

CONTEMPLATIVE LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

*A toolkit for Plymouth group leaders
and committee chairs.*



CONTENTS

WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?	3
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO INCLUDE CONTEMPLATION WHEN PEOPLE GATHER?	4
WHAT ARE SMALL WAYS A GROUP CAN INTEGRATE CONTEMPLATION?	5
Include visual reminders of the Spirit's presence	5
Book-end gathering times with intentional openings and closings	5
Check in	5
Attend to the body and the earth	5
Use contemplative process	6
Some tools that support contemplative process	6
Basic guidelines for all conversations including check-in	6
Models for Contemplative Process	6
Circle process	6
The examen	7
Praying with nature	7
Clearness committee	7
Circle of Trust	9
Lectio Divina	10
HOW MIGHT I INTRODUCE CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES TO A GROUP?	10
RESOURCES	11
Prayers	11
Readings	13
From Mechtild of Magdeburg	13
Keeping Quiet by Pablo Neruda	14
Thanks by W.S. Merwin	15
Small Kindnesses by Danusha Lameris	16
Chants	16
FURTHER READING	17
SUPPORT	17

What is contemplation?

- ◆ Contemplation is not detachment from the world, although we have to practice self-discipline in order to override distractions and habits. Rather, it is detachment from the self, from the ego's demands, will, and resistance. It is detachment from the selfishness at the center of the person, in order to give our life to the divine will. It is an act of faith, given freely, for that which is wholly other.
—Beverly Lanzetta, *The Monk Within*
- ◆ Contemplation is a panoramic, receptive awareness whereby we take in all that the situation, the moment, the person offers, without judging, eliminating, or labeling anything. It is pure and positive gazing that abandons all negative pushback so it can recognize inherent dignity. That takes much practice and a lot of unlearning of habitual responses. ... Contemplation is really the art of full relationship.
- ◆ Much of the early work of contemplation is discovering a way to observe yourself from a compassionate and nonjudgmental distance until you can eventually live more and more of your life from this calm inner awareness and acceptance.
- ◆ I ... call contemplation “full-access knowing”—not irrational, but prerational, nonrational, rational, and transrational all at once.
—Richard Rohr, *Just This* and *The Naked Now*
- ◆ Early in the book of Genesis we read that human beings are made in the divine image. That identity recognizes a deeper, fuller self than our ego image offers us. In the long lineage of contemplative Christian tradition, our true center is found elsewhere. Contemplative practices aim to draw us to that truer place of our identity, leaving us more vulnerable to the Spirit's yearning for us to find our true Home in the spiritual heart. The Spirit that Jesus invites us to receive most deeply lives there.
- ◆ Contemplative awareness is ... a nondual awareness, a “not one, not two” awareness of our paradoxical union with the deepest reality that we name God.
—Tilden Edwards in *Contemplation and Community*, Smith & Higginbotham, eds.
- ◆ The intention of our practice is simply to bring us to the place where we may receive, where we may realize our communion with the source of our life and discover its nature as love.
—Sarah Bachelard, “The Value of Learning Contemplation in Community,” in *Contemplation and Community*
- ◆ The opposite of the contemplative life is not the active life but the reactive life: highly habituated emotional styles and lifestyles that keep us constantly reacting to life like victimizing victims, ever more convinced that the videos that dominate and shape our awareness are in fact true.
—Martin Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*

Why is it important to include contemplation when people gather?

