises for each intervening week of the course. As part of your commitment to the course, you are expected to do at least the four recommended exercises in between sessions 1 and 2 and the four recommended exercises in between sessions 2 and 3. Each exercise should take about 15 minutes. You are also strongly encouraged to do the optional exercises.
- ◆ **Formal contract.** At the end of the first session you will be invited to sign a formal contract. By signing this contract you agree to participate fully in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. Your signed contract will also be signed by some of the leaders in our parish and returned to you at the closing session.

The dates and times for the three regular sessions are listed below:

Session 1:

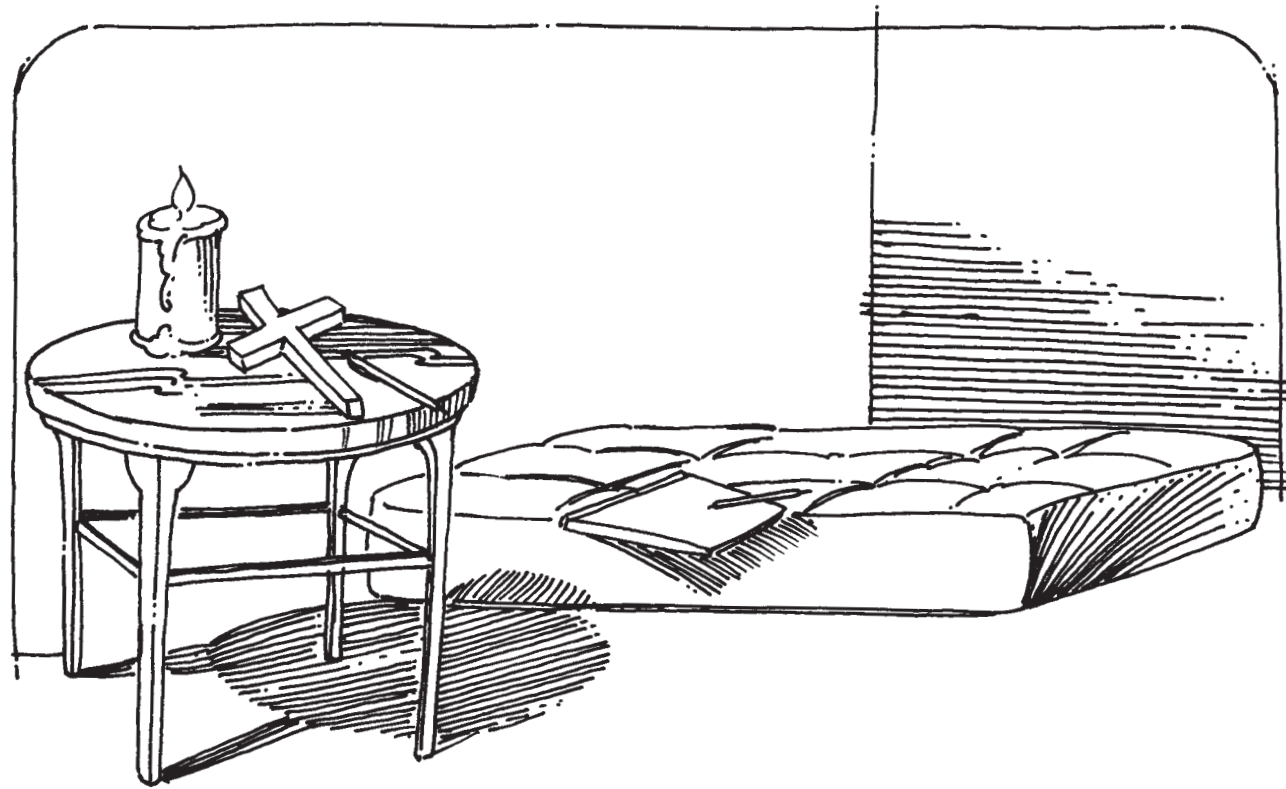
Session 2:

Session 3:

If you have any questions about *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, please call _____.

