

Weeks of Accompanied Prayer / Retreats in Daily Life

Alison Christian (October 2019)

An Introduction

‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ This is what the disciples asked of Jesus after they had been with him for a little while and it is still the cry of many Christians who despite a regular and committed church membership feel their prayer life has not progressed and are a little intimidated by the whole subject of prayer. *Weeks of Accompanied* (sometimes called ‘Guided’) *Prayer* were developed in response to this need.

What happens during a Week of Accompanied Prayer?

A person who decides to participate in a *Week of Accompanied Prayer* agrees to pray on their own for half an hour each day for five days, and to meet with a Prayer Guide daily. The Prayer Guide is a spiritual director or someone trained especially in this work. The Prayer Guide supports the Pilgrim (as the participant is called) by suggesting ways of praying and material to pray with. The daily meetings with the Prayer Guides are for up to half an hour. During this time the Pilgrim shares how they have got on in their times of personal prayer with special reference to their felt experience.

What is the difference between Weeks of Accompanied Prayer and Retreats in Daily Life?

Before we go into the ‘how-to’ guide, however, let me just say a little about the difference between *Weeks of Accompanied Prayer* and *Retreats in Daily Life*. I have found semantic confusion between practitioners! For some people, this is only the same thing with different titles. *Weeks of Accompanied Prayer* take place in your daily life: you don’t have to go away to do them. But because the Week is a special time of prayer and discernment, it is like being on retreat, even though you are still going to work, being at home with the family etc. So, a ‘retreat in daily life’ is a very suitable description.

Other people will use the term, *Retreat in Daily Life*, to describe something that in style is very similar to a *Week of Accompanied Prayer* but instead of happening over one week, it may take place over five or six weeks, and instead of the Guide and Pilgrim meeting daily, they will meet once a week during the time. The main difference for many people involved, however, in the longer *Retreat in Daily Life*, and a major difference if this is how it is understood, is that a *Retreat in Daily Life* is rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

How-to begin

If you are a complete novice on how to organise A *Week of Accompanied Prayer* or A *Retreat in Daily Life*, you might be put off almost before you start by the administrative

task. It can seem overwhelming at first sight. This is why we are writing this introduction, to share simple first steps and show that it isn't that difficult as long as you receive initial support.

I was a vicar when I first decided I wanted to organise a *Week of Accompanied Prayer* both for my parishioners and ecumenically with other local churches. (Incidentally, holding an ecumenical *Week of Accompanied Prayer* is one of the best spiritual bridge-building exercises I ever experienced as an incumbent.) As someone who has never considered administration her strong point, I was pretty appalled by what it seemed I had to organise when I first did some research. I barely knew where to start, even though, in my case, I had been a spiritual director for many years. But I knew someone who was vastly experienced and very enthusiastic about putting on Weeks of Accompanied Prayer and she helped me realise two things: what was my responsibility as the local instigator of the Week - and that I didn't have to do it all. So, my first bit of advice to anyone hoping to put on a *Week of Accompanied Prayer* for the first time is **find someone local who is experienced to guide you through the process.**

Here, is a simple list of what was my responsibility as the instigator of that first *Week of Accompanied Prayer*:

1. I approached my friend who was experienced in putting on Weeks. She gave me an idea of the time scale needed to organise a Week (6 to 9 months), cost implications, spaces needed and those parts of the administrative task that would have to be done locally. She would gather the guiding team and take overall responsibility for them, provide prayer materials and oversee the opening and closing meetings of the Week.
2. I shared the idea of the Week and the task with my leadership team and they all responded enthusiastically. All were on board about it being done ecumenically.
3. I shared the idea of the Week with clergy colleagues at the next Churches Together meeting. It was received with real interest; questions were asked but no decision was made at the first meeting. Everyone needed to go and talk to their leadership teams.
4. As individual churches came on board, we were able to begin to look at practical stuff, like spaces. We made a decision that we wanted the Week to reflect the ecumenical principle, so although in this case it was an Anglican initiative we had the opening meeting (where everyone taking part gathers) and the closing meeting (ditto) in different church halls, and Pilgrims went for their individual meetings to wherever there were suitable spaces for one on one conversations.
5. Each church had their own administrator for the *Week of Accompanied Prayer* from their congregation. The task was to gather the names and details of those who were interested, and also any payment (no one seeks to make money out of Weeks but simply to cover costs.) The administrators kept in touch with one another. The collected names were sent to my friend, the overall supervisor, the week before the *Week of Accompanied Prayer* was due to start and she matched the Pilgrims' names to the Guides. Even so, last minute people were able to join.

My second bit of advice is to get a good little administrative team behind you, especially if you are clergy. Surprisingly, there are some people who are not only brilliant at admin' but love it!

My third bit of advice is also for clergy. Take part in the Week yourself as a Pilgrim. Lead by example. All the clergy I have ever known (including a bishop) who were Pilgrims on a *Week of Accompanied Prayer* valued the experience hugely.

I am not going to give anymore detail than this in this brief introduction. There are all sorts of other things to do but if you have experienced support, you will be taken through the detail as and when these tasks arise. Your experienced supporter will also take much of the pressure off your shoulders.

We did two ecumenical Weeks of Accompanied Prayers within five years in the same parish. We did two because they were such a success with virtually everyone who took part. Some people understood the potential of prayer for the first time, or their prayer life was deeply enriched. Some 'met Jesus' personally for the first time (having been churchgoers all their lives). Some went on to find spiritual directors. Some went on retreat following the experience. They wanted 'more'. I would go so far as to say the whole character of the church was transformed and we certainly matured. Ecumenically, conversation was much more relaxed and open. We had all been changed.

Since being on the receiving end as an incumbent I have been supporting other churches wanting to put on Weeks of Accompanied Prayer, and the experience has been the same. The Pilgrims grow, the Guides grow and there is the sense always that although we are fragile, easily daunted 'clay pots', the Holy Spirit steps in and does wonderful things because we have dared to take a little step of faith.

For further information:

London Centre for Spiritual Direction <https://www.lcsd.org.uk/weeks/> Not much information but has a list of guides who have WAP experience. Best to ring and ask.

Retreat Association

http://www.retreats.org.uk/documents/leaflets/13_Weeks_of_accompanied_prayer.pdf

Diocese of Hereford

https://cofehereford.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/WAP_Guidelines.pdf Very detailed, all you need to know for organising a Week. Don't let it daunt you. Remember try and find local experienced support

<http://lysfasi-spirituality-workshop.org.uk/retreat-in-daily-life> Excellent book but visually dated. Lots of information and free photo-copiable material. Very useful handbook for those organising a WAP, for Guides and the local team.

<http://www.retreatsineverydaylife.org/> This address leads you to a website about a Handbook for a Month of Individually Guided Prayer. Very useful if you want to go for a month-long pattern of prayer and meetings. Would work, for example, during Lent.

The Diocese of Portsmouth have produced some good explanatory notes, which are available to download at <http://www.promotingretreats.org/download/1930>. They have also written an Outline timetable (<http://www.promotingretreats.org/download/1927>), which gives an idea of the workload involved for each Prayer Guide.

Based in and around Birmingham

<https://www.manresalink.org.uk/retreats.html> Excellent simple introduction on Ignatian based Retreats in Daily Life.