- ◆ Contemplative practices move us out of the head and into the heart. “Thought cannot comprehend God,” wrote the anonymous author of the 14th-century classic mystical text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. “By love God may be touched and embraced, never by thought.” In the intimacy of contemplative prayer, we approach God not with our minds, but with our hearts open to the divine touch and the embrace of love.
- ◆ The discursive mind always works in dualities; in community, this often results in polarizing issues, hierarchical structures, identity attachments and exclusionary behaviors. As Christians we’re invited to live into our unity.
- ◆ We talk a lot. We all benefit when we practice active listening.
- ◆ We tend to be reactive. Contemplation helps us be receptive; it frees us to choose how to respond. “Contemplation maximizes consciousness,” Franciscan scholar Ilia Delio says.
- ◆ Silence allows space for mystery and ambiguity. It brings clarity. It invites honesty. It binds us to our Source.
- ◆ “Contemplation helps us to actually experience our experiences so that they can become transformational,” according to Richard Rohr.
- ◆ Contemplation helps us be more fully present to ourselves and one another. It creates community. Its fruits are compassion and solidarity.
- ◆ God is always present and moving. Contemplative prayer is a way to participate in God’s presence and movement, within our hearts and in the wider world. Our part as faithful people is to fuse our own movement with Love’s movement. We do this through our awareness, intention and consent. “The most important thing that is purified in contemplation,” writes David Frenette, “is your sense of being separate from God.”
- ◆ We need to practice faith much as we practice music, sports and therapy.
- ◆ Any time two or more people are gathered together, we can be church for one another.
- ◆ Exercising deep integrity in our process is the most effective means of bringing about the transformation we want to see. “There is no way to peace,” Gandhi is said to have taught; “peace is the way.” Dan Wolpert links process to outcome: “Churches, in their manner and style of functioning, have largely become secular organizations. If secular processes form the organization, then the life of the organization will be that of secular community. But what if the administration is done in the light of the Spirit?” Or as Cynthia Bourgeault writes in *Mystical Hope*, “If we really wish to change the planet, to become a sign of hope in a broken world, all we really need to do (and it is one simple thing, but it is everything) is to narrow the gap between means and ends: between the gospel we profess and the gospel we live out, moment to moment, in the quality of our aliveness.”

What are small ways a group can integrate contemplation?

Include visual reminders of the Spirit's presence

Candles, colorful cloth, flowers and small bits of beauty anchor a room. A basket with various objects is available behind the front desk.

Book-end gathering times with intentional openings and closings

Openings help participants transition from our busy lives into the place and time at hand. They remind us of our creative Source. They help us get centered by giving space to breathe.

Closings return our attention to our togetherness, acknowledge the end of our gathering and transition us back into our individual lives.

Openings and closings could include a simple, short reading; an easy song or chant; silence; a guided meditation; movement; three deep breaths; holding hands; lighting or blowing out a candle.

Check in

As a church, our first job is to be community for one another. A brief check-in allows participants to share what's on their hearts and happening in their lives. Leaders can suggest time limits or invite people to be spare. Check-in can be as short as a single word.

Attend to the body and the earth

As Christians we believe the Spirit is incarnate in creation. Our bodies are wise and worthy teachers. We are more fully present to one another and the Spirit is more fully manifest among us when we honor our bodies. Breathing deeply, placing feet solidly on the floor, feeling our back against the chair, stretching, taking a short walk, sharing food or drink, holding hands, singing—these simple reminders bring us back into ourselves.

Because the natural world always returns us to our bodies, bringing the group outside or incorporating the natural world into the gathering (flowers, a stone, a bowl of water) reminds us of our interconnectedness and invites contemplative listening.

Use contemplative process

Any practice that fosters non-reactivity, spacious listening and speech from the heart is contemplative. The common ingredient for all contemplative processes is collective silence.

Some tools that support contemplative process

- ◆ Circular seating. When possible, sit so everyone can see one another and participate as peers.
- ◆ A talking piece such as a stick or large stone. Participants only speak when they hold the talking piece. Passing it enforces a natural silence between contributions.
- ◆ A chime. The leader can ring the chime between agenda items or periodically through the meeting as an opportunity to pause. If the group mutually agrees, anyone can signal the leader to ring the chime at any point (for instance, if a conversation gets heated), inviting all to return to a place of calm. The group should agree that no judgment is implied by ringing the chime; it's a collective way to remind all to speak from and listen with the heart.
- ◆ A timer. We're naturally uncomfortable with silence, so we tend to short-change it. If you want two or five or twenty minutes of silence, set a timer to support this intention.
- ◆ Paper and pen. Writing is a way the group can listen together in silence. It also gives introverts a chance to hear themselves! Questions up for group discussion can first be met in writing.
- ◆ Art supplies. Likewise, drawing in silence is a form of listening.

Basic guidelines for all conversations and sharing, including check-in

Speak from the heart—what is true and has meaning in this moment?