SESSION 1

Getting Started



Objectives

- To establish procedures that will be followed for all gatherings
- To introduce the young people to the basic components of effective meditation
- To help them become comfortable with the group dimension of the meditation program

Session Steps

- an introduction to the course (20 minutes)
- an opening prayer and meditation experience (10 minutes)
- a presentation on prayer (10 minutes)
- a discussion exercise on the elements of prayer (15 minutes)
- a break (10 minutes)
- an experience of the elements of prayer (25 minutes)
- a preview of supplementary exercises (15 minutes)
- contracting and closing prayer (15 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

Though the concept of meditation is probably familiar to the participants, the actual practice of meditative prayer could be a new experience for them. They may be a little unsure and somewhat apprehensive about what they have gotten themselves into! But these are young people who are curious about the topic. They chose to take *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, knowing that it would require a significant personal commitment. In other words, you are dealing with a motivated group of people who probably do not need to be convinced that this course will be interesting and could be beneficial to them. In fact, they will be eager to get into meditation exercises as soon as possible. It is important to take advantage of their initial enthusiasm.

The purpose of this first session is primarily to set the stage, that is, to provide a context where effective meditation can happen, in addition to leading the participants through some simple exercises. The basic questions of when, where, why, and how will be answered. In the process, hopefully, some of the participants' initial apprehensions will be defused, and they will approach the supplementary exercises for the coming week with a sense of confidence.

The session plan is written with the presumption that an orientation session was held. Still, as with other courses in the Horizons Program, the session begins with brief introductions. Even though the topic of *Christian Meditation for Beginners* is highly personal, the young people must be familiar enough with one another to comfortably enter into group discussions about their meditation experiences. After the introductions, the participants get right into the topic by experiencing a meditation as the opening prayer. A short presentation on prayer and meditation is the only teacher input for the session. This is followed by an exercise in which the participants discuss and experience some of the elements of prayer, such as place and posture. The session closes with a prayer service in which the young people are invited to sign a formal contract, indicating their personal commitment to fully participate in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. As a co-learner in the course, you are encouraged to do the same.

Even though the participants are coming to you with an attitude of openness, this first session is still important to maintaining that outlook. Young people who sense that the atmosphere is cold and impersonal will not be as open to new experiences.

Therefore, perhaps the most important thing you can do to get ready for this session is to prepare a space that is comfortable, warm, inviting, and conducive to this unique prayer form.

Preparation

 Materials Needed

- name tags
- newsprint and markers
- masking tape
- a copy of the learner's booklet, *A Guide for Meditation*, for each participant
- straight-back chairs, such as sturdy folding chairs or stacking chairs (optional)
- a tape or CD player, and reflective music
- blank paper
- a copy of handout 1-A, "Meditation Contract," for each participant
- a pen for each participant
- a Bible, candles, and other desired elements for the closing prayer service
- matches

 Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A.* Copy onto newsprint the sentence starters from step A.
- For step B.* Practice the centering meditation, as directed in step B.
- For step C.* Reproduce on newsprint the diagram in step B.
- For step C.* Prepare to give the presentation on prayer in your own words.
- For step D.* List on newsprint the phrases from step D.
- For step D.* Prepare to give the presentation on the elements of prayer in your own words.
- For step F.* Practice the various options for prayer postures outlined in the session plan.
- For step G.* Read through the supplementary exercises for the coming week.

Opening Teacher Prayer

Before the first session take a few moments to gather your thoughts and center yourself. Read the verse from Psalm 46 a few times, deepening your breath each time until you feel relaxed and focused. Then allow yourself a few moments to simply “be still” in the presence of God.

“Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10)

Conclude with a simple prayer for God’s grace or the following invocation as you face this new beginning:

Breath of Life, move in me.
Power of Life, be with me.
Spirit of Life, flow from me.
Amen.

Procedure

Introduction and Expectations (20 minutes)

Before the session. Copy onto newsprint the following sentence starters:

- I hope that in this course we will . . .
- Some rules we should follow in order for this course to be successful are . . .

1. As the participants arrive make sure each person is introduced to the others and allow for some small talk. Gather the participants and introduce yourself if they do not know you. Then ask them to re-introduce themselves to the rest of the group by stating their name and briefly answering the following questions:

- When and where was the last time you were quiet and alone with your thoughts for more than a minute or two? What time of day was it?
- What attracted you to this course?