Listen from the heart—feel with the other, without analysis or judgment.

Be lean of expression—say only what you need to say.

Be spontaneous—stay in the moment, without rehearsing.

Use “I” statements.

Models for Contemplative Process

Elements of the following models can be extracted and applied to a variety of circumstances. For instance, a finance committee might start with a song, invite members to check in using the examen (What are you most grateful for today?), address the meeting's topics with a chime and pause between agenda items and end with a prayer. A worship committee might plan Lenten services by first asking members to address a question using a talking piece in a circle process (e.g., “How is Lent meaningful for you?”) before making decisions and assigning tasks.

For community-building and group discernment, however, the following models are proven means and worth trying in full.

Circle process

This practice is rooted in the traditions of the Center for Council, Illuman and the Ojai Foundation; it's the basic format taught by the Living School at the Center for Contemplation and Action. Because it is highly structured, it's especially good for check-in and times when emotions run high. It teaches groups to transition away from reactivity to heart-centered listening.

Welcome: The Circle Keeper welcomes all and invites brief introductions.

Opening: The Circle Keeper centers the group with words and silence.

Gathering: The Circle Keeper establishes the guidelines (see above) and says, "My role is to help us stay focused and alert. If I say, "We hear you," this is a reminder to be lean of expression. If I say, "Tell us what's in your heart," I'm encouraging you to share your own story—to go beyond the surface. These reminders are gentle but clear assists to help you maintain focus and share on a deeper level." They also explain the use of a talking piece. Everyone is to listen deeply, without crosstalk or interrupting or reacting. There is no referencing or commenting or building on what another has said.

Releasing: The Circle Keeper poses a prompt—a question or topic. The group sits in silence until someone is moved to speak and motions for the talking piece. Once everyone has shared, the Circle Keeper either poses another prompt or moves to the Witnessing step.

Witnessing: The Circle Keeper passes the talking piece around one final time, inviting participants to share in a word or two something that struck them.

Closing: A prayer, song or gesture.

The examen

The examen is a practice of discernment. It helps us look backward to identify the movement of God, which can then guide us as we move into the future. The examen is most effective if practiced consistently over time.

1. Choose a period of time to examine in prayer. This can be a day, a week, a specific event, etc. Invite everyone to wander through that period of time in their mind. Ask them to consider where they find a sense of life or the leading of the Spirit. Writing or art-making are effective means of listening here. Other questions that get at this same discernment:
 - ◆ What are you most/least grateful for during that time?
 - ◆ When did you feel a sense of love, peace, joy, life (the gifts of the Spirit)?
 - ◆ When did you feel exhausted, dead, drained, angry, mean?
 - ◆ What specific events, thoughts or experiences draw your attention?
 - ◆ What aspects of that time repel you?
 - ◆ What moments speak to you of your deepest desires?
 - ◆ What things feel out of place or uninteresting?
 - ◆ When did you notice God during this time? What felt like a time of God's absence?

2. After a period of silence, invite everyone to notice what their answers to these questions suggest about the future. How is God calling you in to being? Toward what actions, activities or attributes is God drawing you?
3. Invite participants to speak their observations. Remember that you are listening for God's movement, not lobbying for your position.
4. Reflect together: What common themes are we hearing?
The purpose of the examen is hear divine movement in our individual and communal lives. Our task then is to follow wherever God leads.

For a simplified, more familiar variation, engage in a group practice of a gratitude journal. At the beginning of the gathering, have everyone share something from their lives, from the life of the church or from the group's work for which they feel grateful. Or at the end of a meeting, have everyone offer up a gratitude for something that happened during the meeting. Record these observations to find themes over time.

Praying with nature

Bring intention to your group's time outside: attending to divine presence and movement. As you encounter the natural setting or smaller parts of the natural world, practice complete presence. What do you notice, outside of you? Within you? Use all your senses. Practice being in relationship with all that you encounter.

Clearness committee

This simple (but not easy) discernment process comes from the Quaker tradition. Any member of the community may request a clearness committee.

A chair of the committee keeps track of time and intercedes if questions start coming too quickly or if the questions fall outside the bounds of the guidelines. If the person seeking clearness wishes, a clerk can take notes which then become their property for later review.