2. Ask the participants to think about how they would complete the phrase “Meditation is . . .” Give them a few seconds to come up with an answer, then ask for feedback. Their answers might touch on definitions, stereotypes, or impressions of the art of meditation. It is not necessary for everyone to give an answer, but get as many people in-

involved in the discussion as possible. Explain that you will offer a definition of meditation later in the session.

3. If you chose not to use the orientation session, present a description of the program. Allow time for questions, then proceed with the opening prayer.

If the young people participated in the orientation session, ask them if they have any further questions about the program. Respond to their questions as clearly and specifically as possible. Then divide the participants into pairs or small groups. Display the newsprint that you prepared before the session and tell the groups to brainstorm their answers to the sentence starters about expectations and rules. Share the results with the large group.

4. Give each person a copy of the *Guide for Meditation* and explain that it will be used in all three sessions of the course, as well as for the exercises in between sessions. Allow a minute for the participants to browse through the booklet. Tell them to write their name and phone number on the back cover. Call their attention to the blank pages at the end of the guide, labeled “Odds and Ends.” Explain that these pages are for their notes and reflections.

Opening Prayer and Meditation Experience (10 minutes)

Before the session. Practice the centering meditation so that you can read it in a tone that is unhurried, clear, smooth, and relaxing. Consult the introduction to the course for directions on leading guided meditations.

1. Explain to the participants that each session includes a period of silent group meditation. The procedure changes from one gathering to the next. The pattern for group meditation is as follows:

- *For session 1.* Five minutes of silent meditation, with quiet background music to help alleviate tension
- *For session 2.* Five minutes with natural sounds and with the meditators in a different posture
- *For session 3.* Seven minutes without background music

Presentation: Prayer (10 minutes)

Before the session. Reproduce onto newsprint the diagram below:



Prepare to give the presentation on prayer in your own words. The information covered in this presentation is basic to understanding meditation as a form of prayer. Keep it brief and to the point, but if time allows, add anecdotes and examples from your own experience to make the presentation come alive.

1. You may want to begin by assuring the participants that this will be one of the few times in the entire course that you will be talking “at them,” but that this is necessary in order to cover a lot of information as quickly as possible. Explain that you will be talking about prayer as different forms of communication with God. Then express the following ideas in your own words:

- Defining prayer is difficult because there are so many different definitions. As children we may have been told that prayer is simply talking to God. One of the problems with such a definition is that it seems one-sided; it sounds as if we are doing all the work, all the talking.
- Prayer can be defined as communication with God in a relationship of love. The word *communication* implies a unity between persons, a give-and-take kind of sharing. The word *relationship* extends the notion of communication. Prayer is more than mouthing words and hoping for some mysterious sign from on high. A relationship with God implies the existence of a God who is reachable, who is in touch with us.
- Real prayer must be founded on the firm conviction that God cares enough about us to want to communicate with us. It is the nature of all love to want to share with another person. If we believe that God loves us, then that love demands similar expression. If we do not believe that there is a God who loves us, the whole idea of prayer becomes foolish. In prayer we experience our deepest self in touch with the deepest dimensions of life.

2. Gather the participants in a circle. Explain that for group meditation, it is advisable that all the participants assume the same prayer posture as a sign of their unity. Decide on a posture that will be comfortable for everyone and instruct the group to assume that position. Some possibilities include sitting in a straight-back chair, lying down, sitting cross-legged in a circle, or sitting upright against a hard surface.

3. After the participants are settled in their prayer posture, begin playing the reflective music softly. Lead the participants through the following centering exercise. The ellipses indicate a pause in the instructions.

- Close your eyes, and take a moment to relax your body. Identify any part of your body that seems particularly tense. Tighten the muscles in that part of your body, become conscious of the tension there and then allow the muscles to relax. . . .

Now become aware of your breathing. . . . Spend a minute or two steadying the rate of your breathing and deepening it. . . . Now imagine that the air you are breathing in is charged with the power and the presence of God. . . . Think of the air as an immense ocean that surrounds you . . . an ocean heavily colored with God’s presence and God’s being. . . . While you draw the air into your lungs, you are drawing God in as well. . . .

As you exhale, imagine that you are breathing out all your distractions, your concerns, your fears, your negative feelings. . . . Imagine that you see your whole body becoming radiant and alive through this process of breathing in God’s life-giving Spirit and breathing out all those things that keep you from being one with God. . . . Rest in the peace of God’s loving presence. (Adapted from de Mello, *Sadhana*, pp. 36–37)

4. When you have finished leading the participants through the centering exercise, allow them to meditate for a minute or two longer. Then gently invite the participants to thank God in their heart for this time of prayer.

5. Briefly process the experience of group meditation with the participants. Ask them to freely share how they felt during the meditation or how they feel now after it. Invite suggestions from them on how you might change the experience next time.

2. For the next part of your presentation, refer to the diagram of concentric circles that you prepared before the session. Continue by paraphrasing the following ideas:

- The two sets of concentric circles represent two individuals. The outer circle represents our contact with the physical world: the ground we walk on, the trees we bump into, the strangers we pass without a word. The next circle represents the first level of personal relationships—the level on which people move beyond just physical contact and begin to develop communication and friendship with others. Finally, the interior circle represents our contact with the dimension of life that is most interior and mysterious. It is at this interior level that ultimately we find and experience God in the most personal and intimate way.
- It is also at the interior or innermost level that people are most personally and intimately in touch with others, demonstrated by the line connecting the center circles. It is in the experience of love that we can relate on the level of our center, our deepest self. It is also on this level of love that we become one with God.
- Many contemporary writers in spirituality use the term *centering* for that action or activity of getting in touch with our deepest self. Basically that is what is being referred to here—the process or experience of being in touch with our own center.

3. Explain that there are almost as many different forms of prayer as there are definitions of it. The many forms of private prayer—as distinct from communal prayer like the Mass—can be summarized under three categories. Describe the following in your own words:

- *Conversation.* Simply speaking to God and listening creatively (something that is essential to all conversation) to God's response
- *Meditation.* A more structured attempt to get in touch with and communicate with God, to center our heart and thoughts on the Mystery that is God, and to reflect more deliberately on what God is trying to reveal to us about ourself and the mysteries of life
- *Contemplation.* What some writers call “resting in God,” the experience of not needing words, not consciously analyzing or reflecting on the reality of God but simply yet profoundly *being in God*

D Discussion Exercise: Elements of Prayer (15 minutes)

This exercise introduces the young people to the three basic elements of prayer—place, time, and posture—and the options available for each. The participants can begin to make some decisions about personal preferences in each of these areas.

Before the session. List on newsprint the following phrases:

- an appropriate place
- an appropriate time of day
- the proper posture
- an ability to center
- an awareness of and openness to God

Prepare to give a presentation on the elements of prayer in your own words.

1. Divide the participants into three smaller groups. Assign each group one of the following elements of prayer: place, time, and posture. Tell them that they have 5 minutes to come up with three examples of that element that are conducive to meditation, and three situations involving that element that would make meditation difficult. You may want to give examples such as the following: a quiet room is a good place to meditate; a rock concert is not. Provide blank paper and pens and ask someone in each group to take notes.

2. After 5 minutes ask the participants to share the results of their discussion. Some of the suggestions may be rather humorous and may add some levity to an otherwise subdued session. Welcome these suggestions just as any others.

3. Display the newsprint list of the elements of prayer that you prepared before the session. Note that the participants have already begun to explore the first three elements on the list, that is, the physical necessities for effective meditation. The last two elements are the mental necessities. Present the five elements by explaining the following points in your own words:

- *An appropriate place.* When friends need to talk, they need privacy, an environment that helps them relax and focus on each other. The same need exists in meditation. One goal for this week is for each person to create their own sacred space in which to practice meditating.

three elements, which they are to consider on their own or, if necessary, discuss with the group. They are then to make some initial decisions about how they as individuals will deal with these elements as they begin their meditations.

1. Point out the page at the beginning of their booklet, *A Guide for Meditation*, that includes a space to jot down notes about their own preferences as they begin to make decisions about their own meditation style.

2. Ask the young people to recall their answers to the questions you asked at the beginning of the session: When and where was the last time they were quiet and alone with their thoughts for more than a minute or two? What time of day was it? Point out that they may have already begun to determine their preferred style for meditation and explain that for the next few minutes you will be discussing the various elements and asking them to think about their own preferences for place, time, and posture.