- ◆ The person asking for clearness states the question that they are bringing for clearness. They then offer whatever background and other information they feel it would be helpful for the group to know.
- ◆ The role of the group members is to be contemplative listeners. They listen both within themselves and within the group for stirrings and movements of the Spirit.
- ◆ The role of the group members is also to ask genuine, open-ended non-leading questions or clarifying questions. A clarifying question is a question for information that the person feels might genuinely help the clearness process. A genuine open-ended non-leading question is one that the questioner feels may move the clearness along. It may be a question about images, feelings, stirrings or connections related to the situation. These are not Yes or No questions, nor questions about the solution, nor questions to satisfy the asker's own curiosity. They are questions not about the solution but about the situation. Have you read a certain book? isn't a clarifying question. When did you first become curious about this issue? may be a good clarifying question.

- ◆ The person seeking clearness can choose to answer a question or not.
- ◆ There is to be significant silence between answers and the next question.
- ◆ When there is about 15 minutes left to go, the chair calls a halt to the questions and the group enters silence. Then the person seeking clearness has a chance for the last word, to share in any clarity that may have arisen as a result of the process. The committee closes offering gratitude for the time together.

After the committee, confidentiality is strictly maintained.

Circle of Trust

Parker Palmer and facilitators of his Courage & Renewal programs use these principles and practices to create safe, trustworthy space for shared inquiry and exploration in a group.

- ◆ Give and receive welcome. People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- ◆ Be present as fully as possible. Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- ◆ What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand. This is not a "share or die" event! Do whatever your whole self—your soul and your body—calls for, and know that you do it with our support. You know your own needs better than we do.
- ◆ Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth. Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- ◆ No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other. This tends to be one of the hardest guidelines, especially for those of us in the "helping professions." But it's also one of the most important; it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- ◆ Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- ◆ Attend to your own inner teacher. We learn from others, of course. But we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- ◆ When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- ◆ Trust and learn from the silence. Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- ◆ Observe deep confidentiality. Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- ◆ Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

Lectio divina

“Divine reading” is a powerful way to encounter God. Traditionally it involves four phases:

1. *Lectio* (reading/listening). Choose a passage of scripture. Any passage will do, although a psalm, a story about Jesus or one of the poetic passages from a prophet work especially well. Read the passage aloud, slowly. Everyone listens for a word or phrase that speaks to them. After a period of silence, the leader invites all to share aloud the word or phrase without commentary.
2. *Meditatio* (meditation). Read the passage again. Invite all to wait for an image, thought or phrase that arises in response. After another time of silence, invite all to share what they received.
3. *Oratio* (prayer). Read the passage a third time. Invite all to listen for how the Spirit is speaking to them through the passage. Where do you sense movement? After more silence, invite all to share.
4. *Contemplatio* (contemplation). Rest in silence. At the end of a period of quiet, ring a chime and/or close with a prayer of gratitude.

Any of these phases can be done separately or adapted to include time to journal or draw. Consider using the lectionary for the week or working with a passage relevant to a task at hand.

How might I introduce contemplative practices to a group?

Transitioning away from an established pattern of meeting can be difficult. Begin small. What one practice excites you? If you can try it alone first, do. Then introduce it to the group as an experiment: “I’ve been inspired by this book and would like to try something new today.” Allow space afterward to discuss how it went, asking, “What did you notice?” Keep in mind that the fruits of contemplative practice take time. Don’t let others’ natural resistance deter you. When one practice grows comfortable and begins bearing fruit, begin the next.

Resources

Prayers

Psalms for Praying by Nan Merrill is included in the resource basket. These loose translations are excellent for contemplative prayer. A line or stanza is usually sufficient to begin or end silence or gatherings. It's fine to choose them randomly.

The **Plymouth Covenant** steers our focus to the ministry of the church. It can be read or recited together:

We covenant with you, O God, and one with another, and do bind ourselves in your presence to walk together in all your ways, according as you are pleased to reveal yourself to us in your blessed word of truth.

Consider **creating a prayer** particular to your committee or group. It might include words, music and/or movement.