Selecting a place for prayer. Express in your own words the following ideas about selecting a place for prayer:

- Certainly, many options are available with regard to the place for prayer. In fact, the possibilities are unlimited in the sense that one can pray in virtually any place. However, it stands to reason that some places are more conducive to prayer than others. Among the more popular are the following:
 - a bedroom located in a part of the house where some privacy is possible
 - a room of the house that is available for decorating in a way conducive to prayer, for example, with low lighting and candles
 - a natural setting, such as a forest, a creek, or a hilltop. Nearly all geographical areas have some place—even a public park or the roof of an apartment building—that at certain times (with the obvious limitations of weather) offer an appropriate environment for meditation.
 - a chapel or a church—options that are perhaps not as obvious as one might imagine. We tend to think of churches as reserved for public, communal worship rather than for private prayer. Yet few places inspire private prayer more than a beautiful church.

- *An appropriate time of day for the individual.* Everyone has his or her own *biological clock*, a kind of built-in system that makes some people morning people and others, night owls. Effective meditation requires that a person be alert and aware of the surroundings. Another goal for this week is for each person to determine his or her own best time.
- *The proper posture.* Through the centuries masters of meditation have discovered a variety of physical postures that are conducive to meditation. In order to meditate effectively each person must decide which posture is best for her or him.
- *The ability to center through relaxation and deep breathing.* Relaxation and deep breathing are two basic meditation techniques that help people get in touch with their center in preparation for communication with God. Various centering approaches will be practiced throughout this course.
- *An awareness of and openness to God.* In many ways awareness of the presence of God is both a goal and a by-product of all the other elements of meditation. This awareness also includes the ability to listen to God, to comprehend what God is revealing in prayer.

Invite questions, particularly if you sense that some of the young people are confused by any of this information. Tell the participants that after the break they will begin exploring these elements of meditative prayer to help them discern their personal preferences.

E Break (10 minutes)

During the break. Choose four participants to read passages from the Scriptures during the closing prayer. Allow them to read over their assigned verses.

F Exercise: Experiencing the Elements of Prayer (25 minutes)

During this time you will lead the participants through focused reflection and discussion on three of the basic elements of prayer—place, time, and posture. The goal is to provide them with the kind of general information that will make their first week with the program an enjoyable experience. You will introduce them to options for each of the

Next, ask the participants to take a moment to reflect on all the places for prayer that are reasonably available to them, that is, places they can expect to have easy access to on a daily basis. For example, they probably should not choose their parish church unless they live near it.

Tell the participants to turn to page 6 of their booklet, where the options are listed. After a minute or so, ask them to make an initial decision about where they will begin to meditate and check that box. Invite participants to share their choices with the rest of the group.

As an aside, explain that in the directions for the supplemental meditations in the learner's booklet, the presumption is that they will be meditating in a special space in their house, one that they will be able to prepare just for this purpose. In fact, the first meditation period is devoted to creating such a space. Acknowledge that on occasion they may decide to meditate somewhere else.

Selecting a time for prayer. Express the following ideas about selecting a time for prayer in your own words:

- Although the Scriptures tell us to pray always, some times of the day may seem more conducive to prayer than others. Two times traditionally preferred for prayer are early morning or late at night, just before bedtime. Yet some individuals may find both of these times unworkable; for instance, the person who takes hours to wake up or the one who passes out as soon as he or she gets near a bed. For such people, a time at midday may work best, perhaps stopping briefly at church on their way home from school. Or they might find that the time immediately after supper is appropriate for prayer—just before studying or finishing some household chores—when they can be alone without feeling uncomfortable about it.

Again, provide a minute or two for reflection, and then ask the participants to jot down the time of day they initially feel will be best for their meditation periods. Invite them to share their answers with the rest of the group.

Encourage the young people to practice with different times of the day during the supplemental meditation exercises during the week. However, if they are already convinced that a particular time is best for them, tell them they should feel free to stick with that throughout the week.

Selecting a posture for prayer. During this part of the discussion, the participants actively engage in each posture described. They will be able to practice each posture only for a minute or two, but this should be enough time for them to come to an initial decision on which posture they prefer.

Tell the participants that experts in meditation have identified at least five basic physical postures that are best suited for meditation. As you describe each posture, ask them to practice it for 1 minute. Note that they may keep their eyes open but directed straight ahead, opened only slightly, or closed completely. They will have to experiment to find which way works best for them. The five postures are the following:

- Kneel with the back straight and the hands folded in front of the body, the hands resting on something—perhaps a chair or couch—to give support and aid balance.
- Kneel, but allow the body to relax with the buttocks resting on the heels of the feet. The back remains straight, and the hands are allowed to rest on the thighs, often with the palms turned upward in a gesture of openness to God.
- Sit in a firm, straight-backed chair, the upper body erect, the feet together and firmly on the floor, the hands gently resting on the lap, with the palms facing upward. [You will need to provide appropriate chairs for this posture; sturdy stacking or folding chairs will work well.] Some people prefer to sit on the edge of the chair rather than with their back against the back of the chair.
- Recline on the floor, either on the back or the belly, but in such a way that you feel relaxed yet attentive. The body should be straight, the legs not crossed, and the hands in a relaxed but prayerful position. [For obvious reasons this posture is the most likely to induce sleep.]
- Sit on the floor in the famous lotus position: the legs folded close to the body, the back straight—perhaps held so against a wall—the hands resting on the knees with upraised palms. Most people can only do a modified version of this posture, as they do not normally have the flexibility to assume the traditional version.

After the participants have experienced all five postures, ask them to find the list of these positions in their booklet. They should then rank these postures in terms of their apparent effectiveness for them, admitting that they will need practice before making a final decision. The participants should then choose the posture they want to start with this week.

3. Close this experience of elements of prayer by noting that the other two elements identified—centering techniques and listening to God—will be experienced and discussed throughout the program. As usual, allow for any questions that participants may want to ask.

G Preview of Supplementary Exercises (15 minutes)

Before the session. Read through the recommended and optional meditations for the coming week. Jot down any additional information that you feel might be helpful for the participants, given your understanding of their needs.

1. Remind the participants of the supplementary component to *Christian Meditation for Beginners* that involves doing some work on their own in between sessions. They are expected to go through the recommended meditation exercises on four different days between this session and the next one. Note that optional exercises are also included for those who want to do more.

2. Ask the participants to turn to the supplementary exercises in their booklet, beginning on page 9. Point out that the meditations are organized into two sections, one for each of the first two sessions. Each section begins with introductory comments and then presents four recommended exercises and three optional exercises. Tell the young people to find each section. Ask them to read the introductory comments for week 1 as part of their first day of meditating in the coming week.

3. Go through each recommended and optional meditation with the group, allowing the participants to ask questions if they need to. Point out the limited journal writing that accompanies some of the exercises. Strongly encourage them to go beyond the four recommended exercises and do the optional ones as well.

4. Draw attention to the page marked Things Worth Sharing for week 1. Note that before the next session, they should spend a little time jotting down their answers to those questions. This page will be the basis of discussion at the beginning of the next session.

H Contracting and Closing Prayer (15 minutes)

The closing prayer service is also a commitment service. During this time you will be asking the young people to sign a formal contract indicating their willingness to participate fully in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. If you made it clear all along that participation in this course must be entirely voluntary, this is also a time to allow those who have decided that they cannot fulfill the requirements to bow out gracefully. This option is especially necessary if no orientation session was held.

To guide the closing prayer for this session, you may wish to sit on the floor behind a table, such as a coffee table, with the participants gathered about you on the floor. Have a candle or two, a religious artifact such as a crucifix, and a Bible on the table. You may want to play the same reflective music that you used for the opening period of meditation.

Before the session. Make a copy of handout 1-A, "Meditation Contract," for each participant. Consider copying the contract onto parchment or certificate paper to give the young people a sense of its importance.

In a Bible, mark the following scriptural passages. At break time, choose four participants to read the passages in the order in which they are listed and allow them a minute or two to look over their assigned verses.

- Mark 1:35
- Matt. 7:7–11
- John 11:41–42
- Matt. 26:36–39

1. Distribute a copy of the contract to each participant. Make sure they have a pen with which to sign it, but ask them to put it aside for the moment.

Begin the prayer service by recalling Jesus' promise: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). Then say a short spontaneous prayer of your own, calling to mind the presence of God and asking the Spirit to be with the group, both during this time of commitment to the course as well as throughout the next two weeks of prayer and meditation.