The words, **“Be still and know that I am God,”** work beautifully to enter a time of silence. They can be spoken or chanted on a single note. An effective practice is to subtract the final words like this, pausing after each line:

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am.
Be still and know.
Be still.
Be.

This **body prayer**, purportedly created by Matthew Fox, is simple to follow and easy to learn. Pause after each gesture.

Thanks be to God for this day. (*Make a full-body circular movement with your arms.*)
For all that is above me. (*Reach above.*)
For all that is below me. (*Reach down.*)
For all that is behind me. (*Reach behind.*)
For all that is before me. (*Reach before.*)
For all that is around me. (*Walk in a small circle with arms extended.*)
May I open myself to new experiences. (*Reach toward the left.*)
May I open myself to new relationships. (*Reach toward the right.*)
Being true to the earth. (*Touch the ground, if possible.*)
And to myself. (*Give yourself a hug.*)
Thanks be to God for this day. (*Repeat the full-body circular movement.*)

A **meditation on the vertical axis** can be done in silence or while singing or listening to Taize's *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* chant. Standing or sitting, begin in prayer position with hands touching in front of the chest. Slowly move hands above the head, then open to the sky. Slowly close hands, move them down the body until almost touching the floor (or as close as is comfortable). Open hands to the earth. Slowly close hands and repeat the gesture.

The Lord's Prayer is effective because most Christians have it memorized. Recited outside of a church service, in the intimacy of a group or in the context of a meeting, it can be quite powerful. Try reciting very slowly or following the prayer with a period of silence. Also consider this alternative version from the *New Zealand Book of Prayer*, influenced by Maori and Polynesian culture:

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe;
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world;
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings;
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trial too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and forever. Amen.

Liturgy of the Cell Phones by Kara Root

RELEASING PHONES
We surrender our phones
To acknowledge that we are not as essential
as we would have ourselves believe.
And to recognize how essential we are
to this moment, this conversation, this process.
We put down our phones
to put down the false belief
that we can be more places than here,
doing more things than this.

And to commit to being fully present, here and now.
We turn off our phones
to turn to each other and to the moment at hand,
with full attention, creativity and welcome.
May we receive the gifts of full presence and essential connection.
May God meet us in this moment.
Amen

(Phones are shut down and surrendered—for example, a basket is passed around and phones placed in them.)

RETRIEVING PHONES

We return from this moment, taking with us the gift of being fully present.
May we return with gratitude and perspective
to the tasks before us and the noise around us,
a little more willing to resist the urgency
and a little more able to receive the quiet gifts of each moment
where God is present alongside us.
Amen.

(Cell phones are retrieved.)

Readings

From Mechtild of Magdeburg

God speaks to the soul.

And God said to the soul:
I desired you
before the world began.

I desire you now
as you desire me.

And where the desires of two come together
there love is perfected.

"Keeping Quiet" by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still
for once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for a second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

"Thanks" by W. S. Merwin

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water thanking it
standing by the windows looking out
in our directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after the news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the door
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you
in the banks we are saying thank you
in the faces of the officials and the rich
and of all who will never change
we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us
taking our feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
thank you we are saying and waving
dark though it is

“Small Kindnesses” by Danusha Lameris

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
Down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
To let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you”
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. “Don't die,” we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder
and for the driver in the red pick-up to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
Fleeting temples we make together when we say, “Here,
have my seat,” “Go ahead—you first,” “I like your hat.”

Chants

Veni, Sante Spiritu

Dona Nobis Pacem

Confitemini Domino

Further Reading

These titles are excellent introductions to contemplative thought and practice. You can find them in the Plymouth library.

Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*

—*The Wisdom Way of Knowing*

James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*

Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*

Alan Watts, *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion*

Dan Wolpert, *Creating a Life With God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices*

Support

The Plymouth Contemplatives are available to answer your questions and support your work integrating these practices into your group. You can contact them through Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew, Elizabeth@spiritualmemoir.com.

Much gratitude to Dan Wolpert and his fine book, *Leading a Life with God*, from which I've borrowed heavily, and to Chris Lance, Paula Northwood, Nelson Coffey, Peg Birk, Johanna Schussler and Emily Jarrett Hughes for their contributions.

—Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew, 2020.