2. Tell the participants that as in all other areas of Christian life, Jesus is our model for prayer. Ask them to listen to selected passages from the Scriptures, which reflect the primary role prayer played

in Jesus' life. Tell the young people who volunteered to read the passages to do so at this time, in order, slowly and prayerfully.

3. After the readings put the following comments in your own words:

- One of the goals for anyone who seriously wants a relationship with God is to learn to pray with the same conviction of God's love that Jesus had. But such prayer takes work. Like any skill, meditation takes real effort and practice. If this program is to be effective, each person must make a firm commitment to themselves, to God, and to other participants. That is the purpose of the contract.

4. Read through the contract aloud, asking the participants to read along. When you are done invite them to spend a moment in silent prayer, asking God to help them live out the commitment they are about to make. When they feel ready the participants should sign their contract. Make it clear that those who do not think they can commit to full participation in *Christian Meditation for Beginners* should sign at the bottom of the page.

After all have made their decision, invite them to slowly come forward to present their contract by laying it on the table or next to the Bible. You may wish to shake each person's hand at this time as another sign of the commitment you are making to one another. If the group is small enough, consider inviting the signer to shake hands with every person in the group. Remember to sign a contract yourself.

5. Close the service by asking everyone to share the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer. You may wish to join hands for the prayer.

Note: Remind the participants to bring their booklet to the next session.

Alternative Approaches

After reading through the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or make additions to an activity. Consider your time first, and then these alternative approaches:

For step A. If an orientation was not held, consider using the mixer activity in step A of the orientation session. After simple introductions use the Scripture verse mixer and then the word association exercise from the orientation. Continue with the two questions listed in the introduction step of this session plan and the brainstorming on the sentence starter "Meditation is. . . ." Also consider using the suggestion in the Alternative Approaches section of the orientation session.

Note, however, that if you choose to expand this opening step, you may need to make some adjustments in the rest of the schedule.

For step G. Consider asking for volunteers to preview the supplementary exercises for the second week. Assign each volunteer one or more of the recommended exercises. Include the optional exercises if you have enough volunteers. Ask them to read through the exercise and be ready to describe it to the rest of the participants at the next session.

Before the next session. Send postcards reminding participants to bring their *Guide for Meditation* to the next session. Also, suggest that they spend a few minutes looking at the Things Worth Sharing page before the session.

Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Closing Teacher Prayer

Recall the verse from Psalm 46 that you prayed at the beginning of this session: "Be still, and know that I am God!" (46:10). Once again, allow yourself a few moments of peaceful silence to consciously "be still" in the presence of God. Conclude with the following prayer:

Silent God, I treasure this time now ending,
the time of exploration,
the time of joyful chatter,
the time of silent prayer.

Go with me now, as I return to the flow of daily life. Prepare me for what I shall find, for what is to come, and be with me as I return to the crowded and noisy crossroads of my life. Amen.



Evaluation

Take a few moments after the session to evaluate how it went. Think about the following questions and write your thoughts in the spaces provided for future reference:

1. What really worked well in this session?
2. What would make this session better next time?
3. What would you change about the environment?

Meditation Contract

A contract with my God, with my fellow meditators, and with myself

As I begin my participation in *Christian Meditation for Beginners*, I commit myself to freely and sincerely do the following:

- ☞ Meditate at least four days a week for the duration of the course. I recognize this as a top priority in my life and will do everything possible to fulfill this commitment. If, in the case of unavoidable circumstances, I am unable to complete a period of meditation, I will attempt to make up for it.
- ☞ Attend the remaining sessions of this course. I know that I will attend these not only for my own benefit but also for the good of my fellow meditators. I recognize that a failure to attend a session will cause a weakening of the group as a whole. If an emergency demands that I miss a session, I will contact the leader of the program immediately.
- ☞ Be open to the Spirit of Jesus, praying that the Spirit will open my mind and heart to the message of God and give me the courage and insight to act upon God's word in my daily life.

I hereby pledge my earnest intent to do these things by the grace of God and with the support and encouragement of my fellow meditators in this course.

Signature _____ Date _____

We, the undersigned, confirm that _____ has faithfully completed the course *Christian Meditation for Beginners*.

Program leader _____ Date _____

Pastor _____ Date _____

I have decided that I cannot fully participate in this course. To be true to myself and fair to the other meditators, I am withdrawing from the course.

Signature _____ Date _____